After the failed wedding attempt, Akane calls it quits. Now Nabiki is saddled with a morose Ranma. Rather than get caught in the crossfire between his other fiancées, she decides to try and help the pig-tailed martial artist figure out what HE wants (Purely to forestall mounting repair bills, of course). Maybe a weekend of 'normalcy' away from the craziness will help?

Now Nabiki's stuck in the middle of the swirling chaos that is Ranma's, trying to pull the biggest scam of her life - Fixing Ranma Saotome's life. But she's finding herself doing the one thing she promised herself she'd never do - Fall for Ranma Saotome. That would be bad enough, but who is Himura Tanaka, and why is she trying to force Ranma to attend school as a girl?
Chapter 1

Nabiki sighed as she watched the scenery pass through the train window, the tree passing as the railcars rattled along.

Normally this would be relaxing. Heck, she had been looking forward to this. She had been planning this trip for MONTHS. One last hurrah before graduating; Every spare yen she could scrape together for a single weekend of the kind of life she wanted for herself. Just her. The normal one. No martial artists, or water-borne transformations, or ancient demons, or ghosts, or curses. No grudge matches, or chinese amazon tribes, or toxic food, or ANY of it. Just a normal girl, at a normal beach hotel, enjoying a normal summer weekend. Maybe meet some normal guys, have some fun… who knows?

*Thanks, Akane. Thanks a whole lot.* A dark cloud seemed to gather around her, blotting out even the bright summer sun. Sitting next to her was Ranma. Her fiancé, Ranma.

It wasn't the first time Akane had blown a gasket and called off the engagement. Last time had been entertaining and mildly profitable, though she hadn't actually gotten the two of them to acknowledge their feelings for each other. They HAD gone on a date, though, which she counted as a mild win, but things had quickly and frustratingly gone back to the status quo.

THIS time, however… Events had conspired in the worst possible way. One of the hottest summers on record had left everyone exhausted and sleep-deprived. There had been a couple of new martial artists who had shown up to cause havok. Skateboarders this time, interestingly enough, part of some touring American group. Amusingly the pretty girl of the duo seemed more intent on pursuing AKANE than Ranma. The Fiance Brigade had smelled blood and tried to move in. And Ranma… oh ever so diplomatic Ranma… had characteristically not known when to keep his mouth SHUT.

Akane didn't snap like she normally did. This was worse. She had been calm when she broke the engagement. She didn't blame it all on Ranma, but cited all the OTHER, perfectly reasonable external factors for running away VERY quickly from a relationship with him. And then she went to stay with Auntie Nodoka for awhile.

Nabiki glanced at Ranma. He was studying his hands, the same blank, empty look on his face as he had had when Akane held his hand, and very gently and calmly ripped out his heart. She remembered him panicking, begging her to hit him over the head so things could be normal again… he even handed her a mallet.

"I can't do this anymore, Ranma. I love you, but i don't like myself when I'm with you. I don't like what I become. I'm sick of being jealous and angry and violent all the time, and the only time I'm not… is without you. It's not your fault."

Nabiki rolled her head back against the wall and sighed. The only time she can just spit it out, and it's when she's breaking up with him. No wonder the poor guy is destroyed. Nabiki didn't often feel much sympathy for Ranma… or anyone, for that matter. But then again, she hadn't often seen him take a hit he hadn't been able to shrug off a few minutes later.

Of course, being the paragons of caring and understanding, as soon as it became clear that Akane was deadly serious and unwavering this time, their fathers had very quickly and unilaterally switched the engagement to her. AND forbidden her from going on her long-planned trip unescorted.

*I could have just gone anyway. It's not like Daddy forbidding me to do something ever stopped me before. It's MY money, not his.* She thought glumly. Ranma certainly didn't seem inclined to follow,
even with his father kicking him about and ranting about 'manly duty' and such. In fact she had practically had to drag him to the train station.

*So why didn't I?* She glanced at Ranma again. He hadn't moved his gaze. His eyes had that glassy, dead look to them. *He knows she was serious. So what now, Saotome? What do you want? Do you even know?*

She took a deep breath. "Alright, Saotome. Ground rules time."

"When we get to the station, I'll take off." He mumbled softly. "I'll meet you back here when it's time to head back, so they think we spent the weekend together. You don't have to OW!"

He yelped as she gave his pigtail a hard tug. She released it as he turned and glared at her, a little of that old fire flickering in his eyes.

"Paying attention? Good. FIRST rule is you listen to me FIRST. Second rule is, no disappearing into the woods. You're staying where I can see you this weekend."

His eyes narrowed, but then the fire in them guttered out, and he looked away. "Look… Nabiki, whatever you've got planned… I'm not in the mood for the usual crap. Just… figure out whatever you'd be making having my girl side pose on the beach for photos or whatever and I'll pay you back later."

She sighed. That idea HAD occurred to her. But… given the circumstances she knew the kind of trouble that sort of thing attracted, and she had gone to great lengths to AVOID it this weekend. As mouth-wateringly profitable as it might be. "That makes two of us, Saotome, which is PRECISELY why you're staying where I can SEE you." She poked him in the chest. "You go wandering off, and you'll trip over a new fiancee in the forest, or sneeze wrong and get a new rival out for your blood, or SOME cascading disaster that will end up rolling back down onto my beach."

"Yeah, well, you think that'll be different if I stick around?" He looked past her, out the window, that dead look returning.

"Yes, because I've made arrangements to make sure it is, but they'll ONLY work if you stay in the little 'safe zone' I've set up." She pulled up her purse and dug around a moment, pulling out a paper-wrapped bar of soap. "Here."

He blinked, looking at the label on the soap. "This is…"

"Waterproof beauty soap. Take a shower before you hit the beach." She said. Catching his skeptical glance, she paused her continued rummaging. "... What?"

"How much?"

She smirked. "You couldn't afford it. So I'm offering it as… payment, let's call it." She held up a hand to forestall his protest. "I said I wasn't in the mood for the usual crap, and I meant it. This is purely a… *cooperative* venture so we both get what we want."

He raised an eyebrow, idly flipping the soap in his hand. "Oh yeah? And what's that?"

She winked. "A little normalely."

"So, why am I pretending to be your boyfriend again?" He grumped as he hitched his backpack on his shoulder.
"Cover story, 'dear'." She grinned. "Less awkward than the engagement mess, but close enough to the truth that you don't have to whip up an elaborate backstories."

"Huh." He sounded unconvinced.

"Best lies are mostly true, with a couple of details changed around to suit the situation, Saotome." She patted him on the shoulder. "Think of it like another martial art technique."

THAT seemed to get some mental traction as he got a thoughtful look.

"You don't have to be too dutiful… or even pay much attention to me at all. Probably better if we're a bit distant." She said cheerfully. "Relationship on the rocks, failed last vacation to try and patch it up, you know?" She glanced over at him and mentally cursed, realizing she had just crossed into the WRONG topic. "I mean… Don't feel too honor bound to stick by me. The boyfriend/girlfriend thing is mostly to keep the rabble behaving themselves just a little better, that's all. You get a girl pestering you, just let her know you're with someone."

"And if she doesn't care?" Ranma asked.

"If she's cute, and you like her, go for it. Which leads to our next ground rule; Nothing… and I mean nothing that happens this weekend leaves this place. Got it?" She turned and stopped to face him. "It's all off the table. No blackmail material, no photos, no anonymous tips to your fiancées. As long as I get the same courtesy, and you don't blab to Daddy or Kasumi if you spot me having fun with some guy I found I liked. Fair deal?"

"Yeah, but about that…" Ranma stopped. "How can you be sure they're NOT gonna show up? Even when they don't know where we are, they've got a habit of appearing."

She pouted. "Ranma! After all we've been through, you still doubt me?" She smiled as he scoffed at her cute hurt routine. "Relax. The key to THAT is knowing where they're at." She pulled out her smartphone. "Custom app someone in the computer club whipped up for me." She tapped the screen. "Right now Ukyou, Shampoo, Mousse and Kuno are headed for Okinawa…"

"Okinawa? Why Okinawa?"

"Because that's where the rumour I started three weeks again SAID you were going… And Ryouga is in… Colorado?"

"Hang on, this all only started a couple of days ago!"

She sighed and stuffed the phone back into her purse. "Yes, but I've been planning this vacation for the better part of a YEAR, and getting your omnipresent cloud of destructive hangers on as FAR away as possible was a little insurance policy to make sure you didn't 'accidentally' end up popping up!"

"That seems a little paranoid…"

"Is it?" She raised an eyebrow.

"... No, I guess it's not." He pondered a moment. "Hang on, what about me?"

"Just after we left Daddy and Mr. Saotome will have been delivered a set of free day passes for the Okinawa ferry, prizes in a contest they don't remember entering. One for everyone, including you and Akane if either of you were there." She shrugged. "Bit of a waste, but it seems even I can't call EVERY dice roll." She gave him a sideways glance.
"You were gonna send me to Okinawa. With an ambush waiting for me." His eyes narrowed.

"I provided Daddy and Mr. Saotome the opportunity to go to Okinawa. Which, since it was free, I knew they wouldn't pass up. And I sent the brigade there because I knew they'd head that way ANYWAY. And you all get to have your fun little martial arts adventure weekend far, far away from me and my beach, boys, and cold drink with an umbrella in." She waved off his bristling with her hand. "I didn't set up anything, I just moved all of the pieces to a different board." She sighed. "Except it seems I accidentally pocketed the king."

They made their way to the hotel. It was an older building, catering more to the vacationing student than the upscale lifestyle she really aspired to, but she had gotten a killer deal booking at just the right time, and it was beachfront. She noted a little glumly that there was no bellhop service as they checked in, and the carpets were a bit worn, but it was clean and bright and well kept, and ideally they wouldn't be spending much time here anyway.

She noticed Ranma had been silent the whole time, still turning over that bar of soap in his hands. She opened the door to the room and tossed her suitcase on the bed. "You're going to wear the wrapper right off that thing if you keep playing with it like that." She noted as she flopped onto one of the two double beds.

"Oh… uh…" He awkwardly stuffed it in his pocket. "So… where's my room?"

She rolled onto her side, propping her head on her hand, giving him a heavy-lidded look. "Don't tell me you find me THAT unattractive Saotome."

He blushed briefly, then clenched his fists. "Don't start that crap with me!"

_Woah, nerve there._ "Easy, easy!" She quickly placated. "I had to change the booking at the last minute. Two beds was the best I could do on short notice."

He sighed. "I'll sleep on the balcony then." He started to walk past her towards the sliding door leading to the balcony overlooking the beach, but she caught his arm.

"No, you won't. You'll sleep in a bed like a normal person." She said. "Normal weekend, remember?"

"Akane'd mallet me out the window for even thinkin' it." He muttered.

"Well, I'm not Akane. I trust you." She said. She didn't notice his startled look, occupied with digging in her suitcase. "Here. I didn't think you'd think to bring a pair, what with the curse and all." She tossed him a pair of men's swim trunks.

He caught them. They were simple black trunks. He pondered examining them for some sort of Nabiki booby-trap, but then he remembered her words _"I trust you."_ "Uhh… thanks."

"I also brought some less distinctive clothes." She started laying out a couple of shirts, pants and shorts, all in his size. He noted that she had chosen darker colors than he typically wore.

"What's wrong with my regular clothes?"

"Nothing." She lied. Truth was most of what Ranma owned was road-worn, faded, and either too big or too small. She suspected he had gotten most of his clothes from backyard laundry lines back in China. "But 'chinese shirts plus pigtail plus martial arts' is kind of distinctive. I'm just shifting your profile a bit so your smarter fiancées don't catch wind you were here. Just try and avoid any towering pillars of ki or gigantic craters, 'kay?"
"I'll try and restrain myself." He muttered, picking up a dark grey shirt, making a face. "Not exactly my color."

"That's the point. Now go take your shower and get cold-water proof. I want to get down to the beach while there's still some daylight."

Nabiki surveyed the beach with some distaste. It wasn't as crowded as some, but this late in the day there were hardly any prime spots left.

She was wearing her burgundy one piece, with a light cotton shirt overtop, her towel tucked under her arm. She had hoped to get a little sun before the end of the day, get a good feel for the beach crowd, and decide if the local male population warranted breaking out her two piece bikini tomorrow. So far it was looking good, but she still wanted her sun time.

"So… we just gonna sit on the beach?" Ranma asked, already sounding bored. He had a beach umbrella shouldered, and was carrying a lunch basket under his other arm. He had switched to the black trunks, and opted to wear the grey T shirt as well, not quite trusting the soap enough to go bare chested around this much cold water.

"There's a beach volleyball court down a little ways." Nabiki replied. "You can go check it out if you like. They don't know you here, play it right and you might even make some pocket change off the jocks."

"Always with the hustle, huh Nabiki?" Ranma replied. He looked like he was considering it a moment, then sighed. "Nah. Not today."

Nabiki watched him a few moments more. He looked… tired. His shoulders were slumped, and the umbrella and lunch basket seemed to weigh him down, even though she had seen him carry far larger loads without any apparent effort. You needed this vacation even more than me, didn't you Saotome? She quietly resolved to get him good and drunk at some point during the weekend.

"Over there." He pointed to a spot near the breakwater. I would have been shaded in the morning when most of the crowds gathered, so had been avoided, but now with the sun on the other half of the sky it looked rather inviting.

"Good eye, Saotome!" She picked up the pace a little, her sandals slipping in the loose sand. She snapped her towel out and laid it down, anticipating a few good hours of sun and snoozing. She slipped on her mirrored shades, folded her hands behind her head and closed her eyes.

Ranma opened the sun umbrella and set it nearby, setting down his own towel and the basket and sitting down in the shade. He drew his knees up to his chest and sighed.

Nabiki heard her morose sound and rolled over to glance at him. Can't have him moping his way through the weekend. She thought, though exactly WHY that mattered escaped her at the moment. "Hey Saotome, toss me a Lychee soda from the basket?"

Ranma robotically opened the basket and casually tossed a can to her, without even looking at the contents.

She caught the can, still looking upwards at him as she lay on her towel. "You can have some of the sandwiches in there if you like."

"Not hungry." He muttered, still staring out at the ocean."
"Kasumi made them."

"Maybe later."

She sighed and sat up on her knees, putting her hands on her hips. "Alright, now I KNOW you're in rough shape. So… what exactly happened?"

"I don't wanna talk about it."

Nabiki sighed. She didn't really want to play therapist, but she didn't want to drag around a sulking martial artist either. She had hoped he'd perk up, find an audience to show off his physical prowess to like he normally did, but it seemed more was needed. Besides, she was curious what had sent things so seriously wrong so fast, and she WAS going to need to know eventually if she was going to get things back to normal. "No, but you're going to be a downer until you do." She sighed. She didn't want to drive him off either for… reasons, so she needed to soft sell it a bit more than usual. "Look… no pressure. And no strings. The deal stands, right? What is said or done this weekend stays here. I just think you'll have a better chance of enjoying yourself if you get it off your chest."

He was silent, and Nabiki knew better than to press any harder. She shrugged and moved to lie back down to catch what sun was left in the day.

"It wasn't even anything big."

She paused and sat back up, slipping her sunglasses off to look at him. He wasn't looking at her still.

"It was just a date… you know? After that whole mess at Jusenkyo, and the wedding fiasco, we thought we'd try and just have a normal date. Just dinner and a movie." He picked up a scallop shell on the sand nearby and turned it over in his fingers, brushing the sand from it. "It started right away. The usual crap. Kuno showed up first, tried to muscle in on the date. Then the fiancee brigade. I got splashed. We never even made it to the restaurant. Akane's ankle got twisted, we had to hole up in an old tool shed."

He tossed the shell away, skipping it across the sand. "She asked me if it was always going to be like this… like just trying to be together would always be this fight for survival. She asked me… she asked me why I could kill a god for her, but I couldn't tell a bunch of obsessed fangirls to take a hike. She… I tried to explain but…" He closed his eyes. "It wasn't like the other fights. She wasn't MAD. She was just… tired. I can deal with mad. I can deal with her hitting me. But…" He took a deep breath. "She asked me what I wanted. What I REALLY wanted, cuz… cuz she said I SAID I wanted her, but then I was always leading on these other girls. I tried to explain…" He clenched his fist. "I asked her what I'm supposed to do. How do I just ignore all these honor debts? How do I tell someone to just ignore their laws, or that Pops stole from 'em? And then I gotta be a 'Man among Men', so I gotta deal with the curse and keep Mom happy…"

Nabiki listened. Her first instinct was naturally to tell him he was being an idiot. Because he WAS. But it occurred to her that in all of his messed up upbringing and the craziness of his life, no one had actually told him WHY. "You know what I think Saotome?"

"That I'm an idiot?"

She chuckled. "Yes, but you knew that." She took a sip of her lychee. "No, what I think is that Akane has a point. You DON'T know what you want."

"What?!" He uncurled, scowling. "I just said…"

She held up a finger to stop him. "No, what you were talking about is dealing with what OTHER
people want."

"Well, yeah! You gotta deal with that before you can deal with what you want, right?"

Nabiki blinked, and then studied him. There wasn't any duplicity in his face. He was serious. No WONDER even Kuno could take advantage of him. "No, Ranma."

"Huh?"

She considered a moment. Yeah, I can see Mr. Saotome raising him that way. Always gotta uphold the family honor before you own. Gotta make sure everyone ELSE is satisfied before you can have what YOU want. That way you can sit back and just let your kids take care of all of your problems and fulfill all of your obligations for you. "Ranma, have you considered that there's no way you can make everyone happy?"

"Yeah, that's the problem." He slumped again. "What with all the engagements and promises Pops made…"

She shook her head. "No, that's not it. I mean, you've got an extreme case of it because your Dad is profoundly greedy and stupid, but I'm talking in general. You know, regular life? You CAN'T make everyone happy, and you CAN'T hold yourself to dealing with what THEY want before you even get to DECIDE what YOU want. Otherwise you're just spending your whole life reacting, and never going anywhere or accomplishing anything."

"Hey, there's plenty of people I don't try to make happy…" He muttered.

"Yeah. Flat-out ENEMIES. But anyone short of that? Even if you're not trying to give it to them, you're concerned with it, justifying why you SHOULDN'T be trying to get them what they want. You spend so much time dealing with what your Dad wants, or what your fiancees want, or what Happosai wants, or what your Mom wants, or what Daddy wants… What do YOU want, Saotome?"

"I want… Well, I mean, Akane is my fiancee…"

"Engagement arranged by Daddy and Mr. Saotome."

"There's the curse…"

"Mostly because of the whole 'Man among men' thing. I've noticed that when you aren't getting chided about THAT half the time you don't even notice which form you're IN anymore."

"There's the Art…"

"... Carry on the School of Anything Goes Martial Arts, which was something your Dad laid on you pretty much when you were born and you never had a choice about."

Ranma scowled. "What else am I supposed to do, huh?"

"That's the trick. It doesn't MATTER what you're SUPPOSED to do. You figure out what you WANT first, what's really important to you. THEN you figure out how to get TO it. What you're SUPPOSED to do is number three on the list at BEST."

"Well, what a mercenary attitude. What a shock." He muttered, giving her a tired look.

"Not at all. What do you think everyone ELSE is doing? Mr. Saotome knows what he wants. Daddy
knows what he wants. Akane… maybe not Akane. But your other fiancees? They all know what they want. That's what drives them forward, gives them purpose, and makes them dangerous. Even Ryouga, as clueless as he is, knows what he wants. Just… not how to get there."

Ranma snorted slightly at that, and Nabiki scored herself a minor victory. Even if Ranma dismissed what she said out of hand, the gloom had been broken, and he at the very least had something more productive to ponder than "Why am I such a screw up?" Maybe she could actually coax him into having FUN this weekend.

Wait… why was that important?

*Because it's hard to have fun when a friend is being miserable, even if they're the ones MAKING themselves miserable.* She took another sip of her lychee to mask the momentary internal discussion.

Ranma is a friend?

She considered that a moment. Turned it over in her head. *Is he?* She turned the concept over in her head a bit. He was clueless… but given who his parents were, maybe that wasn’t 100% his fault. He was arrogant, brash, and constantly had to shore up his fragile, over-inflated ego… but when things went bad, he would go to the wall for you. If you fell, he would catch you. And despite what Akane constantly accused him of, he was probably the LEAST lecherous male she had ever met. *Yeah, I trust him.* She decided. She ignored that that wasn't really answering the question.

She felt the shadow blocking the sun against her back before she was aware of the presence. "Well… What have we got here?" She turned, and everything that she saw about the group of young men screamed 'thug'. There were five of them, in trunks and light shirts, the leader wearing an open jumper over his bare chest with his hair in a fauxhawk. "What an adorable couple. Who can't read, apparently."

"Read?" Nabiki was caught up short a moment.

Fauxhawk thumbed towards one of the larger rocks on the breakwater. There was something spray painted there that she had taken for the usual graffiti. She squinted at it this time, realizing it was actually meant to be a crude, badly spelt attempt at an english word. "Re… 'Resoived'?

"Yeah! As in this spot is reserved!" He crossed his arms. "Get it? This is OUR spot! Trespasser will be violated and all that."

Ranma stood up smoothly, his expression neutral as he cracked his knuckles. Fauxhawk noticed and laughed. "What's this? Some scrawny middle-schooler gonna start something over this"

Nabiki quickly stood. "No, we were just leaving. Come on Ranma." Naturally it wasn't like a bunch of beach thugs were a threat to Ranma, or likely to even be a major inconvenience, but she wanted to avoid any spectacles. It was her 'normal' weekend, after all. Even if that meant letting a bunch of bullies have their way.

Fauxhawk stepped sideways to block her as she moved to walk past. "Now now now… Now that I get a good look at you, you're kinda cute. How about you stick around? We can have some fun." He leered at her, looking her up and down in a way that made her feel like she needed a shower. "Your boyfriend is free to take a hike."

"Yeah, in fact, we insist." Two of the larger thugs moves to flank Ranma. "Scram, kid."
Nabiki's eyes narrowed. "Thanks, but no thanks. We should get going before we're missed, right Ranma?" She moved to slip her sunglasses back on, hoping that the lack of concern on her part, as well as the subtle hint about there being others looking out for them would be enough.

It wasn't. Even as her hand moved, she could see Fauxhawk's brow knit, and his hand snapping out to grab her wrist, as if in slow motion. She felt his fingers brush, coming up short as she reflexively completed the motion, slipping her sunglasses on.

He came up short because his wrist was now quite firmly gripped by one pig tailed martial artist. She silently marvelled that Ranma had managed to move that fast without kicking up any sand at all. The two heavies who had been flanking him were glancing about in momentary confusion about where he had gone. It was like he had teleported.

*Maybe he did? Was that one of the techniques he knew?* She wondered. She had long since lost track of all of his tricks.

"Hey! You little…!" Fauxhawk tried to jerk his arm free, but came up short as Ranma's seemingly casual grasp didn't budge an inch.

Ranma glanced at Nabiki over his shoulder, and she realised he was looking for confirmation. She smirked a bit, enjoying that he was giving her the lead still. "Bruises, contusion, scrapes and such are fine."

"Why you…!" Fauxhawk, realizing his arm wasn't coming free, tried to throw a punch. To be fair, it was actually a fairly impressive wind up, putting his full weight behind it. Ranma didn't even spare a glance as he caught it, still looking at Nabiki as he started squeezing, Fauxhawk yelping and struggling almost comically.

Her grin widened. "Keep the broken bones to a…" She heard the bones in Fauxhawk's hand pop. "... Reasonable level." She finally decided on.

Ranma nodded silently, then vaulted over the now-kneeling Fauxhawk, split kicking the two cronies rushing to help their boss and sending them spiralling in opposite directions into the sand. Fauxhawk crumpled onto all fours, cradling his partially crushed hand.

The two heavies rushed past her to engage the martial artist. Ranma dodged the straight punch from one, ducking under it as he rapidly poked and twisted various points on the thug's body. *Pressure points* Nabiki realized, having seen Dr. Tofu do something similar, although in less violent circumstances. The thug's body suddenly went rigid, stuck in place as his eyes frantically looked about, the only part of his body responding to him. Ranma ducked around him, deftly deflecting the punch of the second thug, snaking his arm around his as he slipped in behind him. The other two cronies had recovered and charged. Ranma hooked the legs and arms of the thug with his own and turned him, manipulating him like a marionette as he used his body to fend off the attacks of his friends.

*He's copying 'Drunken Master'.* Nabiki realized, remembering the classic Jackie Chan flick. Ranma could have ended the fight instantly, but he was having fun with it instead, making the toughs look like idiots with complex choreography that he had masterfully trapped them in. She silently marvelled at the skill he was showing. *He's doing a fight sequence that took four skilled martial artists working together to pull off, with four untalented thugs who aren't trying to do anything but pound him, and making it look good. She shook his head. You should honestly be doing movies with that kind of skill, Saotome. Why are you wasting all that talent and flair on a two bit dojo with no students?*
Ranma kicked away his thug puppet into the other two, sending all three stumbling. The fourth was still locked in his punch pose, his eyes wide and terrified. Ranma walked into the middle of the three as they stumbled to their feet, folded his arms behind his back in the same way he did when Akane tried to spar with him, and started casually ducking and weaving around their punches and kicks. Eventually he managed to arrange them that all three punched each other in the face, toppling over comically.

Nabiki giggled in spite of herself. She supposed it wasn't as much fun for the thugs, but it was always entertaining to see him being playful. Her focus on Ranma's antics, however, caused her to forget about Fauxhawk until he was already behind her.

She felt the cool metal of the knife lightly brush her neck. Her eyes went wide, but Fauxhawk had already wrapped his other arm around her, his injured hand pressed into her shoulder, holding her firm. "O-okay… you… you just back the hell off! Back off, or your girlfriend gets cut!"

Ranma's movements in response were so fluid and fast she could barely follow them, and it was only after the fact that she realized he had flipped a stone from the ground up into his hand with his foot and thrown it. Fauxhawk yelped in pain, then knife dropping from his fingers. Without the threat of the knife Nabiki was able to twist enough to elbow him hard in the ribs, and when his other arm slackened, let her legs simply go out from under her, dropping straight down.

The impact of Ranma's foot with his face was hard enough to flip the thug over backwards. Nabiki was able to hear the crunch, guaranteeing at least a broken nose, maybe worse. To his credit, Fauxhawk didn't immediately lose consciousness, scrabbling and lurching a few extra feet like a beached fish before passing out face down in the sand.

Ranma immediately dropped down next to her, taking her gently but firmly by the shoulders and giving her an intense scrutiny that otherwise would have been a little embarrassing. "Are you okay?"

She rubbed her throat... thankfully he hadn't actually cut her. "Yeah. Yeah I'm good." She tried to ignore how her hands were shaking.

Ranma nodded, turning to fish around in the sand a moment before coming up with the knife, a nasty looking little switchblade. He scored the blade against a nearby rock a few times to ruin the edge, then snapped the blade off and tossed it into the rocks. He then got up and walked over to the paralyzed thug, who's eyes were wide, showing the whites, his breathing ragged and terrified as Ranma advanced on him.

Ranma brusquely stabbed a couple of spots on his body with his finger, clearing the paralysis. The thug collapsed in a heap on the sand, scrambling as he suddenly regained control, backing up frantically. "Look… LOOK! I didn't know he had a knife! I swear! Please don't…!"

Ranma grabbed him by the front of his shirt and lifted him with one arm. "Pick up your friends and leave." Ranma growled. "And if I hear you ever came around this beach again, I'll put all of you in the hospital. Are we clear?"

"Y-yessir!" He stammered, then yelped as Ranma unceremonious dropped him to the sand. He scrambled over to the other cronies as they stirred, and Ranma ignored them all as he turned back to Nabiki.

"Let's get out of here, Nabiki."

Nabiki was already gathering up her things. She noticed with some dismay that her sunglasses had been crushed underfoot in the scuffle. She picked up the broken frames and sighed.
"Hey, are you guys okay?"

She looked up to see a couple running towards them, a sandy-haired young man, and a dark haired girl. They stopped short, seeing the thugs limping away, carrying their boss between them.

"Woah. Looks like Ryusei bit off more than he could chew this time." The girl said, glancing at Nabiki. "You did this?"

Nabiki crossed her arms. She still felt a little unsteady, and needed to keep her hands from shaking. "No. That was my uh… my boyfriend." I hope Ranma remembers the cover story. She thought glumly.

"They friends of yours?" Ranma thumbed in their direction, coming up next to Nabiki. She noticed that he was placing himself protectively just a little in front of her as he sized up the newcomers. Like he always did with Akane.

The sandy haired boy scoffed. "Ryusei?! Are you kidding?! You have no idea how happy I am to see that jerk hobbling away for once!"

"Ryusei and his gang are a huge problem to anyone who comes to the beach." The girl said. "They set up little 'traps' like this one…” She waved at the graffiti on the rock. "... Then come out to extort tourists and locals for 'premium location fees'."

"We came running when we saw him on the beach up to his usual tricks. This is a bad spot to be caught by him, kinda secluded." The boy said. "Looks like you didn't need us, though."

"I'm Chiyako." The girl extended her hand, smiling brightly. "This is my boyfriend, Asahi."

Nabiki hesitated, then certain her hand was steady she accepted the shake. "Nabiki. This is Ranma."

"Yo." Ranma said, raising a hand in a wave.

"You guys here on your own?" Asahi asked.

"Yeah. Just a romantic little getaway for the two of us." Nabiki smirked and leaned a bit against Ranma, who immediately stiffened. She knew she was pushing their agreement a little, but she couldn't help but tease him a bit.

"We've got a small group of us from the local college just over those sand dunes. We staked out a spot with plenty of room. Would you like to join us?" Chiyako asked. "Ryusei and his jokers don't bother with big groups."

"I don't…" Ranma started.

Nabiki cut him off. This was EXACTLY what she was looking for right now. "We'd love to!"

True to their word, the group had what looked like a whole campsite on the grassy verge overlooking the beach, complete with a fire pit and a few tents.

"They're okay with campers here?" Nabiki asked, following their new friends.

"Not really, but you can tell from Ryusei and his friends that the local beach patrol is kinda lax." Chiyako said. "We WOULD have stayed in a hotel, but SOMEONE forgot to make the reservation in time!" She glared at Asahi.
Asahi crossed his arms and lifted his nose. "That's a filthy truth! I won't have you sulllying our relationship with these vile verifiable facts!" He shrugged. "Besides, saved us a few yen, even WITH paying off the beach patrol to let us stay here."

"And with the added benefit of sand in literally EVERY article of clothing…" Chiyako said dryly.

"Free exfoliant!"

"ASAHI!" A sounds came from one of the tents. Another man, mid twenties this time, with a scrappily stubble and shoulder-length, unwashed hair was dragging a large cooler out from behind the tent. "Where have you been?! I've been scrambling to keep these coolers out of the sun all day all by myself!"

"That's Yuto. He's... different." Asahi said. "He takes care of the beer."

"No one else is going to, apparently!" He roared. He fixed Nabiki and Ranma with a critical glare. "You! You two! Do you drink beer?"

Nabiki blinked, and Ranma opened his mouth, but didn't get a chance to respond.

"Rhetorical question! Of course you haven't! There isn't a real beer within a thousand miles of this place. Except here!" Yuto continued, working himself up into a good rant. "It's all Kirin Ichiban or Asahi Super Dry or Sapporo Light…"

"Hey, I like Sapporo Light…" Asahi interjected.

"PHILISITINE! Begone from my SIGHT!" Yuto roared, pointing dramatically towards the ocean. "No… no, such things will NOT besmirch this refuge… this oasis I have lovingly crafted!" He smiled, turning to look at the large cooler and patting it. "I will show all of you the fruits of TRUE brewcraft!" He scuttled back behind the tent to tend to another large cooler.

"Yuto is kinda big on imported microbrewed craft beers." Asahi explained. "He's also a freshman at our college."

"A freshman?" Nabiki blinked.

"He's currently on his fifth year of first year classes." Chiyako replied. "His Dad is super rich, but never around. We think Yuto just goes to college to avoid having to go home and take over the family business."

"We've got a few more friends who will be showing up later tonight. We'll be having a fire and bemoaning our upcoming return to bondage and servitude and the like." Asahi said. "You two are welcome to join us, if you haven't got anything else planned."

"Well, I don't…" Ranma rubbed the back of his neck. He wasn't exactly feeling sociable at the moment.

"We'd love to! Right Ranma Dear?" Nabiki smiled and grabbed his arm. She could practically HEAR his teeth grate. Suck it, Saotome. This is EXACTLY what I came out here for, and I'm not missing out. Besides, you need some quality time with NORMAL people for a change.

"Asahi!" Yuto roared from behind the tent. "The ice you brought me is disgraceful! THIS BEER DEMANDS A HIGHER QUALITY OF COOLING!"

Okay… A different brand of weird people then.
Ranma sighed, jabbing the fire with his stick as the flames began to rise. He had volunteered to get the fire going while the others made a run to the local grocery for some snacks (After discovering Yuto had neglected that part of his duties). Which had resulted in Nabiki, Chiyako, and another girl, Asami, along with Asami's boyfriend Itsuki, taking off in Itsuki's little convertible.

"Itsuki must be absolutely loving this." Asahi said, dumping another armful of driftwood next to the fire pit. "Running around with three cute girls in his car."

Ranma snorted. "Not all it's cracked up to be. Trust me."

"Oh? You a ladykiller back home?" Asahi smirked.

"Not by choice." Ranma replied. Realizing he was straying a bit from his and Nabiki's established cover story, he tried to bow out gracefully. "It's complicated."

"It usually is." Asahi sat down on one of the logs they were using for seating around the fire, a beer in each hand. He wound back to toss to Ranma, then paused. "How old are you, anyway?"

"Seventeen." Ranma said, and smirked. "Not my first drink, trust me. Dad has a thing for sake."

"Well, then it would be irresponsible of me to give this to you!" Asahi said, feigning shock. "He looked away from Ranma as he tossed the beer at him. "Why, giving alcohol to someone below the state-established drinking age is tantamount to tearing down the very fabric of our society! Whoops! It seems I have lost my grip, I can only pray it does not end up in the hands of some bright eyed teenage toddler who's life the taste of a lightly alcoholic beverage will surely destroy."

Ranma snorted and popped the top on the can. "Do you take ANYTHING seriously?"

"Nope!" Asahi stated proudly, opening his own beer and taking a swig. "Too many people spend too much time worrying too much about things that don't matter. Like, at all. 'Do I look good?' 'What do others think of me?' 'How can I get more money, or things, or whatever it is I think I need?' It's stupid and pointless. Only things that really matter is taking care of yourself and the people you care about, and trying not to be a dick about how you do it."

"Like being a 'man among men'?" Ranma asked dryly, sipping at his own beer. In truth he had only had beer on one or two occasions; His normal experience with alcohol was a very drunk Genma or Soun insistently pouring him cup after cup of cheap sake. He wasn't sure he liked the bitter taste, but it was certainly more drinkable than most of the rotgut he had been exposed to.

"Exactly! I mean… how do you even define that?"

Ranma cocked his head. "You don't seem to mind Yuto and his obsession."

"Hey, that's different. Beer matters." Asahi said sharply, then grinned. "Okay, MAYBE not as much as Yuto makes it out to, but I'm trying to rehabilitate him before he ends up an alcoholic."

"How're you doing that?"

There was a curse from behind the tents where the coolers were, followed by loud retching and swearing.

"Well, to start, I slipped a couple of 'One Cup Genki' from the vending machine down the street into Yuto's box of microbrew." He nonchalantly sipped his beer as Yuto loudly and violently expelled the contents of his stomach somewhere nearby.
Ranma shuddered. 'One Cup Genki' was a rather infamous 'beer' loaded into most vending machines in Japan. The rumor was that the company that made it had actually gone out of business a decade ago, and the vending machines were still full of it because no one would willingly drink the stuff. "That's cruel!"

"He won't bug me about the quality of ice I get him for a while." Asahi replied, smirking. "Don't get me wrong, when my ass has been in a sling Yuto has always had my back. But surely you've got that one friend who has that obsession that needs to be reigned in now and then when it starts getting obnoxious?"

_That describes Ryouga PERFECTLY. Except the stuff that isn't about the obnoxious obsession. Kuno too. Oh God, and MOUSSE...! "You… could say I know a few guys like that, yeah."

"Oh god. Trekkies?" Asahi gave him a sympathetic look. "Gunpla maybe? Whatever, you have my sympathies." he sipped his beer. "Nabiki seems pretty nice, though."

Ranma choked on his own beer.

"Pretty, smart… I mean, I woulda thought she was already in college unless you guys had told me different. Not allowed to gush about her more though, or Chiyako will hit me." He smiled, momentarily losing focus as he thought about his girlfriend. "So, you two been together long?"

"Not long." Ranma said, truthfully.

"Well, I tell you what, if you two can stick together through college? Marry her." He pointed at Ranma. "See so many couples just crumble to dust after the first semester."

Ranma flushed. "I'm… ah… not really thinking about marriage." He muttered. **BECAUSE LITERALLY EVERYONE ELSE IN MY LIFE IS DOING THAT FOR ME!**

"Fair enough. Just sayin'... I hope you two make it. You're a cute couple. And from the thrashing you gave Ryusei and his crew, you obviously care about her a lot."

Ranma blinked, then gawked at the older boy, wondering how anyone could be so far off base. _I mean... Nabiki is cute and all, but... NO!_ He shook his head, hastily shutting down that line of thought before it got him in trouble. He needed to turn the conversation around. "So what about you and Chiyako? Been together long?"

Asahi chuckled. "Met in cram school. And if a girl who is after a medical degree gives you the time of day in cram school? You KNOW it's love." He smiled fondly. "I mean, neither of us was at our best… last push to exams and all. But… There was just that 'spark', y'know?"

Ranma slumped a little more, and took a long drag off his beer. **Yeah… I know that spark. And I watched Akane snuff it out in my face.** He scowled. "You got any more of this?" He held up his empty can.

Asahi blinked. "You finished that fast." He got up, just a set of headlights illuminated the camp. There was a whoop, and Itsuki sprinted over the grassy dune, carrying a couple of overfilled shopping bags. He was a shorter young man with jet black hair, dark eyes, and wore a light scarf as a half-joking, half-serious attempt to affect a more sophisticated air which the rest of him mostly failed to support. "Asahi! Ranma! We've got everything we need!"

Asahi relieved him of the bags, dropping one to the sand and opening the other. "Junk… junk… TERRIBLE junk… There isn't a SINGLE ounce of nutrition in any of this!" He smiled and clapped the shorter boy on the back. "Well done! You have learned my lessons well!"
"You boys COULD help with the rest." Nabiki said, carrying a couple of bags herself, Chiyako and Asami flanking her, similarly laden. Asahi and Itsuki sighed and trotted off to the car, but Nabiki intercepted Ranma. "Not you. There's only a few bags left, and you've done your good deed for the day." She winked. "Don't want my boyfriend to get TOO altruistic, or other girls will get ideas."

Ranma scowled. Nabiki was getting WAY too into her 'girlfriend' act.

She sat down to his right on the log. A little too close for comfort, but about right for a 'girlfriend'. He took comfort that at least she wasn't plunking herself down in his lap or glomming his arm like one of the fiancees would.

"So, what were you chatting about while we were gone?" Nabiki accepted a beer that Chiyako handed her, popping the top and taking a sip as she glanced at him impishly.

Payback time. He waited until she had a good mouthful before taking a page from Asahi's book. "Debating which of our girlfriends had bigger boobs."

The snort from his right was satisfying, even as he calmly tended the fire. He wondered if expensive important Canadian microbrew was as bad for the sinuses as domestic beer?

Nabiki coughed and glared at him.

"To be fair, our discussion did stray along those lines too, much to poor Itsuki's chagrin." Chiyako said, something resembling an evil smile. "Though I'm SURE Nabiki-chan was exaggerating. Love can make certain endowments seem so much BIGGER, can't it?"

Ranma froze, his head turning slowly, like his neck joints were suddenly made of thousand kilo granite blocks. "... When?"

Nabiki smirked and sipped her beer, winking at him.

"Actually, even with the… embellishments, I'm quite impressed with what she told us, Ranma-kun." Chiyaki said brightly. "Not just a professional martial artist, but a male model to boot!"

"Male model…?"

"You know, those photo spreads she said the two of you sold to help make ends meet for her family? It's VERY noble of you to put yourself out there for them! I can barely pose for a vacation photo without blushing! Plus, it shows a lot of trust for her to be able to let other people see so much of you without getting jealous!"

Ranma ground his teeth so hard we was afraid he was going to wear them smooth. He could feel Nabiki shaking next to him, trying to stifle her laughter. "Yes… Well I've had issues with jealous fian-girlfriends before. I'm SO LUCKY that Nabiki isn't like that." I will GET you, Tendo!

Chiyako giggled. "Oh, don't be so embarrassed. It's obvious she thinks very highly of you."

"What?" Ranma said, momentarily losing the train of thought where he was planning some appropriate revenge on Nabiki.

"What?" Nabiki sounded equally surprised.

"Well, what with all that talk about how your talents are wasted, and how you would make a great actor, if you decided to pursue it?" She smiled. "Though she seemed to be mostly concerned with figuring out what YOU wanted most. And she got this ADORABLE faraway look in her eyes when
she talked about you."

Ranma looked at Nabiki, scrutinizing her. She was intently studying her beer. Was she blushing? "Really."

Nabiki hunkered down a little more, and Chiyako giggled. "Asahi, hurry up! We need something better to discuss before I embarrass these two into breaking up or getting married!"

Asahi's idea of 'something better' was a game of Truth or Dare.

Ranma wondered if Asahi was secretly related to the Hibikis. He seemed to have Ryouga's stunning flair for bad ideas, and the masterful application of them towards ruining his life.

"So, Ranma." Chiyako said, having won the coin toss to go first. Ranma found he didn't much like the mischievous glint in her eye. "You're my first victim. Truth or Dare?"

Ranma winced. He was already regretting the beer; The pleasant buzz had certainly taken the edge off, but at the same time he wasn't sure it was the best time to be answering questions while they had a cover story to keep straight. But then again, Dares had NEVER been safe for him. They always resulted in him being forced to take someone on a date, or dressing up as a girl, or something else supremely uncomfortable.

"Best lies are mostly true, with a couple of details changed around to suit the situation, Saotome."

"Truth." He said, hoping he didn't regret it. He could almost feel Nabiki's eyes burning into his skull as she watched him for a screw up.

Chiyako beamed. "Okay, I'm gonna go easy on you, since you're a first timer."

*Oh thank Kami...* Ranma relaxed a little.

"Who was your first kiss?"

Ranma's face froze. Immediately. *Nope, nevermind. Thanks for nothing.* The image of Mikado Sanzenin's face was already filling his mind, the memory of the male figure skater leaning in to...

Nabiki burst out laughing next to him, mercifully snapping him out of his recollection. He turned to glare at her, ready to let her have it with both barrels for her amusement at his pain, but she was grinning up at him, and gave him a look that said, *I'll take care of this for you, Saotome, but it'll cost you.*

He caught himself reflexively reaching for his wallet.

She winked at him and grabbed his arm, which did NOTHING to reassure him. "Oh please... PLEASE let me tell the story, Ranma?"

"Uhh... sure?"

Nabiki turned, and Ranma shuddered and tried to ignore that she was STILL hugging his arm, in a way that reminded him WAY too much of Shampoo. It didn't help that he was now acutely aware of certain parts of her anatomy pressed against his arm.

"Okay, so you'll have to forgive poor Ranma, because he was mortified at the time, and it TOTALLY wasn't his fault. But it was a guy."
"WHAT?!" Chiyako and Asahi said in unison, staring. Asami and Itsuki leaned in closer, and Yuto started laughing hysterically.

Ranma flushed deep scarlet and wondered why he had EVER trusted Nabiki Tendo.

"No… now be nice!" Nabiki scolded, holding his arm tighter. "To be fair, the guy was a whack job, and Ranma was trying to protect my little sister."

"Oh? Noble hero Ranma defending the damsels from the perverts by intercepting their kisses?" Itsuki snorted.

"Something like that." Nabiki replied. "Anyway, Ranma was out at the local skating rink with my little sister. Ranma travels a lot with his Dad and never learned to ice skate, so Akane offered to teach him. This was before he and I started dating, of course. I have to admit, it takes a real man to suck up the embarrassment of looking like a goof on skates his first time."

She rested her head on his shoulder. Ranma stiffened a bit, but then realized from the view of the others, it was meant to look possessive and supportive. Still, he wasn't sure he was willing to let the crack about 'Real man' slide, considering Nabiki knew damn well he had gone skating with Akane as a GIRL.

"Anyway, so he and Akane are making progress, and then this guy named… what was it, Ranma? Mikado-something?"

"Mikado." Ranma grumbled.

"Right! Anyway, he starts skating around… and this isn't an empty rink, mind you… and starts doing some of his figure skating moves to impress the girls. So he sees my little sister and decides to zero in on her, and 'accidentally' bumps her and Ranma, and 'graciously' scoops Akane up to keep her from falling. Except… he's so busy being dramatic, with his eyes closed and all he didn't realize he didn't GET Akane."

Ranma blinked. That wasn't how that went… He glanced at Nabiki, then noticed the reactions of the others around the fire. There were still grinning at the story, but it wasn't the mocking sort of reaction he was used to. She's making Mikado out to be an idiot. He realized. Well… MORE of an idiot.

"So, he rattles off this line about having saved her, and asking only a kiss in return or some tripe, and before Ranma can do ANYTHING, he leans in and plants a big old kiss right on his lips."

Asahi, Itsuki and Yuto all winced visibly as the girls twittered.

"What happened after that?" Asahi asked. "Don't tell me you let him get away with that?"

"'Course not. I beat the crap out of him." Ranma grumbled.

Nabiki smirked. "Oh no… no no you have no idea." She giggled. "Ranma didn't just hit him. He knocked him out while he was still on his feet. And then every guy in the place ran out and started doodling on him. You know, like graffiti? With permanent marker."

"Seriously?!" Chiyako asked. "He was just standing there. On ice skates. Out cold? And people vandalized him?!"

"He had a lot of bad sentiment built up at that place." Nabiki said. "I think maybe Ranma wasn't the first time he 'missed', if you know what I mean. Still, it really pissed Ranma off. Not just the jerk kissing HIM, but he kept going after my little sister too. She looked up at Ranma as he glanced at
her. She gave him one of those sly looks. "Don't worry Ranma. I'll make this one up to you later, okay?" She gave him another wink, this one for the others to see.

He knew that was just part of the act, and if anything he was going to owe HER for this, but he knew what she was implying to the others, which put a mental image in his head that was PROBABLY not the best to have while she was still sitting so close to him, hugging his arm and smiling up at him. He knew he was blushing visibly, he knew she had planned it that way with the look she was giving him, he knew that she didn't actually mean any of that, and he knew his hormones didn't really CARE and… Damnit Nabiki!

"Ranma, your turn." Chiyako said.

"You sure we should interrupt them? This looked like it was about to get interesting." Asahi said, making Ranma realize he and Nabiki had locked gazes a little too long.

He ALSO realized that it was now his turn, and who his next victim was going to be. "Asahi." He said, lazily turning his gaze from Nabiki. She smirked and mirrored him, resulting in them both levelling their gaze on the older boy with disturbing synchronicity. "Truth or Dare?"

"Well… Crap." Asahi's face fell as everyone else snickered at him. "I shoulda seen that one coming. Uh… Truth!"

"Tell us about YOUR first kiss."

"Oh come on! That's not fair! You can't just re-use it right away like that!"

"Yes he can." Yuto piped up. "International Truth or Dare rules have nothing forbidding using a question or dare that was used on you the previous turn, as long as the target is different."

"International Truth or Dare rules?" Asahi turned on him incredulously. "Since when are there International rules to Truth or Dare?"

"Since the Truth or Dare League went professional in '86. Come on man, open a newspaper once in a while!" Yuto said gravely. "This was covered in the ruling on Takemoto vs Wait in 1992. Everyone knows this!"

Ranma wasn't certain if the beer otaku was serious, but he was willing to go along with it since it supported his revenge. "Yeah. Literally EVERYONE has heard about that one. So spill it already. First kiss, go."

"Aww come on, Asahi. It's a cute story!" Chiyako prodded him.

"It's embarrassing. And not, like, epic contest-winning embarrassing like Ranma's story over there. Just… plain run of the mill dull embarrassing."

Ranma pressed the attack. "Am I gonna hafta ask your girlfriend to tell it?"

Chiyako waved her hand. "Oh no, I'm not a part of this. This was well before my time."

Asahi sighed. "I was four, okay?"

Ranma frowned. "I'm not sure that COUNTS, man…"

"She was twenty-two."

Itsuki snorted his beer. Yuto started howling with laughter again. Chiyako covered her mouth,
grinning, obviously already aware of the story, and Asahi simply hung his head.

"Okay, THAT requires some elaboration, don't you think, Ranma?" Nabiki grinned up at him, and he found himself grinning back. It was kinda nice to have Nabiki on his side and helping to make someone ELSE squirm.

Itsuki coughed as he recovered. "Jesus Christ Asahi! I knew you were a player, but…"

Asahi closed his eyes as if in pain. "She was my preschool teacher, okay? She was pretty, and I told everyone I was going to marry her one day, and I was supposed to give her a kiss of the cheek, but I had snuck downstairs while my parents were watching this romantic movie, and I saw the kiss scene, and I figured that's how adults are supposed to kiss, and…"

"Oh, that's not even the worst bit…" Chiyako added.

"Chi, no, please…"

"You have to finish it! Finish it or I will!"

"... You're a cruel, cruel woman."

"So you see, Asahi met up with her a few years later…"

"ALRIGHT! Okay, okay… Yeah, so I didn't know any better. Never thought I'd see her again outside of preschool, right? Well, about twelve years later mom decided to bring home her new shopping friend…"

"Asahi was about sixteen by this point…"

"... And it was HER. My old preschool teacher."

"And she remembered you."

"Of COURSE she remembered me. The universe hates me after all. So naturally the first thing she does is tell my mother the story. And then ask me if I had been practising since then!"

"Which of course he hadn't."

"THEY DON'T NEED TO KNOW THAT!"

Yuto had fallen off his log laughing at this point, and Itsuki and Asami were not far behind. Ranma found himself a little more reserved, feeling a bit more sympathetic after his own story, though he noticed Nabiki was laughing her head off, leaning against him for support. He realized he almost never saw Nabiki laugh like this; unrestrained. Not her usual evil chuckle or knowing smirk or mocking laugh… just Nabiki, enjoying a funny story.

"So… Asahi… was she your second kiss, too?" Itsuki asked, pursing his lips.

He got an empty beer can to the face for his trouble.

"Okay, okay, had your laugh? Good? Everyone having fun? Great!" Asahi said, then fixed Ranma with a piercing glare. "Now to deal with YOU. Ranma Saotome, prepare to die!"

"Wha…?" Ranma blanched a bit, and for a moment was terrified he had gained another rival as Asahi levelling his finger at…
… Nabiki?

"Nabiki, I Dare you to 'make that kiss up to Ranma' right NOW. On the lips, two minutes minimum." He grinned proudly.

Ranma throat tightened with panic. He looked around wildly for a Panda in the bushes, then back to Asahi, then down at Nabiki, frantic denials and visions of being suddenly stuffed into a tuxedo flashing through his mind, before he noticed Nabiki was smirking, her arms crossed in that casual way that said she was unconcerned.

"Asahi-chan, aren't you supposed to ask me 'Truth or Dare', first?" She inquired sweetly.

"Fuck!" Asahi swore without breaking his dramatic pose, setting off a fit of giggles from the group. "Uh… Truth or Dare, Nabiki?"

"Foul." Yuto said casually. "You blew your turn, Asahi. According to the rules, it's Nabiki's go now."

Asahi deflated, slumping back to his seat on the log. Chiyako patted his arm consolingly.

Nabiki smiled, and turned her attention to Yuto. "Thank you, Yuto. How about an easy one, as thanks? Truth or Dare?"

Yuto snorted. "I'm not kissing Ranma either. Truth!"

There was more snickering at that. Even Ranma found himself chuckling a bit.

"Alright." Nabiki cocked her head. "Indulge my curiosity. How does one end up a 'Beer Otaku', anyway?"

"NO!" Chiyako, Asahi, Itsuki and Asami all cried out in unison, but it was too late. A wide grin spread across Yuto's unshaven face, a wild gleam twinkling in his eyes. "At last… someone who seeks to know the true path!"

"You don't know what you've done, Nabiki!" Asahi cried.

Yuto spread his arms wide. "It is time, dear children, for me to once again recount the tale of how I came to be the defender… nay, the HIGH PRIEST of the nectar of the gods themselves!"

"Settle in." Itsuki said glumly. "This is gonna take the rest of the night."

"For I cannot tell my tale without telling the FULL story, the TRUE story!" Yuto continued, the firelight giving him a maniacal look. "It is TIME, heathens, for you to learn the TRUE STORY OF BEER!"

The 'True Story of Beer' lasted a number of hours, and involved starting with a somewhat fanciful retelling of how beer was created that was likely not wholly historically accurate (Yuto's version involved a war between African Gods and Norse Frost Giants), followed by a retelling of his birth (Which apparently cribbed a few notes from the Dragonball manga) and an alien invasion in the 50's where the aliens were deathly allergic to hops, which was covered up by the government despite 70% of the world's population dying.

The story took up most of the rest of the night, and by the time Yuto had wrapped up his story with a re-enactment of his solemn vow to the Beer Gods to serve the Will of the Hops, everyone was about
ready for bed. In fact, Itsuki and Asami had retired halfway through the story, and Chiyako was dozing against Asahi's arm.

Ranma and Nabiki bid them farewell, with a solemn promise to come by the next night. Most of Ranma's buzz had worn off by that point, and the night air and smell of the sea further cleared his head as they walked along the waterline back to their hotel.

He was a little surprised when Nabiki took his arm. He glanced back to the campsite, but Asahi was already ushering a sleepy Chiyako into their tent, and was not looking their direction. He glanced back at her, wondering if maybe she had had one too many. "Nabiki…?"

"Shhh…" She said softly. "Normal weekend, remember? I might not get a chance to enjoy a evening walk on the beach with a cute guy for a while. Let me enjoy the fantasy, would you?"

"Cute guy…?" He blushed a little. Nabiki had called him that before, but it was always part of some manipulation ploy.

She sighed. "Don't be dense, Ranma. You know for a fact you're the best looking guy at Furinkan. I've got the picture sales to prove it." She looked up at him and grinned. "Don't go getting ideas, though. You've got WAY too much baggage to be worth it. But… as a pretend boyfriend for the weekend…" She leaned against him a little. "... I guess you'll do."

"Gee, thanks." He said dryly. They walked silently for a few minutes, the waves lapping at their feet, before he spoke again. "You sell pics of my guy side?"

"They're actually my best seller." She chuckled. "Girl side sales are split between you and Akane, but not much competition for your guy side, aside from the few snaps I can get of Ryouga."

"You sell pics of Ryouga?!

"Oh, and Mousse. He's got a fairly rabid little following. Can't seem to catch him with his shirt off much these days though." She giggled. "What, did you think it was just the MALE side of Furinkan that was a bunch of horny freaks? Trust me, the hormones were carbonated in that place BEFORE you started attracting the hottest male martial artists in Asia to come have sweaty guy-on-guy clothes ripping contests."

Ranma shuddered at that. "Ugh… You have a gift for making literally ANYTHING sleazy, doncha Nabs?"

"Not all of us get to fly like you, Ranma." She muttered. "Some of us gotta muck it out in the mud you kick off your shoes as you leap from rooftop to rooftop like it's a totally reasonable physically possible thing to do." She grumbled.

Ranma frowned a bit, trying to parse that, then deciding she was making some kind of metaphor. "I could teach you."

"That's not the…" She looked at him sharply, then trailed off, eyes widening a bit. "... Teach me?"

"Well, yeah. I mean… It's not like you'd be able to do any of that stuff tomorrow or anything… Probably take you years, but… It's not like you COULDN'T learn it if you stuck with it." Ranma cocked his head in confusion at her look of shock. He didn't MIND astonishing Nabiki… in fact he kind of liked disarming her like that, but he'd like it much better if he knew WHY she was so upended by it.

"Just like that?" She asked, her brow knitting. "My baby sister rages because you won't even spar
with her seriously, but… you'll teach me? Just like that?"

Ranma sighed. "Akane doesn't want me to teach her."

"What?! Ranma, she complains all the time…"

"No." He cut her off, his expression hardening. "She wants me to SPAR with her. Fight her as an equal. Fight her 'seriously'. She doesn't want to learn from me, she wants to beat me." He shook his head. "If I thought for a second she could get her ego out of the way long enough to actually listen to me, I'd have been tryin' to teach her from day one."

"Wow, you're really good. I'm just glad you're not a boy…" The memory hurt, a little. Even now. Of sharing a moment, bonding… then having it turn sour instantly.

His eyes drifted down to the sand as it squished between his toes, only to be washed away by a warm ocean wave. "Ryouga had some luck with her, but he'd not around enough. Mebbe she'd do better if all the other female martial artists weren't out to get her 'cuz of me. Mebbe if I actually had any experience teachin', or could get Pops or Mr. Tendo to continue her trainin'… I can't have Akane as my first student. There's too much risk of her getting hurt."

"Alright." Nabiki said softly.

"Alright what?"

"Alright, you can teach me." She said. "I'll be your first student."

He stopped walking, and as she was still holding his arm she was drawn up short as well.

"Really?"

"I'll even knock some of your tab off for it." She said. "But keep it quiet, okay? I don't want the Fiancée Brigade getting jealous and trashing the dojo because they think I'm getting alone time with their object of obsession."

"Yeah, sure. Umm… When did you want to start?" They started walking again.

"Don't wanna think about it now. Sounds like a lot of sweating and exertion, and all I want to think about right now is that sort comfy bed waiting at the hotel." She yawned. "Ask me again after the weekend is over."

(Author's Note: So apparently my first attempt at this ate ALL of my formatting AND breaks, so it looked a lot crappier than intended. Secondly, my proofreader has informed me that I have NOT, in fact, invented the idea of a Beer Otaku, and in fact I have significantly lowballed the insanity in Yuto's case when compared to real-world examples. I NEED to visit Japan someday.

More soon!)
The Hot Dogs of Desire

Watching the sun rise wasn't anything new to Ranma Saotome. Morning was when his father SAID it was, and there were days when they were done sparring before the sun had even peeked over the horizon.

He moved smoothly through the kata, one motion blending into the next. That being said, usually if he had his way he'd be sleeping until noon. That's the way it was in his life; Sleep as much as you could when you could, eat as much as you could as fast as you could when you could, because you never knew when you'd be hungry and on the run.

There was no Genma Saotome here to toss him out of his bed, though. There was no angry fiancees beating him because another had snuck into his bed. There was no perverted old man splashing him to grope his female side. There was no smells of kasumi's cooking replacing the need to sleep with the need to eat.

So why was he up at the crack of dawn?

_I slept enough. If I get tired I can sleep more._ Came the honest answer.

He stopped his kata and paused, looking out of the balcony at the sunrise. It was there… an odd sense of… not quite peace. _Security_. There was no Genma to throw him out of his bed, he was free to rise when he wanted to. There was no scheme to defuse, no perverted master to foil, no rivals or fiancees… so it was okay to just get 'enough'.

_Is that all it takes? A couple of days of 'normal'?_ He wondered. _Is this what 'normal' is? Just… having enough?_

He shook his head. This weekend was going to make him soft.

He turned and looked back inside. Nabiki was still curled up in her bed. It was a little surprising how small she curled up when she slept. He supposed he shouldn't be noticing that sort of thing about a girl that had no interest in him, but somehow with all of her bravado and attitude, he had expected her to sprawl out on the bed, take full advantage of the large mattress.

He crossed his arms and leaned against the railing, sighing. This weekend was barely started, and he was already questioning things that he had taken for hard facts before. It wasn't even that Nabiki had changed, or that he was privy to some great secret. It was like… she lived in a totally different world from him. He had seen the mercenary schemer, and she still was that, but he had thought that's all she was. He was getting a glimpse now of the side of her that… well, not that she kept hidden, but that simply didn't FIT in his world. Now he was visiting HER world. Laughing, having fun, joking, making friends. Flirting even, just for the fun of flirting, without fear of getting pounded or married off. Spending time with people who didn't want something from you, or have any shared goal, just because it's nice to spend time with other people.

Being able to decide when you wanted to wake up, instead of when you HAD to.

He was starting to feel like he had been cheated of something.

He noticed movement out of the corner of his eye and turned to see Nabiki stirring. He opened the door and headed back in, anticipating collecting her for breakfast. He walked over to the bed and leaned over, grinning at her as she peered blearily up at him. "Hey Nabs. You feeling up to grabbing break-FWUUAAAGH!"
The last was cut off as Nabiki grabbing him by the collar and jerked him down to eye level, her bloodshot eyes full of murderous, sleepy rage. "Clear the path between me and my coffee, morning person, or they will never find your body." She roughly shoved him back onto the other bed, and began the slow, laborious process of convincing her limbs to work in tandem long enough to transport her to the hotel room's complimentary coffee pot, and her daily morning salvation.

She swung her legs out from under the bedcovers, stretching, the stretched out, oversized nightshirt she wore hanging off one shoulder as she blearily blinked at the cursed orb of unholy fire that forced her to face consciousness each day. She renewed her vow to one day destroy it and free herself from its tyrannical bright cheerfulness. Carefully she got to her feet and stumbled towards the little alcove by the door where the coffee maker was. Thankfully she had had the foresight to set it up and set the timer beforehand.

She sighed after the first sip, feeling the hot, bitter liquid warm her belly. She gestured vaguely at Ranma. "You. Do soap… thing. In there." She waved at the bathroom. "I need alone time with my coffee."

Ranma snorted, but at her nasty glare thought better of making a further comment, grabbed his towel and the waterproof soap and headed into the bathroom. Nabiki carried her steaming mug out to the balcony Ranma had recently vacated, taking another sip as the caffeine slowly cleared the remaining fog of her return to wretched wakefulness. She looked out over the beach and wondered why she had even bothered to get up this early, then spotted a group setting up a few nets a bit further down the row. She smiled, memory jogged.

That's right. Boys and beach volleyball!

'Breakfast Buffet' was not a thing Nabiki Tendo indulged in often. Partially because such a thing would require she get up early on a day off, but also because every buffet in Nerima had blacklisted them due to the unending appetites of two certain freeloding houseguests.

Thankfully for them, this was not Nerima.

Unfortunately for the owners of the buffet, she was with one of those two houseguests.

Ranma slipped back into his seat with his third overflowing plate, piled high with scrambled eggs, sausage links, bacon, fruit, and french toast. The place served western-style breakfasts, catering mostly to the international tourist crowd. Nabiki had indulged in a small stack of pancakes which had beckoned to her sweet tooth, and weren't something one normally got to have in Japan; She had never had real maple syrup before.

"So what's the plan for today?" Ranma asked around a mouthful of scrambled eggs. "There's… uhh… that beach volleyball tournament they're setting up." He gestured with his fork, trying (and failing) to look nonchalant. "I mean… if you don't got any other plans…"

Nabiki smirked and sipped her coffee. Her third cup, but since it was a vacation she was trying to cut back a little. "Well, there is that. I suppose I could be talked into taking a look. I'm guessing you want to play?"

Ranma's expression was almost like a puppy dog faced with a favorite toy that was dangling just out of reach. He scratched the back of his neck and looked anywhere but at her. "Ummm… well… y'know… I figure if we're already there…"

She chuckled. "Oh just say 'yes' for once, Ranma! We're on vacation! You're allowed to want to do
things." She picked up her knife and fork and started in on her pancakes. "To be honest, I was planning on heading over to watch that anyway. There's no need to beat around the bush. Remember what I said about being clear about what you want. You might be pleasantly surprised that someone else might want the same thing. Besides, what were you going to do if I didn't want to? Sneak off to play volleyball and leave me alone to face the vengeful wrath of the beach thugs?" She snatched a strip of bacon off his plate and glared at him as she ate it.

He blinked and stared at her a little confused and dumbfounded.

"Bacon tax." She explained. "I can't charge you yen for saying something stupid this weekend, so it will cost you in bacon." She almost managed to keep her lips from twitching and ruining her deadly serious expression.

There was a moment of dead silence before both of them dissolved into a fit of giggles.

"Oh… Oh Kami…" Ranma gasped for air, holding his gut. "You have to promise me… promise me… That you'll do that to Pops at some point when we get home…!"

She covered her mouth to keep from snorting half-chewed bacon. "It isn't… ~snicker~… It's not THAT funny Saotome…"

"It is! It's… it's the standard Nabiki Mercenary 'This Will Cost You' face… p-plus… plus the bacon…" She schooled his expression with a bit of a struggle, then stared her in the eye, scowling a bit, one eyebrow slightly upraised in a stern, authoritative expression. He snapped out his hand, as if demanding payment, then an instant later smoothly swiped it around to snatch a strip of bacon off his plate, whereupon he started angrily eating it, all the while maintaining the stern moneylender impression.

Nabiki dissolved into giggles again, though part of her noted she should probably be offended. "I do NOT look like that!" She then quickly schooled her own expression to what she assumed was her typical haughty, bemused scowl, and copied his 'bacon-lending' gesture, sending him into renewed fits as she munched another strip of bacon. This kicked off an impromptu match of 'Anything Goes Bacon-Lending', which quickly depleted Ranma's plate.

Nabiki held her stomach as they trudged through the sand towards the volleyball courts.

"You okay, Nabs?" Ranma peeked over at her, towel slung over his shoulder.

"Ugh… Too much Bacon-lending." She muttered. "Next time I accept a challenge from you, remind me to make it something less fattening."

He snorted. "You started it!" But he found he couldn't wipe the grin off his face. A stray thought occurred to him, in a brief moment of insight. You know… that sort of thing would never have happened with Akane. She would have gotten mad if I teased her like that and… Oh… His face suddenly fell.

It was Nabiki's turn to give him a searching look. "Are YOU okay? I didn't think the Great Ranma Saotome could be brought low by a half plate of bacon."

He shook his head. "No, it's not… Look, I'm sorry." He jammed his hands into his swim trunk pockets, his head dropping.

"For what?"
"For... y'know..." He pulled a hand out to gesture as he searched for the words. "... teasing you. Being mean, I guess."

Nabiki snorted, putting a hand on his shoulder to stop him as she doubled over a moment in mirth. "Being mean...?" She paused, noticing the look on his face. "... Wait... you're serious."

"Well... Akane would have malleted me back to Nerima for making fun of her like that." He said nervously, wondering if he should have just kept his mouth shut.

"Well, yeah, but I'm not Akane!" Nabiki replied. "Anyone who knows her... Including you... knows she gets all triggered when someone teases her. But not EVERYONE is like that." She put a hand on her hip. "Alright, lesson 2 for getting along with people. After you've figured out how to lie effectively, you have to know your audience, and figure out what will fly and what won't." She fixed Ranma with a stern look. "Pay attention, Saotome, this is where you keep screwing up with my sister. AND a lot of your rivals. And pretty much every other random person we bump into."

"Hey! I'm not THAT bad!" Ranma protested, though he was a little unclear what he was protesting ABOUT.

"Yes, you ARE, Ranma!" Nabiki said sharply. Then her expression softened. "Which is a shame, because when you behave, you're actually kind of a nice guy. The problem is you've got exactly ONE social setting; 'Insulting.'"

"I DO NOT!" He protested more loudly this time. "I've been FINE this whole weekend..."

She put her hand over his mouth. Just lightly, but the gesture was such an unexpected, alien thing that his vocal cords simply tripped over themselves and got tangled up. "You've been FINE because you aren't that way with ME, and that's because you CAN learn, if someone provides the proper instruction." She removed her hand. "See, everyone else reacts to your insults and posturing and boasting with physical violence, and you do that for fun, so that just makes you WORSE. Even when you WANT to stop, you just keep going because it's what you know how to do." She smirked. "But me? I hit you in your soft, squishy, vulnerable pocketbook. So you behave with ME."

"But... the bacon-lending thing..."

"THAT was a little light teasing. It just FELT dangerous to you, because you DON'T tease me much, and you fear the consequences." She closed her eyes and raised a finger in her favorite lecturing pose. "Seriously, have you EVER insulted my figure, or questioned my femininity, like you do with Akane?"

"Well, no, I..." Ranma frowned, then looked Nabiki over. Really looked, with a critical eye. She was wearing that blue two piece swimsuit, cut high on her hips. Despite not being a martial artist, she kept in good shape. Long legs, well toned thighs... flat tummy, despite her protests about fattening breakfast challenges, though she still had a softness to her that the more athletic girls lacked... up to her MORE than ample...

He slapped a hand over his eyes by reflex, flushing brightly and quickly looking away. "I wouldn't have anything to insult you about...! I mean, I never looked...! I mean, not that I wouldn't look...! I DON'T KNOW!"

Nabiki blinked, then blushed a little, realizing what he had been doing. A small smile crossed her lips, and she took his other arm, looping hers around it and gently leading him towards the volleyball courts again. "Alright, Saotome. You get a strip of bacon off your tab for that one."
Ranma peeked through his fingers at her. "What? Why?"

"When you figure THAT out, you get another strip of bacon."

"Couples' volleyball?!!"

Nabiki and Ranma had stumbled into Asahi and Chiyako at the lineup at the sign in table. Nabiki had planned to help Ranma get signed up, then settle in to watch the show.

"Yeah. It's apparently a yearly event. We did it last year." Chiyako said, beaming. "It's not really a serious tourney. The judges assign handicaps to the players if they think any teams are too unbalanced. Mostly it's just an excuse to flail about and get rewarded for willing to be clumsy and uncoordinated in public."

"Well, that lets YOU out Saotome." Nabiki smirked.

"Hey!" Ranma reflexively protested, then paused, a look of confusion on his face as his furrowed his brow. "Wait… Was that an insult or a compliment?"

"Like I said, they handicap you." Asahi said. "Last year they made me tie my good arm behind my back for a couple of matches. They randomize it a bit too. We saw one match where they had both teams dress in those novelty sumo suits they use on Takeshi's Castle."

"They also don't always go by the score." Chiyako continued. "They had one father/daughter team progress through as 'cutest' couple…"

"To be fair, she was six, and the most adorable thing EVER." Asahi added.

"... Even though they couldn't score a single point."

"Basically, it goes by whomever the crowd likes."

Nabiki pinched her chin between her thumb and forefinger. "Well, that's not exactly what I was expecting… Not sure if Ranma would even WANT to play. Doing stuff 'just for fun' isn't exactly his sty-

"Sounds like fun!" Ranma said, grinning. Nabiki gaped, but she could already see the gears in his head turning, as he started formulating some insane Anything Goes-brand strategy to win.

"Oh really?" She crossed her arms. "And who exactly is going to be your partner in this, Ranma? Because this is a couple's match, and volleyball isn't exactly my thing!"

His eyes sparkled with inspiration, and a mischief she couldn't quite identify. "That's the best part, Nabs. You aren't gonna hafta do anything at all!"

"What are you plotting, Saotome?" She hissed as he lead her out onto the sandy court. Ranma had signed them up despite her protests, and her repeated assurances that she had NO intention of exerting herself for this simply seemed to make his grin bigger.

"This is basically a show, right? Judges pick the winner based on the audience rather than the points?" He held up a finger, insufferable smirk plastered across his face. "So we just gotta give 'em a show. Just leave that to me. Just stay relaxed, and don't freak out when it starts, I won't let you get hurt, okay?"
"Hurt!? Ranma, what…?!

The loudspeaker chose that moment to blare to life. "What are these people running from? They're not! They're running TO the World's Toughest Competition in Town!"

"MOST EXTREME VOLLEYBALL CHALLENGE!"

Nabiki and Ranma both blinked in perfect unison.

"And now here are your hosts, Kenny Blankenship and Vic Romano!"

Nabiki's eyes widened as she reflexively took a step back. She was IN the Madness! Rule One of Nerima Survival was you never, EVER went into the Madness! You watched from the sidelines of the Madness! You set odds and took bets on the Madness! You photographed the Madness for posterity! You never, ever participated!

"Nabiki, you okay?" Ranma put a hand on her shoulder, noticing her nervousness.

"Ranma, I shouldn't be here." She hissed. "I'm not a martial artist! This is going to end up being some kind of crazy Anything Goes deathmatch, and people are going to be flying all over, and… and…" She paused. "And why are the other team hot dogs?"

Sure enough, the opposing couple walked proudly out onto the court, wearing matching hot dog costumes.

"We've got a great show for everyone here Vic!"

"That's right Kenny! It's the battle of the ages, 'Shameless Game Show Contestants' versus their longtime rivals 'Relationship Counselling Escapees'. A blood feud that has been going on for decades now."

"I had to go to my doctor to get tests done for a blood feud once."

"Oh? What was the blood feud about?"

"Which family I belonged to. Neither side wanted to admit I was a relative."

"Relax Nabiki, this isn't Nerima." Ranma replied. "Asahi told me they have a tradition here of doing a theme of Japanese shows that the Americans did weird stuff too. Last year's theme was something called Samurai Pizza Cats."

"Pizza Cats…?" Nabiki scrunched up her face, wondering how on earth they got that from ANYTHING Japanese. "What the hell, America?"

He smirked. "Weird, right? Anyway, no martial artists or crazy ghosts or stupid love pills. Just goofy game show announcers."

She crossed her arms, raising a skeptical eyebrow. "When exactly did you learn all this, anyway?"

"When I was in the lineup, when you were still complaining to Chiyako how volleyball wasn't your 'thing'." Ranma said, bouncing on the balls of his feet as he warmed up, the grin on his face betraying exactly how much he was enjoying having one up on her in the information department for once.

"Entering the court now for the Game Show Contestants are Jenny and Phillip Babagadoosh, who have managed to get themselves banned from every gameshow on the Pacific Rim for inappropriate
use of answer buzzers."

"That's right, Kenny. Facing them are Ataru Moroboshi, and Lum, the alien girl who kidnapped him."

"Ah, better relationships through Stockholm Syndrome., eh Kenny?"

"We're WHO now?" Nabiki boggled.

"Who knows?" Ranma moved over next to her. "Okay, when the match starts, just stay loose, okay? I'll take care of everything."

"How?!" She hissed back. "You haven't told me what you're planning!"

The hotdogs got first serve. Impressively, despite her awkward costume, the girl managed to get the ball in the air and serve it halfway competently. Nabiki watched the ball arc over the net to their side of the court, unsure what exactly she was supposed to do.

Ranma ran over to it… and slipped in the sand.

Nabiki raised an eyebrow. Usually Ranma wasn't so clumsy…

Ranma flailed, and his arm coincidentally hit the incoming ball, sending it back up into the air, in a high graceful arc to precisely where Nabiki was standing. She blinked, then readied herself, trying to remember what she knew about volleyball from high school gym class.

"Hey Nabiki."

Nabiki looked down, blinking in surprise. Ranma was right in front of her, nose a few inches from her own. She yelped and started backwards.

Ranma grabbed both her hands and looked into her eyes. "I have something important to tell you." He said, his tone serious.

"Ehhh? Ranma…?!"

Suddenly Ranma lifted her hands up over her head. She felt the volleyball hit her wrists, sending it back up into the air.

Ranma grinned. "Thanks!"

Nabiki gaped for half a second. Then she ripped her hands from his grip and roughly pushed him away. "Damnit, Saotome!"

Ranma rolled with the push, letting himself fall onto his back. He kicked upwards, connecting with the volleyball one last time, and sending it just over the net to the other side.

The male hot dog was gaping the whole time, and watched dumbly as the ball hit him square in the face.

"Oh, and Phil gets a ball lightly bumping him on the chin! That brings us to 1-0 for the Relationship Counselling Escapes!

"Looks like they might want to get recaptured at this point Vic."

"Right you are, Kenny."
Nabiki stomped towards Ranma as he got up. She got right into his face, feeling a brief moment of satisfaction as his self-satisfied smirk dissolved into a look of apprehension and fear. "What the hell was that, Saotome?"

"I… Chiyako said they judged this stuff based on crowd reaction, so I was just playing it up a little." Ranma backed away a step, but Nabiki stayed right with him.

"You used me as a prop!" She hissed, her fists balled up. She now understood Akane's deep and abiding need to hit him so frequently.

"Just your hands! You said you didn't want to play so I was just taking care of it pleasedon'thitme!" Ranma backed up to the post holding up the net, eyes wide with fear.

Nabiki realized what she was doing, how it would look to Ranma's thoroughly Akane-trained mind. She forced herself to relax, closing her eyes and taking a deep breath. Vacation weekend. He's just having fun. He didn't actually cross any lines. He did exactly what you told him to do.

She opened her eyes and fixed him with a hard look. "Alright, new ground rule, Saotome, and this one sticks even once we get home."

Ranma swallowed nervously.

"Anytime… and I mean anytime you have a brilliant plan… no matter HOW clever you think it is… you run it by me, first. Got it?" She poked his chest to emphasize her point. "Especially if it involves me."

"I-I-I… okay…?" Ranma blinked, not entirely sure how to process a response that WASN'T violence.

Nabiki sighed a bit as she mentally stepped back and took a good look at his instinctive cowering. Sweet Kami, Ranma. You just don't know how to respond to someone being cross with you, do you? Just straightening out that ALONE would be a project! You are a lifetime of work just waiting for whichever poor girl finally catches you. "THIS TIME… you get a pass. That actually was fairly clever. But manhandling me without my permission was NOT. So next time, ask."

Ranma nodded dumbly, still eying Nabiki nervously. His mind tried to come up with an intelligent strategy for dealing with the situation, but he just wasn't accustomed to being faced with an angry female who was being reasonable, and not immediately accusing him of the worst possible motivations. He swallowed, realizing he had in fact invited those sorts of accusations with his antics, without any thought to the aftermath. At this point he would normally have either fled, been attacked by another fiancee or rival, or been knocked unconscious by a table or other blunt force implement. He wracked his brain for the proper response when those things didn't happen, eventually dredging up a barely remembered instruction from his mother from when he was six years old.

"I'm… Sorry Nabiki and… uh… it won't happen again." He offered the apology tentatively, not sure if he was doing it right.

A smiled tugged at the corners of Nabiki's mouth. "Well, well… There's manners buried in there somewhere after all! Alright… You're forgiven, Ranma. But just because this is your freebie weekend, got it?"

"Uh… yeah, got it."

"So? What's your idea for topping this for the next match?" She asked, putting her hands on her hips.
Ranma flushed a little. He hadn't actually thought this far ahead. "You don't think more of the same would work?"

Nabiki rubbed her chin. "No, you've got a good direction here, but… needs some escalation to keep it going." She spied something by the side of the court and walked over, kneeling to pick it up. It was a wooden mallet, used to drive the net stays into the sand during setup. "Here's an idea… We could use your usual fiancee routine."

"I thought you weren't gonna hit me!" Ranma protested, eying the mallet nervously.

Nabiki snorted. "I'm not, and knowing your thick head I'd just hurt my wrist doing it. No, I mean, we start out the same as before, but then I start chasing you around with the mallet, and we use that, with you doing some of that Drunken Master puppeteering to make sure I'm hitting the ball right. I'll run around and chase you ineffectually, playing the 'angry outraged girlfriend', while you use that to set up the ball return."

Ranma shook his head. "I dunno, Nabs… It feels a little close to the mark."

"C'mon, Saotome, what could possibly go wrong?"

"So… you lost in the second round?" Chiyako asked in disbelief.

"I don't want to talk about it." Nabiki said, grousing.

Nabiki, Ranma, Chiyako and Asahi were in the lineup for the concessions. Turns out all participants in the tourney were entitled to free food for the day.

"Well, I mean… what were we gonna do?" Ranma sighed. Ranma Saotome never lost… except when facing something that was literally impossible to defeat. "I mean, it was a toddler AND a puppy…"

"They weren't even contestants!" Nabiki huffed angrily, arms crossed, grinding her teeth in frustration. She had found out after the fact there had been prize money on the line.

"I think they just wandered in from the stands, and the announcers went with it." Ranma said glumly. "I mean, a toddler OR a puppy, maybe… but a toddler AND a puppy?"

"It was completely, totally, and inexcusably unfair!" Nabiki muttered.

"The part where she cried for her Mama and ran to you was cute, though." Ranma noted, grinning a bit as Nabiki flushed several fetching shades of red.

"I hate you, Saotome." She muttered under her breath.

"Awww! I wouldn't have even minded losing if that happened to me!" Chiyako said. "I love kids!" She sighed wistfully. "It's going to be so many years until I can have any of my own."

"You've awoken the beast." Asahi said, his voice dead and flat, his eyes straight forward. "You know not the horrors you have unleashed."

"I mean, medical degrees take SO LONG, not to mention internships… it'll be a decade or more until I can even THINK about having children. I feel so guilty knowing how unfair that is to poor Asahi."

"I refuse to be included in this. I cite Common Article Three of the Geneva Convention, forbidding torture or cruel and inhumane treatment." Asahi replied, keeping his eyes dead ahead.
"I'm so tempted to just quit school altogether, so we can elope and start a family." She grabbed onto Asahi's arm, leaning against him. "Wouldn't that be wonderful, Asahi? We'd be poor, but so happy and in love…"

"This is a drug for her, you know." Asahi muttered, turning his head slightly to look at Ranma and Nabiki. "I almost let her do it once, and when she snapped out of it and realized she was about to resign from her classes, she described to me in exquisite medical detail how she would go about castrating me if I ever let her go through with it."

"But Asahi, wouldn't be wonderful?" She looked up at him with big, watery eyes.

"Anything I say now can and will be used against me."

"I know your mother would be so happy she could finally plan our wedding. AND plan for grandchildren!"

"Murder me now. Please. Doesn't matter how. Something rusty and dull would be fine. Just end the pain."

"You are SO not any fun!" Chiyako huffed and slapped him on the arm. "Any time I want to talk about this sort of stuff!" She looked over at Nabiki and Ranma. "I know you two are a bit young to discuss it, but have you ever thought about it? Having kids I mean?"

"N-no! I mean…” Nabiki looked at Ranma wildly, her eyes demanding he give her a reasonable out.

"I mean, Nabs still has to go to college, and I've got… uhh… dojo stuff…” Ranma added nervously.

"That's right! Ranma still need to get his teaching license!"

Ranma blinked and looked at her. "Wait… I need a license to teach at the Dojo?"

"Yes you need a license but now isn't the time to discuss it DEAR." Nabiki hissed back harshly.

"Well, you'll still probably get there sooner than me," Chiyako said sadly. "You HAVE to let me come babysit when you do! Any kids you two have will be adorable! If I can't at least be someone's auntie, I won't make it through pre med!"

"Please… I can only buy her off with plushies for so long." Asahi muttered miserably.

"Uh… sure Chi." Ranma said absently, glad to have an easy way out of the conversation.

"Ranma…” Nabiki growled warningly.

"Uh…! I mean, I don't think we'll need a babysitter…”

"Ranma…” Nabiki turned to look at him, fixing him with an incredulous, angry stare.

"I… I mean, we're not going to have any kids! Beca-OOFF!" Ranma was cut off by the wind rushing out of his lungs as Nabiki elbowed him hard in the ribs.

"What Ranma means is that he is an idiot, and will be shutting up now. Right dear?" Nabiki growled at him, before turning to give Asahi and Chiyako a sunny smile.

Ranma nodded dumbly, rubbing his injured side.

"Hey, look! A distraction!" Asahi said, pointing at the hot dog counter they had just reached.
College and Dojo stuff, huh? Nabiki folded her arms under her chin as she regarded her hot dog, as if it held all the answers, and was stubbornly withholding that information.

"You… gonna eat that Nabiki?" Ranma asked, glancing over at her as he settled back down on the picnic table bench, having just gotten back from going for seconds. Or thirds.

She picked it up and offered it to him. "Go nuts, Saotome."

"Thanks!" He took it, and happily started wolfing it down. After a few bites, he paused. "Hey… uh… is everything okay?"

"What DO you plan to do after you graduate high school, Ranma?" Nabiki asked, looking out across the beach at the ocean.

"Uhhh… Well…" He took another bite of the hot dog to give himself time to organize his thoughts. "I dunno… That teaching license thingy would probably be a good idea."

"Hmph." Nabiki blew aside an errant strand of hair with a puff of breath. "You didn't even KNOW about that until I mentioned it today. And if you don't marry a Tendo… and trust me, you're NOT marrying a Tendo unless you patch things up with Akane… You aren't going to have a dojo to teach in."

"Oh…" Ranma seemed to deflate a bit. "I guess you're right. I guess I was just sort of used to the idea. You know, it being what Pops and Mr. Tendo expect and all."

"Forget what they expect, Ranma. Mr. Saotome and Daddy aren't exactly the best long-term planners." Nabiki turned a bit to look at him. "What do YOU want?" She held up a hand. "I don't mean like, 'this is your choice for the future' kinda thing. Forget that. Off the top of your head… where do you want to go in life?"

Ranma studied his half-eaten hot dog again, turning it in his hand as if never having seen one before now, his brow furrowed in concentration. Finally he sighed and took a bite. "You'll call me stupid."

"I won't. Promise. On pain of forfeiting your entire bacon tab." She put a hand over her heart, raising the other in a mock pledge.

Ranma snorted. "You know what I really want? For stuff to not have to change. I don't WANT a future, I don't WANT any 'go from here'. I want what I have… what I HAD, I guess… Right now. Before me an' Akane… you know…" He sighed.

Nabiki gave him a confused look, studying his face. She could tell the difference between when he was being thoughtless and stupid, and when he was deadly serious, and this was the latter. "What, you LIKE all the chaos?"

"No!" He protested, then sighed and shrank a bit. "Well… maybe some of it. It's interesting, and kinda fun when it isn't too serious. But… Look at it from my perspective; I spent my whole life on the road. Like… ALL of it. Just me an' Pops. Never bein' sure if I was gonna have a roof over my head, or enough to eat… or ANYTHIN' to eat. No friends, no chance for anything to ever get familiar… Never havin' anywhere that felt like 'home'. Havin' people look at me with this sad look, like I was some homeless kid. 'Cuz I WAS, really… I think I hated the pity the worst. I hated myself for takin' advantage of it when I was hungry." He scowled a bit at the memory.

"And then we arrive at the Tendo Dojo." He said softly. "And suddenly… I've got a home. I can go to school every day, and know that home will still be there when I get back, instead of Pops havin'
't move camp because the cops told him to move along. I've got food, and clean clothes, and a warm place to sleep that doesn't leak. And there are other martial artists around… people who understand, you know? People like me, so that I'm not a… I'm not a freak. Even with the curse, 'cuz there are people who have THOSE, too. And sure they try and kill me sometimes, or marry me… but other times they don't, and they're there… and just knowing there are people I could talk to… who GET IT… That's huge." He toyed with a paper plate on the table, picking it up and spinning it on his finger. "And then… then I get my best friend back! Sure, turns out she's a girl, and wants to marry me too, but… I get Ucchan back. And Ryouga, and Shampoo, and… it's like everyone I ever met on all my travels who was worth a damn all in one place. And then… and then I got Mom back too."

He sighed and put the plate down. "You know that feeling you get? Like… like the first time you try an ice cream parfait… and it's this thing you never knew existed before, but suddenly you can't live without it? That's what my life has been this last year. It hasn't always been happy… sometimes it's been downright miserable… but… I didn't even know what happy WAS until came to the Dojo. I didn't know what 'safe' felt like. I didn't know what 'alone' was until I wasn't anymore." It was his turn to give the waves a melancholy stare. "You wanna know what I want? You wanna know why I never picked a girl, or did anything to really discourage 'em… why I tried so hard to get Shampoo back during that whole Reversal Jewel thing? Why I didn't just go back to China myself and get cured? Because I didn't want it to end. Because if things stayed how they were, even though I'd get beat up, or made to look stupid, or frustrated… I'd get to be happy too. So THAT'S what I want." His eyes fell. "And I'm already losing it. So… I guess I don't really care what comes next. The good part is already over. I can't have what I want, and I was stupid for wanting it."

Nabiki was not inclined to hug people. But hearing Ranma's take on things, the tone of resigned defeat… She had always thought Ranma just liked the attention of being the centre of a love polydecahedron, she had never taken the time to consider Ranma's background, or how that might give him a unique perspective on things, or that his waffling on settling all his rivalries and fiancee issues was something deeper than just spineless indecision.

Of course, Nabiki was NOT inclined to hug people. She had a ready list of reasons what it was a bad idea, both in general, and with specific annotations for each person she knew to outline why hugging them in particular wasn't a good idea. Ranma's list alone was several pages worth.

And as she put her hand on his shoulder, turned him to face her, and wrapped her arms around him to hug him tightly, she promised herself she would review that list, and remind herself thoroughly why what she was doing right now was a bad idea. Hugging people was absolutely not something Nabiki, Ice Queen of Furinkan, could EVER been seen doing.

But this was her 'Normal' weekend, and for right now, she was just 'Normal' Nabiki. And maybe… just this once… it was okay to hug someone.

Ranma naturally froze up solid.


She felt his arms tentatively move around her. Almost like he wasn't sure exactly where things were supposed to go. She tried to remember if she had ever seen Ranma get a simple hug before, one that returning in any way wouldn't get him killed, and realized she had never seen it happen. Not once.

"Why?" He asked softly. Nabiki proceeded to move on to the corollary chapters about hugging Ranma specifically pertaining to taking any and all opportunities to escape said hug and flagged them for future review as well as she proceeded to hug him a little tighter, rather than immediately letting.
"Because I felt like it." She said. She finally loosened her squeeze and leaned back a bit to look at him. "Look, Ranma… I'm the LAST person to blow smoke up someone's ass. You know that, right? So… trust me when I say… Nerima is NOT the best things are going to get for you. In fact… They're kinda crappy, by any objective measure. You've got so much potential that… well… it's a little infuriating, because you don't seem to have any idea what to DO with it all. But trust me when I say that you've got everything you need to be happy, you just gotta go out and find what makes you happy."

"But…" Ranma's eyes dipped, darting back and forth as if trying to make sense of an unfamiliar book. "I mean, what if I can't? I mean, what if other stuff comes before bein' happy?"

"Damnit Saotome, don't make me hug you again! "Ranma… NOTHING comes before being happy. That's the point of living."

At this point the two of them both simultaneously realized they were VERY close to one another, and looking into each other's eyes in a way that could be misinterpreted as being entirely more intimate than they were comfortable with, and they quickly scooted apart.

"Oh, hey, we're not interrupting, are we?" Asahi familiar voice causes them both to turn away from each other and blush. Asahi and chiyako were both approaching, carrying a couple of ice cream cones each.

Chiyako elbowed him. "Asahi! Don't embarrass them! They were having a moment!"

"For that, I am sorry. I bring Ice Cream of Shame and Sorrow, with which to express my deepest regret." Asahi bowed slightly, handing one ice cream cone to Ranma, the other to Nabiki. He then took one of the ones Chiyako was holding for himself.

"Nice!" Ranma gladly took the cone, then paused. "'Ice cream of Shame and Sorrow?' What, because it's unmanly or something?"

Asahi barely avoided snorting frozen dairy treat through his sinuses. "Unmanly? Since when is ice cream unmanly?"

"Well… Pops always told me that real men didn't eat ice cream."

"If ice cream is unmanly, then manliness is no longer a worthy goal." Asahi said solemnly.

Ranma looked pensive as he ate his ice cream.

"We've invited a few more people over to the campfire for tonight." Chiyako said. "Going to have a clam bake. You two ARE coming, right?"

"Translation: Chiyako has agreed to cook for something like twenty people, and is now panicking and looking for cooking assistants." Asahi said dryly, earning him another elbow to the ribs.

"I'm… afraid I don't know anything about cooking seafood." Nabiki admitted carefully. The truth was she didn't know anything about cooking anything, but she felt a little awkward admitting that.

"I can help." Ranma said.

There was dead silence from the other three as they looked at him in surprise.
"What?" Ranma looked to each of them. "It's beach campfire cooking, right? Me and Pops used to do clam bakes all the time, when there wasn't a red tide 'er nuthin. Have you got all the stuff yet?"

Chiyako fidgeted. "I've got all the seafood, and Itsuki and Yuto dug the fire pit this morning, but I thought I should wait on getting the seaweed so it didn't dry out."

Ranma nodded. "All right. We should grab a cooler or something to carry it in. We'd better get started, for 20 people we'll need a lot."

"So where did you learn how to do this?" Chiyako watched in awe as Ranma worked. After a long trek hunting down seaweed a decent distance from the more inhabited parts of the beach, he had returned to inspect the fire pit. Declaring it insufficient, he had set about expertly rearranging the stones on the metal grill covering the wood fire, and fanning it to get the stones glowing red hot. The rest of their small group was gathered around watching.

"There was this guy Pops and I met on our travels. It was... oh, four or five years ago. He was a wandering martial artist too, from... Well, he said he was American, but then he said he was from 'New England', so... is that in America? Had this THICK accent so it was tough to understand him. Said 'Yar' a lot." Finally satisfied with the glow of the stones, Ranma snuffed the fire carefully, and started laying wet seaweed over the rocks. "He showed us how to do this in exchange for use teachin' him some of Pops' techniques."

"A wandering martial artist who says 'Yar'?" Chiyako cocked her head.

"Yeah. He was some kind of Shinobi, but he wore a bandanna on his head, and an eyepatch. He had this parrot that kept sayin' stuff in English. Said it was 'Buccaneer-style Ninjutsu.'"

"Hold up." Asahi held up a hand. "Are you telling us you learned how to do an authentic New England clam bake from a literal Pirate-Ninja?"

"I... guess?" Ranma rubbed the back of his head nervously.

"I am not sure I can legitimately call Yuto weird after that." Asahi said. "HEY YUTO!" he called back to the campsite. "GOOD NEWS!"

"WHAT? YOU HAVE TO SPEAK UP, ASAHI!" Yuto yelled back. "I CAN'T HEAR YOU, I HAVE BUTTER ON MY FACE!"

"Aaand nevermind." Asahi concluded, sighing.

"Do you cook anything else, Ranma?" Chiyako asked, watching as Ranma piled alternate layers of shellfish and seaweed on the glowing hot stones.

"Not much. I do a decent vegetable stir fry." Ranma admitted. "And I guess my omelettes aren't bad. Mostly learned in self-defense, since Pop's tastebuds are dead, and if it was up to him we'd be eating campfire rice and cabbage every night."

Asami sidled up beside him. "So... you're a world class martial artist?"

Ranma grinned and puffed out his chest. "Yup!"

"Who can improvise complex choreography on the fly..."

"Errr... I guess?"
"And you can cook?" She finished, an unsettling predatory look in her eye.

"... Yyyyes?" Ranma finished tentatively, not sure where this was going.

"Do you have an older brother?" She asked, leaning close enough to cause him to lean back and away.

"Asami…" Itsuki grumbled warningly.

"Twin brother, perhaps?"

"Asami." Itsuki's tone was louder.

"Younger brother, even?"

"Asami!" Itsuki clapped a hand on her shoulder.

"What?" She looked up at him innocently. "I have girlfriends in need!"

"Right." Itsuki scowled. "'Girlfriends'"

Asami straightened and put her hands on her hips, scowling right back. "And what is that supposed to mean?!"

"Well, you ARE kinda gushing on and on about Ranma here. I like to think i'm not an insecure guy, but come ON, Asami!" He replied, crossing his arms.

"Do you honestly think I would try and poach a high schooler away from his girlfriend right in front of her!?" Asami demanded, getting redder in the face and stomping.

"Well, maybe his little brother."

"Says the guy who's been hitting on anything and everything female all weekend!"

Nabiki glanced over at Ranma, who seemed to be drawing in on himself more and more with each exchange. She had to admit, this WAS a little too close to home. She got up, silently grabbed Ranma by the arm and dragged him up and away from the group.

Ranma yelped and protested, but didn't fight her as she hauled him away. Asami and Itsuki were far too deep into their spat to notice, and despite Asahi and Chiyako's guilty looks, they didn't intervene. Ranma wasn't entirely sure what he had done wrong THIS time, but he was pretty sure it was something. "Look, Nabiki, it's not what you think…!"

She stopped, releasing his arm and turned to him. Rather than the flushed look of rage he was expecting, she looked more… concerned? "You okay?" She asked, cocking her head. "I know that probably triggered some nasty fiancee flashbacks…"

Ranma opened his mouth, then closed it after a minute realizing nothing was coming out as his brain spun out in place, again trying to find the appropriate response in a situation where he was expecting to end up mallet salad, but wasn't. "Umm… I'm… fine? I don't know what I did…"

Nabiki scoffed. "You didn't DO anything. Trust me, on the shopping trip yesterday Itsuki was pretty much doing the same thing to me, with the same fight happening about halfway through. If they follow form, they'll have made up before the mussels are cooked through." She crossed her arms. "It's apparently just the sort of relationship they have. I think they like the 'making up' part of having a fight."
Ranma sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. "Socializing is confusing."

Nabiki chuckled. "Ranma, they're college students. It's like... a white belt sparring with black belts. Don't be too worried if you get thrown a lot, you're mostly just here to learn from observing."

Ranma considered that. "Socializing is a martial art?"

"Oh, it's the oldest Martial art, Ranma. And it's the one I've been studying all my life." She winked. "So pay attention, and I might teach you a few things."

On impulse, Ranma clapped his hands to his sides and formally bowed to her. "Yes, sensei!"

She smiled and ruffled his hair. "Don't be cute, Saotome, or I might get attached." She turned and walked back to the group.

Ranma froze in position, a ruffled lock of hair falling over his eyes. Wait, what did she say? Why did she say that?

Nabiki walked a little more quickly back to the group than she intended, chewing on her thumb, a disturbed look on her face. Wait, what did I say? Why did I say that?!

Itsuki and Asami seemed suitable chastised by the time they returned, Chiyako and Asahi having taking it upon themselves to read them the riot act. Ranma felt a little embarrassed by the necessity, but he found framing it how Nabiki had, with social interaction being a martial art, it made it easier to process. Older students chastising their peers for being too rough with the beginners. He thought. It rankled him a bit to think of himself as a beginner, but it was a lot easier to swallow than the idea of just being awkward. It meant if he paid attention and studied their strange new art, he could master it like any other discipline.

He decided to do just that, paying attention to Nabiki in particular, and how she navigated interacting with the others. There WAS a kind of flow to it, advance and retreat, parries and ripostes. He realized she was completely at ease with the older youths in the group. Advanced student he thought. No wonder she was able to so effortlessly tie everyone around her into knots!

She smiled at something someone said, and he found himself smiling too. He quickly covered it by sipping his beer, blushing a little. There was a downside to observing Nabiki TOO closely, and that was he was finding her interesting in more ways than just watching her practise her art. He had learned early on it was a BAD idea to allow himself to focus on any one girl too much. Showing interest... or indeed even allowing himself to BE interested... was deadly. If he allowed himself to notice how they looked, how Ukyou had started filling out her chef's uniform, how maddeningly accident prone everything Shampoo wore seemed to be, how Akane looked when the wind played with her hair, he would be instantly and immediately packaged up and married off to said girl. Having a girl side of his own helped, blunted the sense of forbidden mystery girl's bodies had for most boys his age, but it still required almost constant mental discipline. NOT thinking about something was extremely hard, especially when it was rubbing up against him and smelled of lilac perfume and ramen.

He shook his head to clear it. He had let his guard down this weekend, and it was causing him to notice a lot of things he had never allowed himself to notice before. He had had moments where he had let his guard slip... usually with Akane, but there had been times with the others too... And for a moment he would see them with the eyes of a teenage boy. He'd normally cover it up frantically with a stream of insults, or blurt out something stupid, or whatever it took to get himself hit to end the moment.
Nabiki hadn't been someone he'd had to focus too hard on not noticing, simply because she was usually always on the periphery. That one time the engagement had been switched to her she had been a bit… distracting, but that had been muted by her relentless exploitation of him.

But now…?

She seemed… almost genuinely concerned about him. Yeah, she had stated up front that she was just using him this weekend to deflect jerks like Fauxhawk and his cronies or get herself an 'in' with the cool college kids, but… that aside, she seemed to honestly care about how he felt. *She said she just didn't want me bringing her weekend down with my moping. She went back to watching her. But… since when did Nabiki care if I was miserable?*

He saw her flash her confident smirk to Itsuki as she expounded on something, probably deflecting another of the boy's attempts at being 'suave' judging by Asami's dark expression. Usually that smirk was a terrifying thing, signalling impending financial doom. But… having it on his side for once, he found himself appreciating it.

*She's pretty. He thought. You wouldn't think that was any big revelation, but for him it was a huge peek out from under his blinders, to allow himself to actually subjectively observe a girl, and acknowledge she was attractive to him.*

He dropped his eyes, studying his beer. It felt like he was peeping on her doing that. Girls were a distraction from the art anyway. That's what Pops had always said. At least, up until he wanted to marry him off for whatever reason. THEN he was expected to know how to handle them.

He sighed, and crushed the beer can with perhaps a little more force than was necessary. As nice as having a glimpse at how 'normal' people lived was, it just drove home how NOT normal things were for him.

The sun was starting to set, and a number of other people had gathered for the bake. He had gotten complimented on his cooking numerous times by people he didn't even know, but for once he wasn't in the mood for praise. He wasn't even really hungry, a picked at paper plate full of shellfish sitting on the log next to him.

*What do I want?*

His eyes flicked back over to Nabiki. The source of all these questions he had never bothered to ask before. His impromptu sensei on how to be a normal person.

He glanced over at the improvised dance area near the bonfire, where couples were dancing to whatever happened to be playing on Asahi's portable stereo. College students, a few adventurous beach goers, people they had met at the volleyball tournament… random strangers. People who had all crossed paths on their way to wherever it was they were going.

*I bet they all know what they want. I bet they at least have an idea. 'Go to medical school', 'Meet the love of my life', 'Travel the world', 'Save for my first car'… Ucchan wants to expand her business, become the best Okonomiyaki-ya in Japan. Ryouga… well, aside from killing me, he wants to find a nice girl, settle down, and find a home he can find no matter how lost he is. Shampoo wants to go back to China with her Airen, continue the path to becoming Matriarch… Nabiki's right. Even back in Nerima, everybody knows what they want. 'Cept me.*

He studied his hands. What did he want? To be the best Martial Artist in Japan? Yeah, but that wasn't something he pursued. It was just what he did, same as breathing. It's what he did because he didn't know how to do anything else. He hadn't even seriously considered how he was going to
accomplish it, or determine his progress. He just kept training, and people kept landing on his doorstep to challenge him.

*When was the last time I went out to learn a new technique just to learn a new technique, and not to keep Ryōga from exploding my head, or the old freak from molesting me, or some random Prince from kidnapping Akane?*

He scrubbed his fingers through his hair in frustration. *Why is answering one dumb question so hard!! What do I want? WHAT DO I WANT!!*

"Hey Ranma." Nabiki settled onto the log next to him. "Want a beer?" She held up one of Yuto's precious microbrew stash, which he had frantically been swatting partygoers away from all night.

"Yes! Yes I want a beer!" Ranma latched onto that. Maybe it wasn't a good answer as far as dealing with his life direction, but for right now, it would do. He popped it open, and chugged down a few gulps, never having been so happy to have the distraction. "Thanks Nabiki, you're a lifesaver."

Nabiki raised an eyebrow. "You must have been really thirsty." Said said. Suddenly she leaned against his side, and rested her head on his shoulder. "Poor thirsty Ranma."

Ranma felt a momentary surge of fear. *She's drunk!*

She chuckled as she felt him stiffen. "Oh relax, Saotome! I'm not THAT drunk." She poked his nose with her finger. "Just a little buzzed. So I'm relying on my boyfriend to keep me from having any more. Deal?"

Ranma blinked. "I'm not your boyfriend, Nabiki."

"You are! For another…" She checked her watch. "20 hours and fifteen minutes."

"Fake boyfriend, yeah." He muttered, sipping his beer and not looking at her, not really understanding why that qualifier was making him grumpy right now.

"Oh, I don't know…" Nabiki smirked, but without any of her usual mercenary coldness. "... I've had worse dates. I think I can see clear to give you a temporary upgrade."

Ranma locked up again.

Nabiki puffed out her cheeks in exasperation. "Oh come on, Saotome! Loosen up a bit." She put a hand over his, and leaned in a bit. "Let's just… forget who we are for a while and pretend a little, okay?"

Ranma took another deep pull of his beer. He didn't have much experience with alcohol, but he knew he wasn't NEARLY drunk enough to deal with this. "Thought you were here fishing for a college guy, and I was just here to keep the creeps away?"

"Yeah, well, you've done that brilliantly. And honestly, you've been a lot more fun to be with than some random guy." She poked his chest. "You had fun too. Don't deny it!"

"I did." He admitted. "Got a lot to think about, too."

She scowled cutely and poked his chest again. "No thinking. Think later. Dance now." She grabbed his hand and tried to pull him up off the log.

"Uhh… I don't…" He stood up, if just to keep her from slipping and falling over in her efforts to get
him up. "Nabiki, I can't dance!"

"'Course not." Nabiki said, dragging him over to the edge of the spot where people were dancing.
"You're a guy. Guys can't dance. The only difference is some guys know they can't, and some have
deluded themselves into thinking they can."

"I'm pretty sure I've seen guys who can dance. Like, professional dancers and stuff?"

"Expertly faking it." Nabiki asserted. "Like you do whenever you get challenged in something weird
like rhythmic gymnastics or whatever."

The next song came on, and Ranma wasn't sure if he was relieved or terrified that it was a slow song.
He glanced over and saw Asahi next to the stereo, giving him a thumbs up and a wink, and decided
terror was probably appropriate.

Nabiki took full advantage of it, stepping in close to him and slipping her arms around his neck. She
smiled a bit at his obvious rising panic. "There. Anyone can dance to this." She reached around
behind his head and started idly playing with his pigtail.

Ranma went stone stiff. "NabikimaybeIshouldsitthisoneoutI'mnotfeelingsogood…"

Nabiki's expression darkened. "Ranma. Arms around me. Now."

Ranma's arms obediently wrapped around her waist.

She chuckled and started swaying gently, slowly coaxing him to follow her movements. He was
trying VERY hard not to notice how close she was to him, or that her bikini was doing nothing to
mask the warmth of her body, or the fact she smelled faintly of seaweed and sunscreen, or the way
the firelight reflected from her eyes, or…

"Ranma?" She asked softly, snapping him back to attention, though the softness of her voice and her
concerned expression did nothing to help the storm currently ravaging his brain. "Are you okay?"

"I… dunno…" He said, truthfully enough. "I mean… I don't…" He closed his eyes and growled in
frustration. Words! Why were they so difficult!? "This isn't my life. I mean, I don't get to be that
guy… that normal guy… dancing on the beach with… with…" He looked at her and swallowed. "…
With a p-pretty girl. Something is supposed to wreck it. Someone is supposed to want something
from me by now."

Nabiki blushed fetchingly at the included compliment. She closed her eyes, let her head fall against
his shoulder, and leaned against him, her arms tightening around his neck as she gently pressed
closer.

"Oh, yes… that was MUCH worse.

Her body kind of fit together with his, and he could feel her warm breath on his neck, the steady
thrum of her heartbeat. But worst of all was that she was relaxed. Not limp, not clinging… she was
neither demanding anything of him, nor stiff and tense at his touch. She was… at ease.

She trusted him.

Maybe… A rebellious thought pierced through the layers of defensive strategies and hyper
awareness. Maybe it really is okay. Just this once. He closed his eyes, took a deep, shuddering
breath… and relaxed.
"Better now?" She murmured.

"Yeah." He said softly, though he didn't know why. He felt like he had just come out of a rough fight. He felt like something had changed, but he didn't quite know what yet.

She leaned back a bit to look into his face again. He opened his eyes, soft brown meeting steel grey. She smiled and toyed with his pigtail again, brushing it over the back of his neck. "Ranma… What do you want? Not five years from now, not tomorrow, not an hour from now. No consequences, no parents, no fiancees, no perverted martial arts master, no obligation to be manly... anything goes. Right this minute... what do you want?"

Their eyes locked for a few moments, firelight flickering, the music softly playing nearby, and just for a moment all the rest of the world, with its demands, its obligations, its honor, and its expectations, fell away. And for that instant, the answer became simple.

He leaned in, and gently pressed his lips to hers.

(Author’s Note: This would be a cute place to stop, wouldn't it?

Naaaaaaah!

Not letting these two off that easy.

I apologize for the volleyball bit, both to those who hated it, and to those who may have actually wanted to see it go a few rounds.

More coming soon, I promise!)
Of Samurai and Tea Shops

One week ago

Akane beamed in triumph. This wasn't her usual sort of fight, but it had been some time since she had had a real 'win' against a tough opponent, and she felt like she needed all the victories she could get.

Normally being sneaky was not something she was good at, but a year of constant frustration did wonders for opening one's horizons. She felt a little guilty, but nothing of what she had talked about with Auntie Saotome was a lie, technically. She was simply using the situation to her advantage.

She figured Nabiki would be proud of her.

"But No-chan…" Genma protested, wringing his hands. "I thought you had already declared the boy as a 'Man among Men'. I don't see why this is necessary!"

Nodoka fixed her husband with a cold glare. She held the family sword in the crook of her arm, wrapped in a blanket, something she hadn't done since before the failed wedding. "While I have held that my SON has upheld his part of the agreement, and has his honor intact, I remain as yet unconvinced that his manliness is due to your teachings. Watching my son for the past year, I have seen him learn more from foreigners and that disgusting man you call your Master than you."

"I taught him the Umisenken!" Genma protested.

Her eyes narrowed, and the blanket wrapped around the family sword slipped slightly. "Which you had declared as sealed, and would NOT have taught him if circumstances had not demanded it. Circumstances which were direct consequences of YOUR actions, which you failed to take responsibility for!"

Genma swallowed as he caught a glimpse of the hilt of that terrifying sword. "No-chan, you really wouldn't demand I fulfill the seppuku pledge NOW, would you?"

"That shouldn't be necessary." Nodoka said. "If you can demonstrate that your teaching techniques are what laid the foundation for Ranma's considerable skills, and NOT what he learned from others while travelling with you. In other words, I require that you repeat your results, to some degree. To that end, dear Akane has volunteered to allow you to train her."

"But… No-chan… There's still so much work to be done on the house…" Genma protested weakly.

"The house is almost complete, and it is the job of the contractors we hired to complete it. They do not need your supervision." Nodoka replied diplomatically, not commenting whether Genma's snoring had been all that instructional for the workers or not.

Genma slumped, defeated. "Yes, dear." Ever since things had gone sour with Ranma and Akane's engagement, Nodoka had been keeping him on a shorter and shorter leash. He HAD been hoping to head off for a nice long training trip with Soun, but Nodoka had put the kibosh on that.

"I am looking forward to learning from you, Mr. Saotome." Akane bowed to him formally. "I want you to train me exactly like you did with Ranma." She set her stance and folded her arms in determination.

After almost an entire summer trying to piece together what went wrong between her and Ranma,
she had finally figured it out. It wasn't him... not just him anyway.

Before Ranma came, she was one of the top martial artists in Nerima, which even THEN was saying something. She was in top form, honed through fighting off a literal horde every single day, topped off by fierce clashes with Tatewaki Kuno. It didn't matter that Akane was a tomboy, or couldn't cook, or wasn't very feminine. Akane Tendo was strong. Akane Tendo didn't lose.

Until Ranma came.

He was faster, stronger, more graceful, more sure and more powerful than she imagined was possible. And he did it almost casually, like it wasn't a big deal. And he attracted others who were similarly strong and fast and skilled, privy to secret techniques and training. And despite her protests of being a 'real martial artist', she quickly came to realise she wasn't. Not in Ranma Saotome's world anyway.

She could have handled that. But at the same time, he was also a she, a girl who could with the same casual lack of effort be cute, exotic, vulnerable, charming, and feminine. A boy who hated being a girl was better at her in the things that should be inherent.

The trouble with Ranma Saotome's world was, there wasn't any room for HER in it. Not as a martial artist, not as a woman. Everything she did, those around her now did better. There wasn't a single thing that was HERS, except anger and frustration.

She could have lived with that, maybe. If he had chosen her. If she could have known for certain that she was what HE wanted, that would have been enough. To know that she had something that set her apart, even if it couldn't be quantified... even if it was just in his eyes... she could have managed with that.

But he couldn't say it. He couldn't even give her that much, not out of pettiness, but because he just didn't know.

And she realized what a fool she had been. She had given up so easily on the things that DID make her special, that DID make her strong, in the hopes that she could grasp this ephemeral thing that even HE wasn't sure existed. She wasted time competing with his girl side on things she had never been good at, while she let the things she had always been good at lay fallow.

She was a martial artist. Not a cook. Not a homemaker. Not a swimmer. Not someone to sit on the sidelines of a fight. She had given up the fight when the challenge was first issued, because the task of closing the gap seemed so daunting, so... terrifying. But she realized that it was literally the only choice she had. After a year of struggling and running and trying to find an alternative, another place she could exist in this new reality Ranma had forced upon her, she knew now that she only had one choice. The same choice she had ALWAYS had.

Genma's eyes narrowed, his brow furrowing. "You want to be trained 'just like Ranma', do you?" he crossed his arms. "Very well..."

Akane allowed herself another grin. Genma probably thought he was being intimidationating with that. In fact, she was terrified. She always had been, which is why it took her a year to realize she had no choice.

_Do your worst._

_The Present_
Mornings were never an easy thing for Nabiki. On the best of days, she and mornings had a kind of tense armed standoff until there was enough caffeine in her system for her to take her finger off the 'nuke everything' button.

This morning, however, opened things with a pre-emptive strike.

"Unnnnngh!" She unwillingly floundered back to consciousness as the light shone through the window. Her temples pounded as she buried her head in Ranma's shoulder and tried to shut it out.

The mental gear prying itself loose was almost audible as she gradually realized that on THIS side of wakefulness there shouldn't be a shoulder there for her to bury her face against.

Slowly, she cracked an eye open, squinting as the hated sun stabbed her in the eye with needles of light. Next to her was Ranma, eyes closed, face relaxed and tranquil. Her head was pillowed on his shoulder, and his arm was around her.

The cliched response to this would have been to panic, scream, and frantically extricate herself. Nabiki hated cliches. She closed her eyes again and relaxed. Ranma was asleep, and there was nothing urgent pressing her into action, so she had a little time to assess the situation. She pushed past the throbbing migraine and forced her protesting mind to sift through the alcohol-soaked memories from the previous night.

All right… we were drinking… obviously too much in my case. She scowled, not entirely pleased that she had let herself go as far as she obviously had. I was a little buzzed… Ranma was off sitting by himself, being all introspective and moody, so I came over to try and cheer him up. I pulled him up to get him to dance. It was a slow dance, and then I asked him… something. And then… then he…

She winced. God damnit Drunk Nabiki!

Ranma had kissed her. She didn't know if it was because he was actually falling for her, or a spur of the moment thing brought on by the mood and the setting… she sincerely hoped it was the latter… but he had leaned in and kissed her.

Sober Nabiki would have pushed him away, maybe even slapped him, and hit him with such a huge debt that his grandchildren would still be paying off the interest.

'Normal Weekend' Nabiki probably would have let him down gently, maybe even apologized for giving him the wrong idea.

Drunk Nabiki though?

*His answer wasn't the one she was expecting. The kiss was soft, tentative… almost more of a question than a statement. That simply would NOT do.*

She moved her hand from his pigtail to the back of his head, keeping him from escaping as she returned his kiss with interest, her arms tightening, pulling him in against her. She opened her mouth, her tongue caressing his soft lips, leading him and daring him to follow.

She pinched the bridge of her nose, the pain in her temples flaring as she did a mental inventory of just how badly she had screwed up. The night was an incoherent blur after that, but she knew that hadn't been the only kiss. There was a definite sense of Ranma rapidly improving his technique as the night went on. She cracked open an eye, and gingerly lifted the sheet covering them both, dreading what it might reveal about the night's activities.

*Whew!*
She sighed in relief and let the sheet drop back into place. They were still both clothed. In the state they had been in, she doubted they would have had the presence of mind to put their clothes back into place. There was also no sign of any 'wet spot' on the mattress. The LAST thing she needed was the complication in her life of getting pregnant.

Drunk Nabiki wasn't going to get let out again for a VERY long time.

Carefully she disentangled herself from Ranma. Thankfully he was a heavy sleeper; She knew from experience she could dump a bucket of cold water on him and not wake him. She slipped out of the bed as he rolled over onto his side. She felt an intense need for coffee, a shower, and something to wear OTHER than a bikini, in that order.

Naturally, she hadn't set the coffeemaker timer this time. She set about fumbling with the coffee filters, absently taking a couple of pills for her headache as she struggled to make the machine work. Finally getting it burbling away, she stumbled back into the room and sat down on the empty bed, across from Ranma.

Now there's just waking Ranma up, and hoping he doesn't remember anything. She sighed, leaning forward a bit. Yeah, fat chance of that. Ranma had been less drunk than her, after all. With her luck, he'd likely remember the whole night.

Just gotta do it quick. She thought. Whatever... chemistry we have, it's a terrible idea for both of us. I'm going to college in a few months, and he really needs a girl who can defend herself. If we got together we'd be forever stuck at that stupid dojo fending off challengers, fiancées and whoever else his idiot father sold him to. I'll just make sure he understand it's for the best, and not because of anything he did.

She unconsciously brushed a fringe of his hair from his face. She smiled a little, seeing how all the lines of his face smoothed out when he relaxed, making him look almost innocent. Poor guy... He's really not equipped to deal with ONE girl, must less four or five. She felt an odd surge of possessiveness flutter in her chest, and a small, quiet, but insistent voice in her head.

Mine.

She shuddered and withdrew her hand quickly. She ran it through her hair and stood up, making her way purposefully towards the shower. Apparently she needed to get some of her own rebellious impulses under control first.

The coffee was ready by the time she stepped out of the bathroom, wearing a fluffy white hotel bathrobe. She had spent the time under the hot water almost in a trance, carefully retracing her plans and goals for the year, reminding herself of what was at stake, and ruthlessly silencing any dissenting voices. She stepped out of the bathroom and gave Ranma a good, long look, until she was satisfied there were no more unprofessional heart flutters or immature, possessive little voices in her head. She sat back down on the empty bed and took a deep breath.

"Ranma." She said clearly.

She had spent a lot of time observing how Ranma slept, primarily to facilitate getting pictures for her various Ranma-obsessed clients. Ranma slept like the dead, oblivious to anything short of being bodily thrown out a window. Unless someone clearly said his name. Happosai in particular had been caught unawares by that when he had succumbed to monologuing while trying one of his stupid incense schemes in Ranma's room.
Ranma groaned and stirred, cracking open one eye, then closing it with a moan.


"My mouth feels like I licked the insides of a well-used pair of gym shoes." He mumbled. He made a couple of abortive grabs for the pills on the nightstand before managing to grab them, swallowing them dry.

"The water too, Saotome. You're dehydrated. That's why your head hurts." She took a sip of her coffee as she waited for him to recover a little more.

He slowly sat up, doing a fairly good impression of herself in the morning, bleary-eyed, mussed hair, and blank stare at the floor. He reached for the glass of water, managing to grab it in one try this time and downed it in one gulp.

"Pops and Mr. Tendo are idiots for doing that to themselves willingly." He muttered. "Never drinking again."

Nabiki smirked in spite of herself. "Daddy says exactly the same thing every time he wakes up with a hangover."

"Yeah, well, I mean it. If I want my head split open,next time I'll just go piss off Ryouga." He looked up at her blearily. She could almost see the gears in his head come unstuck as the memories started coming back, his eyes widening, following by a slightly blush on his cheeks. "Nabiki… I… we…"

She held up a hand to stop him. "No panicking, Saotome. I know what we did, and it's okay. Nobody is getting malleted or married over this." She folded her hands and leaned forward a bit. "Take a minute, tell me what you remember first, then we figure it out together, okay?"

"We… uh…" He blushed deeper and took a deep breath. "We kissed. Umm… more than once. Maybe a lot more than once." He wrung his hands a bit. "We stayed at the party for a bit… I remember having a few more drinks. Things got a bit blurry… I think I tried to dance…Then you started falling asleep, so I carried you back to the room. B-but… you wouldn't let go, and I was tired too, so…" He winced and ducked his head a bit.

"You didn't do anything wrong, Ranma." She said quickly. And I am VERY lucky I was with you and not someone else who might have taken advantage of me! Drunk Nabiki is definitely going on permanent hiatus. "So… We can agree we were both drunk, and did something stupid."

He winced at that, and his eyes fell.

Shit. "Ranma… listen to me." She took a deep breath, mustering up the rehearsed speech she had spent her time in the shower putting together. "This isn't anything wrong with you. Or with me, really. This is a situation thing. I'm going to business school… that'll be four years or more of my life where I won't be able to focus on ANYTHING ELSE. You have… probably the most complicated mess of a love life imaginable, and you don't need me complicating it. Especially if you still feel anything for Akane. You need to at least sort that out before you look anywhere else."

He hunkered down a little more at that, looking away.

"It's like Asahi and Chiyako said," She pressed on. "Most relationships don't survive College. This was… A nice weekend that got away from us, okay? This isn't a foundation for anything. It's better we just leave it all here, rather than try and make something out of nothing… Right?"
Ranma balled up his fists and closes his eyes, his shoulders tensing. He seemed to struggle a moment, then relaxed. He opened his eyes again, and they were flat and grey. "No, I understand. My fault for taking you seriously, huh?"

"What? Ranma..." Nabiki bit her lower lip. She had expecting things to be awkward, but...

"All that stuff about figuring out what I want being important. About trying to be happy the only thing that really matters. About how that's the way to finally sorting out my mess of a life." He gritted his teeth. "I guess that was just part of the joke, huh?" He suddenly got to his feet and made his way slowly and carefully to the bathroom.

"Ranma..."

"You should get packed." Ranma said just before he stepped inside. "Don't want to be late checking out."

To say the train ride back was awkward would be a painful understatement.

They sat opposite each other, as far apart as they could physically get. Ranma had been unwilling to do more than give one or two word answers, and Nabiki didn't feel like pushing him for more.

*Stupid stupid STUPID!* She groused at herself as she gazed out the window, as it was as far from looking in Ranma's direction as she could get. *The point of a weekend getaway was to GET AWAY, Nabiki! If you found some nice boy to have a little weekend romance with, then you both go home to your separate corners of Japan afterwards, never see each other again, and get to remember it as a sweet, fun little weekend.*

She glanced at Ranma's reflection in the window. He was looking off to the left, across the aisle. Probably trying to look anywhere but at her, same as she was. *But NO. YOU had to go and mess around with your little sister's fiance!*

She sighed. It probably would have been okay if Ranma was even remotely the kind of guy his reputation made him out to be; A casanova who got off on playing with girls' hearts. But he wasn't. He was naive, inexperienced... maybe a little sweet... And to him a kiss actually meant something. Not the sort of boy suited to a little meaningless weekend fun.

She scowled. *No. I am NOT going to feel guilty about this! Ranma is a big boy, and he knew the arrangement when we started this weekend! It's not like he doesn't know me! Honestly, with all the effort he puts into keeping all his other relationships from blowing up, you'd think he'd show a little restraint!*

She smirked a bit, satisfied that she had managed to shift enough of the blame for the situation off her own shoulders to keep the guilt from completely ruining any benefit of the trip. It lasted exactly as long as it took for her gaze to flick back to Ranma's reflection in the window.

~Everyone else who ever kissed him, they kissed him first. I was the first person he ever chose to kiss.~

She winced and screwed her eyes shut. *Damn it, that's not fair...*

The speaker crackled to life. *Next station is... Tobu-Nerima. Next station is Tobu-Nerima.*

"That's our stop." Nabiki said, unnecessarily. She started gathering her bags, trying not to make eye contact with Ranma. She noticed he silently grabbed her heavier suitcase and felt another stab of
guilt. *Would it kill you to be a jerk so I can hate you for a little while, Ranma?* Nabiki fumed. She was starting to get an idea why the relationship between Ranma and her sister had been the way it was.

The walk back home was more uncomfortable silence. Ranma didn't do his usual fence-walking, and simply stayed a couple of paces ahead of her, holding her suitcase over his shoulder. She struggled with the urge to start some sort of meaningless small talk, knowing it was just going to make things worse.

They finally reached the front door, and Ranma stopped and handed her her suitcase. "Here. Don't want anyone getting the wrong idea or nuthin'."

"Ranma…" She sighed heavily, wondering if this was just how he was going to be from now on.

"Oh, and here." he handed her something wrapped in tissue.

She blinked and peeked at it, finding a bar of soap. "The waterproof soap? What am I supposed to do with this?"

"I don't need it anymore." He replied, walking through the front door. "Sell it to Ryouga, toss it in the trash. I don't care." He kicked off his shoes and headed inside without another word. "I'll be in the dojo if anyone needs me."

Nabiki watched him go, gripping the tissue-wrapped bar of soap tightly. Kasumi peeked her head out of the kitchen as Ranma walked past. "Oh! Ranma, you're back! Dinner's not quite ready yet…"

"It's alright, Kasumi. I'm not hungry." Ranma muttered, and continued towards the dojo.

"Oh… my." Kasumi stared at him wide-eyed, then turned to Nabiki, who was lugging her suitcase in the door. "Nabiki… did something happen this weekend?"

Nabiki gripped the wrapped soap tighter, then jammed it into her pocket. "No! Nothing happened." She stalked past the kitchen. "I'm going to go unpack."

Kasumi watched her sister stomp past, concerned look on her face. She watched her go up the stairs, then her eyes flicked towards the dojo, where she could hear the sounds of Ranma hitting the training post already. She looked back and forth between then two, then decided to return to her kitchen for the time being, though the worried look never left her brow.

~Whack~

~Whack~

~Whack~

~CRACK!~

Ranma sighed and relaxed from his ready stance, the post he had been using as a hitting dummy askew, the wood snapped at the mid point. He glanced at the other two posts he had already broken tonight, and decided to give it a rest. Hitting things wasn't making him feel any better.

He sighed, slumping a little. He set about freeing the broken post, resolving to replace it… again… later. He made his way back to the house.
"Oh, Ranma! Is everything all right?" Kasumi asked. She was waiting for him by the door with a towel.

"Everything is fine, Kasumi." Ranma said, managing to sound completely unconvincing. He accepted the towel and dabbed the sweat from his face. "I'm… going to take a bath before dinner, if that's okay?"

"I… of course." Kasumi replied. "It's just us tonight, father is visiting the Saotomes, and Akane… she's still staying with them for now." She bowed her head a bit.

"Yeah, I figured." Ranma walked away towards the laundry room and furo. He grabbed a change of clothes from the laundry, taking one of his more comfortable red silk shirts. He checked for the occupied sign on the door, sighed in relief and put it up himself, then stepped inside the changing area.

I shoulda known better than to trust Nabiki. He thought darkly. Why did Pops and Mr. Tendo send me on this stupid trip anyway? Nabiki didn't need me along. She didn't WANT me along. He undressed in a businesslike manner, tossing his clothes in the hamper.

"This isn't a foundation for anything. It's better we just leave it all here, rather than try and make something out of nothing... Right?"

Better foundation than I've gotten before. He thought glumly, open the door and stepping into the furo. He sat down on a stool and filled up a wash tub with cold water. At least I actually got to pick the girl this time. Though what the HELL was I thinking picking NABIKI?! He dumped the tub's contents over himself. The soap had finally worn off, and he felt the tingle of the change as his body shifted, proportions changed, and his line of sight dropped as she was now several inches shorter.

She looked up, catching sight of herself in the mirror. She got up from her stool and walked over, wiping away the mist covering it, and finding a pair of deep blue eyes looking back at her from her reflection. She almost felt a pang of guilt for having locked her girl side away so long, though that hardly made any sense given how many times she had been stuck as a girl. Hey again. She thought, looking at her. I guess you're the only girl I can actually trust, huh?

A memory of deep brown eyes, framed by soft brown hair, and a sly smirk turning up soft lips that his memory of was so much more than just visual. "Well, I'm not Akane. I trust you."

Another memory, this time of hazel eyes full of emotion and promise, framed by dark hair. "Do you really hate me that much?"

She closed her eyes and tried to shut the faces out. That's not fair! What was I supposed to do?! How was I supposed to feel?! She slumped down onto the bathroom floor and pulled her legs up to her chest. Her emotions had always been so much closer to the surface as a girl, and she found she couldn't stifle the tears of hurt and confusion anymore.

Why doesn't anyone who I want want me back? What's wrong with me?


I'm sorry! I'm sorry I couldn't make you happy, Akane! I didn't know what to do! I didn't know how! She shuddered. Hindsight was a cruel, unforgiving thing. She could see all of the chances she had had to do just that, all the ways she had messed it up, and then been forgiven, over and over and OVER, until finally the forgiveness ran out.
"You CAN'T make everyone happy, and you CAN'T hold yourself to dealing with what THEY want before you even get to DECIDE what YOU want." Nabiki's voice cut in. "Otherwise you're just spending your whole life reacting, and never going anywhere or accomplishing anything."

Ranma sighed. "Yeah, that worked out REAL good for me, didn't it, Nabiki?" She rested her chin on her knees. "Knowing what I want doesn't help much if I still can't figure out what anyone ELSE wants…"

"Oh come on, Saotome! Loosen up a bit." There was a memory of a warm hand on his, and soulful eyes that she would like to lose herself in. "Let's just… forget who we are for a while and pretend a little, okay?"

A memory of hazel eyes, and the smell of flowers and perfume "Then do it. Kiss me. Can you just… make believe?" She dropped her head back into her arms, feeling the tears hot on her cheeks again. "I didn't, though. I wasn't… I wasn't pretending." She dug her nails into her biceps. "I didn't WANT to pretend…"

"Ranma?" A soft, familiar voice came from the changing room, causing her to freeze in place. Kasumi!

"I-I'll just be a few more minutes!" She called out.

"That's alright, I just wanted to leave you some fresh towels." Kasumi replied. "I'm sorry for intruding."

Ranma took a deep breath, steadying herself. She realized she had started talking out loud. "How… how much did you hear?" She looked up, seeing Kasumi's shadow on the other side of the paper screen. She realized that Kasumi could probably see her outline too, all huddled up in a pitiful little ball.

"Not much. Enough." Kasumi replied. "Ranma… I'd like to talk. When you're done."

Ranma bit her lip. "Kasumi, I don't think…"

"Ranma." Kasumi cut her off, a firmness in her tone that was uncharacteristic of the eldest Tendo sister. "You don't have to tell me anything you don't want to, and I won't attempt to force you. But there are some things that I have left unsaid for far too long that I wish to say. Meet me in the dojo when you're done, please."

Kasumi looked up from where she was kneeling as Ranma came in the dojo door. She noticed Ranma hadn't bothered to change back to male, and certainly hadn't had enough time to wash thoroughly. She probably thinks she's here for a lecture, and just wants to get it over with as soon as possible.

Kasumi had set down some pillows to kneel on to try and make things a bit more comfortable. The Dojo wasn't exactly the place she would have preferred to have such a talk, but with Nabiki upstairs, it seemed best to have some distance. Plus she knew that Ranma seemed to be more comfortable in the dojo than anywhere else in the house. Ranma eschewed these and knelt in front of her on the hard wooden floor. Her eyes were closed and downcast, still puffy and red from crying.

Kasumi took a deep breath. "Ranma, you are no longer a guest in this household."

Ranma winced as if struck. She tensed, looking as if she were going to protest a moment, then
seemed to deflate and nodded slowly. She opened her eyes, and the misery in them was palpable. "I guess… that was inevitable, huh?" She started to get up. "I'll get my things and…"

"Ranma, sit!"

Ranma blinked in surprise, caught completely unawares by Kasumi’s authoritative command. Her foot slipped, and she obeyed by flopping gracelessly back onto her rear, staring at Kasumi as if she had been replaced by some kind of alien pod.

"That was not a statement that you are unwelcome here, Ranma, nor that you’ve incurred some kind of punishment. In fact, it is exactly the opposite." She sighed and gathered her thoughts. "Ranma, answer a question for me. Do you believe you will be welcome in this house should you choose NOT to marry Akane or Nabiki, or even myself should father and Mr. Saotome decide to shuffle things once more?" She looked into the redhead’s eyes, not liking what she found there.

"Well… no…” She slumped, knowing the chances of her marrying into the Tendo family were basically nil… and not even sure if that's what she WANTED anymore.

"And do you believe that if your Mother should decide, against all reason, to attempt to enforce that ridiculous promise of your father's, that we would step back and simply allow it to happen?" Kasumi clenched her fists in her lap, struggling to maintain control and decorum as a thousand old frustrations bubbled to the surface.

Ranma's eyes widened at the look on Kasumi's face. "Kasumi… I'm sorry, whatever I did…!"

"No, Ranma!" Kasumi said sharply, causing the redhead to recoil back again.

Kasumi took a deep, calming breath, closing her eyes and breathing a few times to find her center. "I am not angry with you, Ranma. I am angry with myself and… 'circumstance.'" She opened her eyes. "Firstly, you are NOT a guest in this house, Ranma. You are family. As long as I live in this house, this is your home, and you are welcome here. No matter what. I apologize that I have not made this clear to you."

Ranma found herself blushing as she scooted back to her knees. "Kasumi…"

"Secondly..." Kasumi took a deep breath. She was overstepping herself here, she knew, but this had bothered her for FAR too long. "... Though I do not wish to impune the honor of Mr. Saotome or your mother...I do not approve of the obligation of the seppuku pledge they forced upon you as a child, nor would I have stood by… or allowed FATHER to stand by… should your mother have chosen to render judgement against you. Or should she reverse her decision not to in the future."

Ranma was stock still, staring. She opened her mouth, then shut it again.

"What I am saying is… you have our support. You have MY support. No matter what." Kasumi took a final breath, and released it. "I know something happened this weekend between you and Nabiki... And I will not pry as to what it was. I know that your life is tumultuous, and your future is in question. I just want to be clear that I want to help you, and I WILL help, however I can, and that that help is NOT conditional." She finished, giving Ranma a resolute look. "I want this to be a safe place for you."

"I…” Ranma rubbed the back of her head, blushing. "I… uh… Thanks? I mean… I'm not sure what to say…”

Kasumi shook her head. "You don't have to say anything. Thank YOU for letting me get that off my chest. Now, there IS something you can do for me in return, however."
Ranma froze, sensing the other shoe dropping.

Kasumi bowed her head. "There is something very important you must keep in mind in regards to my sisters."

"Uh…" Ranma looked nervous.

"Ranma." Kasumi fixed the girl with her most serious look yet. "Never forget this, EVER, for I will not repeat myself."

"Y-yes, Kasumi?"

"Ranma, my sisters…" She took a breath. "… Are idiots."

There was a long moment of silence, a pause as Kaumi solemnly stared at Ranma. Finally, Kasumi's mask cracked, the corner of her mouth tweaked, and the tension broke as the two of them dissolved into a fit of giggles.

"You… you had me going Kasumi! Good one!" Ranma giggled, holding her gut and wiping the tears from her eyes.

Kasumi had been more restrained, but was nonetheless beaming. "I did mean everything I said, Ranma. INCLUDING about my sisters." She dabbed the corner of her eye with a handkerchief. "Akane has so much passion about the things she wants, but has no idea how to pursue them. And Nabiki is so adept at pursuing what she thinks she wants, but is so busy chasing meaningless things that she misses out on the richness of life." She sighed. "I have always tried my best with them, but I can't help but feel they have honestly suffered for not having a proper mother."

"What? No, Kasumi…" Ranma crawled over to her and sat next to her. "You're the most supportive, caring, NICE person I know. You did the best you could!"

Kasumi shook her head. "There is a harsh reality, Ranma, that sometimes the best you can do simply isn't enough." She hesitated a moment, then gently patted the girl on the head, earning a blush. "Still, thank you. It means a lot to me that you see me that way. You have always been a little brother to me." She carefully avoided the word 'like'. She had made her statement, and was sticking by it; Even if Ranma never married into the family, he was her brother now. She hoped their parents understood that and would not try and force the engagement on her should things remain sour with her sisters. "And… I mean no offense by this… But in a way you are a little sister too."

Ranma cocked her head, then glanced down at herself. "Wha…? Oh." She blushed a bit.

"Ranma… I know the curse is a sore point for you, and I know it is something you must deal with how you feel best. But… I also understand that there are many things that you are suddenly expected to know, being a seventeen year old girl, that you have no way of knowing. Questions that might seem obvious to someone who was born female, but which might be mysteries. I want you to know that it's okay to come ask me about these things, no matter how embarrassing."

"I… thank you Kasumi." Ranma said quietly. In other circumstances she probably would have gotten flustered and angrily denied needing such things. But her 'normal' weekend had made her painfully aware that there was an awful lot to life she simply didn't KNOW, and she wasn't sure she was okay with leaving it like that anymore. She wasn't sure what that meant in relation to the curse yet.

"Now, it is far past time I got dinner ready. I have been getting lax in my housework with everyone away on their little weekend vacations." She smiled. "Would you care to help me?"
"I… sure, Kasumi." Ranma nodded. Feeling useful would be a good way to calm her thoughts.

They started back to the house, Ranma finally posed the one question that had tugged at the back of her mind. "Kasumi, you said I was like a little sister to you, right?"

"Not 'like'. You ARE a little sister to me, Ranma."

"Errr… yeah. And… what you said about your sisters…"

"Yes?"

"Does that… apply to me?"

"Now Ranma, I believe I said I wouldn't repeat myself, and to answer your question I would have to do just that."

"H-hey!"

Nabiki lay back on her bed, staring at the selection of brochures for local and not-so-local business schools she had been pondering. She had narrowed her selection to five, which she believed she had both the finances and grades to manage to get into. When she was upset, one of her favourite ways to center herself was to review her choices, visualizing through the promotional pictures herself attending each school, imagining daily life at each.

Currently it wasn't helping.

Right now every time she tried to close her eyes and imagine herself in one of those pictures, surrounded by other students, they all had the faces of Asahi, Chiyako, Yuto, Asami and Itsuki. That on its own wasn't so bad, it leant a certain realism to the fantasy that hadn't been there before. Now she had a better idea of how she might interact with other students at college, what sorts of people they would be.

The problem was, in her mind all of her interactions with that group had Ranma firmly at her side. And being reminded of Ranma by her fantasy world defeated the whole purpose of the escapism.

_Damnit, Saotome, you just HAD to ruin this for me, didn't you?_ She thought sourly as she put the pamphlets aside. Instead she pulled out the tissue-wrapped bar of waterproofing soap. _Geeze… I'm even starting to THINK like Akane. I need to get out of Nerima for good. Living on the fringe of The Madness is starting to affect my mind._

A rogue thought pricked the back of her mind. _~Must REALLY suck for the guy stuck in the middle of it all, huh?~_

_Nnnn! No! I am not doing this!_ Nabiki ground the heels of her palms into her eyes and tried to banish the guilty little voice. She was used to doing it. Good at it, even. But for some reason, it was refusing to go away.

_~Especially since you gave him a taste of normalcy, and he liked it. Nothing like giving someone a taste for something they can't have, right?~_

_Shut UP!_ She tossed the soap across the room, as if it was somehow connected to the voice. The wrapped soap thunked against the wall and hit the floor intact. She rolled over and looked away from it. _I am NOT going to feel guilty for how screwed up HIS life is! NONE of that is my fault!_
~You haven't helped.~

How!? She turned and looked up at the ceiling. How on EARTH could I possibly help straighten out that mess he calls his life?!

~You know you could. You just knew he'd never be able to afford what you wanted to charge for the long-term effort it would take.~

What right do I have to meddle like that, anyway? She switched mental tack, momentarily ignoring the futility of arguing with herself. How do I know he doesn't prefer things this way? He certainly hasn't do anything to straighten out the mess himself!

~He doesn't know how.~

She winced at that. Her conversations with him during the weekend had made that painfully clear. He was like a feral child who had never been taught the language of normal human interaction. Still…

~He's never shown any interest in any of the things offered to him here, but the minute we showed him normalcy, he chose it.~ The voice stated. ~He chose US.~

ARRRRGHH STOP! She gripped her temples. I am NOT marrying Ranma Saotome! I am not DATING Ranma Saotome! I am not getting involved with him IN ANY WAY!

~You already did.~

STOP!

~You promoted him from fake boyfriend.~

I WAS DRUNK!

~You kissed him.~

He kissed ME!

~You wanted him to.~

She whimpered and curled into a ball, turning onto her side. Shut up shut up shut UP!

~You made him want something he can't have.~

What do you want me to do about it!?

~Fix it.~

HOW!? She rolled onto her back, panting as she came to the end of the mental struggle with herself. She realized with a sinking sensation that she had just accepted responsibility for an impossible problem. Ranma wants Normalcy, but there's absolutely no way in hell to DO that with all of these random factors pulling at him and stirring things up and… and…

She paused her line of thought as something sparked. She started mentally running through all those ‘random factors’. Because they weren't REALLY random, were they? They were all connected, tied to each other, so that the smallest force on one caused the whole thing to rattle. But, if she could MAP that, plot it out…
She rolled off her bed, retrieving the large hanging corkboard she had once used to post up IOU slips before she went digital. She hung it back up on the wall, then opened up her desk and started rummaging through her photograph files, selecting pictures of the various figures in Ranma's life, as well as some red and green yarn, and a package of thumbtacks. She stuck a picture of Ranma dead center in the board, then started to arrange the pictures around him, running green and red lines of yarn between them as appropriate. Her movements had the feverish, frantic nature of an inventor who was caught in the throes of inspiration. She returned to the desk, rummaging around for some cue cards, and started frantically scribbling notes, pinning them up as well.

When she was finally done, she stepped back, a little short of breath. It wasn't complete by any stretch; She'd need to tweak it, add more factors and connections, throw in more peripheral individuals who might affect things. But it was a start, the start of something she had never been crazy or desperate enough to attempt before.

She was mapping The Madness. And it was starting to make sense. There was a structure to it that could be manipulated. One she had unconsciously been tweaking for her own profit, but now, one she could use to dismantle the whole thing.

"Oh my god…" She breathed. "... I can fix Ranma Saotome."

Breakfast the next morning was suitably awkward. Ranma and Nabiki sat in their usual spots, but neither was meeting the eyes of the other as they ate in silence.

"I got a phone call from Father before you two got back yesterday." Kasumi said, trying to fill the empty void. "They had fun in Okinawa. He's staying with the Saotomes for a few more days to help with repairs to the house. He says that once that's done, he'll be coming home. With Akane."

Ranma flinched at that, but didn't look up from his miso. He was eating at a sedate, almost normal pace, probably the closest he would normally come to being put off his food.

"You'll get all the assignments from the teacher for her, won't you Ranma?" Kasumi asked. She knew this was uncomfortable for him, but she knew the two of them needed to find SOME sort of reconciliation.

"Yeah, sure." Ranma muttered. He glanced at Nabiki, then at the clock. He sighed and put his half-finished bowl down. "I'm... gonna head off early. Thanks for breakfast, Kasumi." Without another word he stood and headed for the door.

Kasumi gaped, never having seen Ranma leave food unfinished before… unless it was from Akane. She looked at Nabiki, who was reading the newspaper… or at least looking at it and trying to appear like she was reading it, and absently finishing her own breakfast. "Nabiki… are you sure you don't want to walk with Ranma?"

"He's a big boy. He can find the way on his own." Nabiki said.

Kasumi waited until she heard the sliding door closed, and was certain Ranma was out of earshot. "Nabiki, is everything alright?"

"It's fine." Nabiki mumbled, distracted. "Why do you ask?"

"Because you've been reading the same page of the newspaper for twenty minutes." Kasumi replied, snatching it up as she cleared away the breakfast dishes. "Upside down."

"Hey…!" Nabiki protested, then blushed as she got called out. "Okay, fine! I just didn't want to try
and carry on an awkward conversation. I've got a lot on my mind." She stood up, brushing her dress off unnecessarily.

"Nabiki." Kasumi paused, incidentally right in the path of any easy escape out the front door. "How do you feel about Ranma?"

"Oh my GOD!" Nabiki rolled her eyes. "Can we not have this conversation please, Kasumi?"

"Nabiki, he's your fiance now." Kasumi stood her ground. "You just spent a weekend together, and after you got back I found him in girl form in the furo crying. I've just watched my baby sister lose any chance she had with him when they obviously cared about each other very much because she couldn't be honest about her feelings, and I do NOT want to see it happen again!"

Unused to the resolve her sister was showing, Nabiki's usual cool, calm demeanor crumbled. "K-Kasumi…?" She gaped at her older sister a bit, then something else got traction in her mind. "Ranma was crying…?"

"Don't you DARE tell him I told you." Kasumi said sternly. "And don't you dare use it against him either, but yes." She sighed. "I did not approve of you and Ranma going off together unescorted like that, but given how poorly the situation tended to be handled by father when he DID escort Ranma and Akane, I didn't feel I should object. You have always been more… 'worldly' than the rest of the family, and I supposed I should have been more concerned about how that might affect someone as… frankly innocent as Ranma." She closed her eyes and huffed. "Did you at least use protection?"

She said quietly.

Nabiki flushed deep scarlet. "Kasumi! Nothing like that happened!" She very carefully shoved back down the thought that if she had been just slightly less drunk it might well have.

"That's a small mercy, I suppose. But whatever DID happen obviously affected him, at a time when he was already vulnerable." She wrung her hands. "Please be careful, sister. Ranma does not have the same kind of support network your or I do, and while he is resilient I fear he is at his limits right now."

Nabiki felt a twinge of annoyance. Even Kasumi is assuming I'm completely blind to his feelings. Am I the 'Ice Queen' to you too, Kasumi? "I know. I already decided to lay off him before the weekend even started. I swear, I wasn't messing with him. I was trying to HELP, it just… got a little misunderstood."

Kasumi nodded slowly, then stepped out of the way. "You'd better get going or you'll have to run."

Nabiki grabbed her bookbag and started past her towards the door, but Kasumi caught her shoulder as she passed.

"Nabiki… I meant it when I said I don't want to see what happened to Ranma and Akane happen again. Be honest about your feelings about him. At least to yourself."

"I'm not marrying Ranma Saotome." Nabiki muttered darkly.

"That's not what I said, Nabiki." Kasumi corrected softly.

Nabiki sighed. "I AM honest about my feelings. And he's a nice guy under all the machismo and bizarre upbringing. But I don't like him THAT way." Nabiki fixed her sister with an unwavering gaze, making sure that she was showing her that she was entirely confident and clear on this point.

Kasumi nodded. "Then perhaps help him to deal with the other girls? They are likely to be a bit
more… opportunistic when they learn he is not longer tied to Akane."

"I'll… take it under advisement." Nabiki said, and made her escape before her sister could jump to any more conclusions, or lay any more guilt upon her. She stalked out the front door, her mood already soured before the day had even begun.

**REALLY should have been more worried when she started getting into all those psychology books.** She sighed and started the trudge towards school. *I don't need her getting the idea I'm repressing some hidden attraction for Saotome! She's right though, he IS kinda fragile at the moment.* She considered as she walked. *Maybe I can run interference for him on Kuno. Still gotta work out if I should even try and meddle in his life any more than that, though. I won't do anything without letting him know.* She nodded, satisfied she was doing enough to salve her inconveniently budding guilty conscience. *As for the remaining fiancee brigade…*

*Mine.*

**YOU SHUT UP!**

Ranma reached the front gates of Furinkan with ample time to spare, having sprinted the whole way. He had wanted to be sure Nabiki wouldn't catch up with him and make things more awkward, which had unintentionally resulted in one of the signs of the apocalypse coming to pass: Ranma Saotome was EARLY for school.

*Maybe I'll get to slip past Kuno this time?* He thought as he walked through the gates, earning surprised looks from some of the students already there.

"**HALT, FOUL SORcerer!**"

*Yeah, of course not.* His expression soured as he looked up to see the self-proclaimed Blue Thunder of Furinkan High standing before the main doors of the school, bokken in hand, levelling it dramatically at him in challenge. "Geez, Kuno, how early do you get here, anyway?"

"Ha! Did you think simply altering your timetable would catch me unawares, Ranma Saotome?" Kuno shouldered his bokken and sneered. "I anticipated this tactic almost a full year ago, and have been prepared!"

Ranma blinked. "Hold on… You've been coming to school early…"

"5 AM in fact!" Kuno announced proudly.

"... You've been coming to school stupid early, for an entire YEAR, on the off-chance that I tried to get by you by coming to school early?" Ranma folded his arms and cocked his head, not sure how to deal with that level of obsession. Waiting for a duel for three days? That was one thing. But coming to SCHOOL early for a year? On the off-chance that your rival MIGHT show up early? That required a special level of obsessed!

Ranma felt something almost like respect for that.

Kuno smirked. "Ah, how the baying mongrel cowers when it realizes it has been cornered by a wolf!" He stepped forward, leveling his bokken. "Already your power slackens, and the fair tigress Akane Tendo has wrenched herself free from your grasp! Today, I complete your fall and forevermore tear the Pig-Tailed Goddess from your vile clutches!"

Ranma sighed. Another day, another time, this would have been a good way to blow off some
frustration. But Kuno looked to have a serious head of steam, and putting him down would probably make him late for class, which he didn't want to deal with. Plus, Nabiki would be there by then, which he really didn't want to deal with. He started rapidly figuring options, and considering different angles of attack to solve his problem, when inspiration hit.

Socializing is a Martial Art. Everyone wants something, right? Ranma ran through what he had learned over the weekend like he was mentally reviewing a kata. What Kuno WANTS is the Pigtailed Girl. The only reason he wants to pound ME is because he thinks I'm in the way. If I change that, he'll leave me alone, right?

He looked at the advancing swordsman, an idea forming. And the best lies are mostly true, with a few details switched around to suit the situation.

"Okay, fine." He said. "You can have her."

Kuno stopped in his tracks, eyes narrowing. "What sorcery is this? Do mine ears deceive me? I know your ilk, cur, and you have not the wit to know when to give up. What plot are you hatching?"

Ranma chewed on the corner of his lip. Kuno was suspicious. He'd have to word this carefully. "I ain't giving up! I'm just sick of fighting my sister's battles for her!"

"Sister…?" Kuno blinked.

Ranma pressed the attack, sensing an opening. "Yeah. You know, the Pig-Tailed Girl? Didn't you ever notice the resemblance, or the fact we have the same name? Same age? Same birthday?" He crossed his arms and looked away. "Geez, dude. A year of chasing her and you never even asked."

"Your sister… is the Pig-Tailed Girl?" Kuno blinked, the rusty mechanisms in his brain groaning, stirred into unfamiliar motion.

"Yeah. Twin sister. Why do you think she hangs around with my fiancee all the time? Or dresses like me? Or that we call the same guy 'Pops'?" Ranma grinned, knowing he had hooked the kendoist, and just needed to reel him in.

"Then…" Kuno desperately searched for a counter argument. "Then why do you so vehemently oppose our love!"

"Name one time I got between you and her." Ranma smirked, folding his arms across his chest. "I only kick ya around because YOU pick fights with ME."

"But… but…" Kuno's gaze started to dart back and forth, as if watching the various pieces slot into place. "... No! It makes sense! The same style of martial arts! The same home address! The protectiveness of each other!" His eyes widened. "All this time… have I been battling the very flesh and blood of my beloved?!" He dropped to his knees and clutched his head.

"~Okay, geez, milk it why doncha ya drama queen.~" Ranma muttered under his breath. "Yeah, so… since I'm not with Akane anymore neither, I guess I'm no longer an obstacle, right? Not much point in wasting your time on me." He folded his hands behind his head and starts to nonchalantly walk past the shocked kendoist.

"No…" Kuno stared at the dirt for a moment in shocked contemplation. Then, as Ranma walked past, he suddenly bolted to his feet, grabbing the startled pigtailed martial artist by the shoulders. "NAY! THIS WILL NOT STAND!"
"Holycrappleasedon'thurtme!" Ranma babbled as his personal space was violently invaded. By the obsessed older boy.

It didn't get much better when the kendoist solemnly looked into Ranma's eyes, and then crushed him to his chest in a hug.

"I have wronged you, Saotome! Slandered the name of the man who's approval I should always have sought! Blinded by petty rivalries and pride! O cruel fate dost thou punish mine hubris so!" He released Ranma, holding the stunned pigtailed boy at arm's length. "No wonder my love was ever reluctant to accept my embrace!"

"Eeeeeeééééééé..." Ranma for his part was white as a sheet, and stiff as a board.

Kuno released him and clenched his fist, tears running down his cheeks. "And yet despite our animosity, you have given me a gift! Moved by my determination and spirit, no doubt! Ah, I swear to thee, Ranma Saotome, I shall not squander this opportunity! I shall prove to thee I am worthy to court your sister, and be your brother both! This I, Tatewaki Kuno, the Blue Thunder of Furinkan High, do swear!"

Thunder boomed ominously in the distance as lightning flashed.

Ranma glanced left, then right, then quietly made his escape, wondering what fresh hell he had just invented for himself.

Furinkan was a large school, and thankfully, being a year apart meant that it wasn't all that hard to avoid Ranma. There were some rumblings about something weird that had happened that morning between Ranma and Kuno that smelled of profit, but right now, for once, she wasn't as concerned with the almighty yen as she was with avoiding an awkward conversation. She had carefully fended off inquiries from her friends and associates about her current status of being engaged to Ranma, and since the LAST time she had taken the engagement for a little quick cash, they just assumed this would be more of the same.

It was the first few classes of the year, which was a lot of introductions to things she already knew pretty well, so she had some leeway to let her mind wander. She was still mentally working on her corkboard diagram of all of Ranma's various entanglements, and pondering how to unravel them, or at least get some slack.

Objectively, it was a fascinating problem, and the profit potential was enormous. If she had stumbled on the idea before she would be salivating over how much she could make just by tweaking a few factors.

But now? She was FAR too close to getting tangled up in it herself. That wouldn't have been a big problem a year ago, but with finals and the entrance exams for the schools she was gunning for looming, she didn't have the time or inclination to deal with being some kind of replacement Akane. She needed to sweep the board clean, or at least arrange things so she could step out of the mess before it closed around her and tangled her up in it.

Never, EVER be part of the Madness. Even if that means sacrificing a few easy yen. She thought.

But there was the crux of the problem; To undo the gordian knot of Ranma's problems, she would have to do just that. Worse, she would be arrogantly trying to play PUPPETMASTER to it. The potential for personal disaster was huge.

She slipped out of school quietly after classes were done, avoiding both her friends and her technical
fiancée. Rather than head home right away, she opted to get herself a coffee, and some time away from The Madness to think. She avoided most of the usual coffee shops, knowing that she ran a high risk of running into her friends or acquaintances from Furinkan there.

So… what do I do? She pondered. I could fix or neuter most of Ranma's problems, I know I could. The answer is THERE. But it'd be easier and safer to just do what I did last time, play the fiancées off against each other, sabotage Daddy's attempts at any impromptu weddings, then make a break for college, and leave Ranma to deal with the fallout.

She looked up, noticing for the first time an odd looking little tea shop. The sign above the door read 'Clara's Leaf Tea Shop' with a perfectly preserved large red ovate leaf attached to the wooden sign. The door was a traditional sliding door with paper windows, but absolutely nothing else about the shop was remotely traditional. The outside was adorned with various wind chimes and prayer tags and whirligigs, arranged along the awning and down each post. Outside there was a small table and two chairs that looked long unused. The trim was green and faded, more of a western style than the rest, and there were knickknacks and oddities on the windowless wall that seemed to be from all over the world. A hand-drawn sign of artfully done brushed kanji stated the shop was open.

She opened the door and stepped into the dim shop, curiosity piqued. "Hello?"

"Oh, hello dear! Welcome! I'll be with you in just a moment" A figure at the far end of the dimly lit shop came over. It was a tall, lean man, his hawkish nose and thick eyebrows at odds with his effeminate demeanor and poise, as well as the admittedly competently done make up. He wore a light woman's kimono, and had what appeared to be a head kerchief entirely covering his hair.

Nabiki blinked, but such oddities barely registered on her weirdness meter anymore. She looked around the shop - One side of the small shop was dominated by a long wooden counter, with stools at one end for patrons to sit and enjoy their tea, as well as a number of plain teapots on burners. The back wall was covered in shelves, stocked with clay vases, each labelled a different tea variety. On the far side of the shop were a few tables and booths, but all were currently empty.

She slipped onto one of the stools, a little nervous that there didn't seem to be any other patrons, but she had been seen, so it would be rude to duck out now.

"Thank you for waiting dear!" The man came over, beaming, showing off his large, perfectly straight and brilliantly white teeth. "Welcome to my little shop! This is your first time here, isn't it?"

"I… uh… was just passing by and…" Nabiki stammered, not entirely sure how to handle the exuberant individual. "… Do you by any chance have any coffee?" She winced, getting the sense that asking for such a thing in a place like this might come off as offensive.

In fact, the man chuckled and patted her arm. "Oh, no, no, no, dear. Coffee is all well and good, but each beverage has its time and place, and afternoons are definitely meant for tea. Wouldn't be fair to let the British have gone through all that drama over it to only get the idea you could substitute any old drink, eh?" He pulled out a plain white teacup and picked up a tea kettle seemingly at random. "I'm Jiro. Just Jiro. And who might you be?"

Nabiki boggled a bit as the man was already pouring tea without he having stated a preference. "Uhh… Nabiki. Nabiki Tendo."

"Now, Nabiki, I have a bit of a ritual I hope you will allow me to indulge." Jiro said pleasantly. "First cup is always on the house, but I insist you allow me to try and guess your preference." He poured out the tea, and without asking added two sugar, then placed the teacup on a saucer in front of her.
"You seem quite… uhh… confident." Nabiki gave the tea a skeptical look, lifted the cup, and sniffed. Seeing Jiro was watching with rapt anticipation, she shrugged inwardly and took a sip. She immediately raised an eyebrow, tasting a hint of bergamot. "That's… that's actually quite good!"

Jiro beamed and clapped his hands. "I knew it!" He leaned in conspiratorially. "Earl Grey always seems to go over well with the serious thinkers. I've been tweaking that blend for ages to get it just right. A certain customer of mine is VERY demanding about his tea. You know how fussy frenchmen can be." He put the teapot aside. "Now, I imagine you have some momentous decision that needs pondering."

Nabiki covered her surprise by sipping her tea. "Is that another guess?"

Jiro chuckled. "No, no, of course not. No… most people who find their way in here are puzzling some great decision or another. Something of great importance to them. That's why this shop exists," He nodded and placed his hand over his heart in solemn salute. "To provide a soothing cup of warm tea, a sympathetic ear if it's needed, and a quiet place to make a difficult choice."

Nabiki smirked at the routine. Truth be told, though, a sounding board did seem appealing right now. Though deep problems in Nerima had a bit of an issue. "I'm… not sure how to really lay out my problem without sounding crazy."

"Oh pshaw, my dear." He made a dismissive gesture. "I've had actual madmen come through here ranting about boxes and screwdrivers and how much they hate pears. I can tell the difference, trust me."

Nabiki took a deep breath. "Well, this has to do with… well, a boy."

Jiro snorted. "Honey, it always has to do with a boy."

Nabiki scowled. "Not like that! Well… a little like that, but that's not the point. The problem is, his life is… well… a complete mess. And at first I didn't pay that any mind because he's a loudmouth and a braggart and exactly the sort to end UP in those kinds of messes, so I figured it was just what he deserved. Maybe even that he wanted it that way."

Jiro nodded, listening raptly.

"Well… then circumstances kind of forced us to spend some time together. Not like that!" She said quickly. "But… we talked for a bit, and I guess I got a look at how he actually thinks, and some insight as to why he kept getting into these messes."

"He was a bit more than you figured?" Jiro asked, sipping his own cup of tea that Nabiki hadn't actually seen him pour.

"Yes… and no. Actually a lot of the opposite." Nabiki said, and felt a small pang of sadness. "He… well, he missed out on a lot of… normal stuff. Going to school, first crushes, learning how to interact with people. A lot of his problems are just because he doesn't really KNOW any better."

"A lot of silliness boils down to just that." Jiro said softly. "And that people are often too prideful or arrogant to simply admit they don't know what to do."

"Yeah, well 'prideful and arrogant' describes him pretty well. But…" She bit the corner of her lip, looking into her reflection in the dark liquid in her cup. "His skin is a lot thinner than I could have possibly imagined. I think I really hurt him."

"And now you're wondering how to make it right?"
Nabiki shook her head. "That's the thing. I know how to make it right. I've almost got it entirely figured out. I can fix the mess of his life, get things stable enough so that he can handle the rest on his own, and maybe even start picking up all those things about dealing with people he missed out on. But... If I start this, I have no choice but to see it through. And if it goes bad, it'll pull me down with it, and I'm so close to getting to where I want to be in life."

"Mmmm... So!" Jiro pushed a plate of biscuits towards her that she had also not seen his get, taking one for himself. "You have to decide if it's worth risking your future to make a bad boy with a sensitive side happy?"

Nabiki frowned. "It's not that simple..."

"Well, you implied he was..."

"No!" Nabiki glared at the effeminate tea shop owner. "He's actually surprisingly smart. All it takes is for someone to show him he can USE these skills, and he picks them up incredibly fast!"

"But he's arrogant and prideful!"

"That's just his cover, because he literally doesn't know how to be any other way, because his idiot father taught him he has to be 'tough' all the time, so he can never actually just ask for help!" She pushed herself to her feet, eyes blazing.

"You know what I think?" Jiro said with a knowing smile as he bit into a cookie. "I think you already know what you want to do, and are really just deciding if you should talk yourself out of it or not."

Nabiki's indignant anger immediately drained away as Jiro's words hit the mark, and she blushed. "This is NOT the sort of thing I'm known for doing..."

"And are you the sort of person who does things because it's what others expect her to be doing?" Jiro raised an eyebrow, then took another bite of his cookie, grinning. "I didn't think so."

Nabiki smiled in spite of herself. What is reward without a little risk? She thought. If this is really my martial art like Ranma said, then what kind of martial artist would I be if I turned down a challenge? "Thank you. This helped."

"It always does." He said softly. "Oh!" He straightened, holding up a finger and ducking down behind the counter to rummage. "Before I forget..." He pulled out a large shallow box, filled with teacups. "Last tradition of the day, I swear. I get all of my customers to pick out a teacup before they go, so that the next time they visit I can serve them from their own cup, that no one else uses."

"That... doesn't sound very cost effective..." Nabiki said skeptically.

"If you're running a tea shop for the profit margins, darling, you're in the wrong business." Jiro said saucily, and placed the box on the counter in front of her. "Go ahead, pick whichever one catches your fancy."

Nabiki looked at the eclectic collection of cups, of all different sizes, shapes and colors. She was originally going to pick one at random, which one caught her eye.

It was white, with an octagonal shape that curved inwards to the base gracefully. Drawn on the sides of the cup in black and yellow ink was a tastefully done scene of a sunrise over the water, with rolling dunes of a beach spreading out to the sides. She carefully picked up the cup, feeling it was far too valuable to be in a simple tea shop.
Jiro smiled and nodded, taking out the matching saucer and placing it on the counter in front of her. "It will be waiting for you when you next visit."

Nabiki smiled wistfully, then looked up at the tea shop owner. "Thank you, but I'm not sure I'll be back. I kind of came out of my way this time." She reached out to touch the cup, feeling a little bad about it.

"Oh, I know. I have many a cup that haven't seen their owners in a long time." He put a large, calloused hand over hers. "But that's good too, if they don't have any more big decisions weighing them down. Either way, it's something for me to remember them by."

Nabiki smiled at the odd man and nodded. "How much do I owe you?"

He shook his head. "Just a repeat visit, if you should find yourself pondering another life-changing dilemma."

Nabiki smirked. "I might have to take a rain check. I'm really not the sort for personal dilemmas."

Jiro smiled and nodded. "You're not, are you? Ah well, I DID say one did not run a tea shop to get rich, didn't I?"

"I'm sure you'll do fine." Nabiki replied, patting his arm. She turned and made her way out of the shop, feeling a good deal lighter and more confident.

Jiro watched her go, smiling. He sighed, shook his head, and collecting her cup and saucer, carefully placing it on a rack behind the counter with innumerable other cups of varying shape, style and size. "I'll need to order in more Earl Grey."

(Author's Note: I reworked the Akane scene a little, as it felt clunky, and more importantly didn't acknowledge the big huge elephant in the room of the Ranma/Akane breakup, or the fact that it was what was motivating Akane. I really do appreciate all the feedback I've been getting on this story so far!)
The summons Ranma from Nabiki later that evening was unexpected, and a little disconcerting. Nabiki had come home late from school, smiled at him, and asked him to meet her in her room in an hour.

He figured even odds on her being a doppelganger, being under some ancient evil spell, or having just sold his debt to her to the Yakuza. Given the awkward tension between them since the weekend up until now, he suspected it might even be all three.

He gently knocked on her door, only sparing a momentary glance at Akane's room.

"Come in!" Nabiki's answer was unnervingly cheerful.

He gritted his teeth and opened the door, stepping inside. It wasn't as if he had never been inside her room before, it was just that he had never LEFT her room without being considerably poorer.

Nabiki was perched on the edge of her bed, having changed into her jeans and the blue sweater with the twin hearts on it. She was smiling, which was never a good sign, and had that twinkle in her eye and the sly, confident look that said she was scheming, which was a worse sign.

Ranma closed the door behind him, then leaned back against it and crossed his arms. "All right, what do you want?"

Nabiki raised an eyebrow. "Oh my, so hostile already, Saotome? And here i was ready to fix all of your problems forever."

He scoffed. "Yeah, right. Look, Nabiki, I'm really not in the mood for this right now…"

"I'm deadly serious, Ranma." Nabiki fixed him with an intense glare. "I am talking about getting your life back on track towards something approaching stability. Maybe even close to normal."

Ranma paused, curiosity piqued in spite of himself. "Oh yeah? What's this gonna cost me?"

Nabiki sighed. "Look… ego aside for a moment here. I screwed up last weekend." She closed her eyes and gathered herself for the rarest of all things; A Nabiki Apology. "I tried to play Las Vegas rules and you got hurt, and you really don't deserve that. So part of this is to make that right, and to prove to you I wasn't lying when I told you what you want actually matters in all this." She opened one eye and held up a finger. "Of course, altruism only goes so far, and you couldn't foot the bill for the difference even if you were working in movies. Fortunately for you, Self-preservation also factors into this."

"Self-preservation?" Ranma said, tilting his head in confusion.

Nabiki sighed, got up off the bed and grabbed his shoulder, dragging him in so he could see the board she hand hung on the wall next to the door. On it were pictures of all the various different people in Ranma's life, clustered together where appropriate, with red, green and blue lines of string running between each of them in various proportions. There were also note cards covered in tight, crabbed handwriting.

"What the heck is this!?" Ranma's eyes flicked all around the board, trying to make heads or tails of it. It looked almost like one of those boards detectives used to track a killer on TV dramas.
"This is The Madness." Nabiki said proudly. "Or at least as much of it as I have been able to map out so far."

"The Madness'? Ranma regarded the complicated mess skeptically.

"That's my term for the seemingly random chaos that seems to follow you around like a cloud." Nabiki smirked. "I always had a sense that there was some sort of pattern to it, but I never took the time to actually map it all out until now."

"Okay…?" Ranma scratched the back of his head in confusion. "... I don't get it."

Nabiki sighed in exasperation and turned to glare at him. "Look, if we can map it, we can understand it. And if we can understand it, we can dismantle it. Think of it like a martial arts opponent. This is how we learn all its secret moves, all of its attack patterns and weaknesses."

"Oh…" Ranma took another look, his brow furrowing. *If red is a line of attack… no, OPPOSITION… green would be… Attraction? And blue would be… support?* His brow raised. "Oh! I think I get it… it's like a tactical map, of a battlefield, with all different fighters, with the lines showing how they affect each other in the melee!"

"Yes! Exactly!" Nabiki clapped, glad she had found an analogy that let him see her genius.

Ranma whistled. "Holy crap, I wouldn't want to be in the middle of THIS fight. This would be a total mess!"

"You are in the middle of this fight." Nabiki tapped the two pictures she had placed in the middle, of Ranma's male and female forms. "See, the problem is that the forces in this fight are pretty much even. Everything cancels out, and what you've been doing in order to keep a lid on things, is when any one faction in this gains an advantage, you counter it. She gave him a sympathetic look. "I don't even think you know you're doing it. Because should any one faction definitively 'win'…"

"Others lose. Bad." Ranma said softly.

"Ukyou is disgraced a second time, maybe forcing her to live as a man for the rest of her life. Shampoo is forced to return home having failed a second time, possibly to worse punishment than a Jusenkyo curse. The Saotome and Tendo schools are never joined, and the Anything Goes School dies out." Nabiki listed off each of the worst case scenarios. "The problem is… this has made everything a total pressure cooker. What happens in a fight where there's a stalemate, and no easy course of retreat?"

"You push harder to overcome the stalemate. Break out the more extreme moves, try different tactics." Ranma said automatically. Then comprehension dawned on his face. "And… if that doesn't work…"

"You get desperate." Nabiki finished for him. "You get stuff like the wedding happening."

"Which wouldn't have happened…" Ranma growled, remembering who had sold that information.

Nabiki held up her hand. "I'm aware, Saotome. I wasn't aware of the dynamic when I did that. I thought it'd end up being like the Christmas Party. They'd show up, toss out their objections, maybe chase you around, and then at the end of the day you and Akane would get together like you always do." She shook her head. "I was not anticipating them bombing the venue." She sighed and tapped her chin, looking at the board. "But I probably should have."

"So… whenever one faction gets advantage, the others will get more and more crazy about it?"
Ranma massaged his temples. "How do I keep 'em from killing each other?"

"Now you see my point about self-preservation? Nabiki said wryly. "I've got a plan, though. Akane being off the board is actually a good thing, believe it or not." Nabiki said. "None of them believe I'm serious competition, so some of the pressure is off. Not much, but it'll buy us some time." She started pacing back and forth as Ranma sat down on her bed, giving her his full attention. "We've got to bleed off the pressure gradually, de-escalate the big players, and kick the agitators off the board."

"'Agitators'?' Ranma asked.

"The Kunos. Ryoga. Mousse. The various nutjobs that keep cranking up the chaos."

"The Kunos?" Ranma asked, remembering his attempt to defuse Tatewaki.

"Yeah. I figure all three of them are unwanted. Unless you actually DO want Kodachi in the running for marriage?" She smirked a bit at his shudder. "Duly noted. So… pick a Kuno to keep."

"To keep?" Ranma said, confused.

"Getting two out of the three Kunos sent off to the funny farm shouldn't be too tough. It's where they belong, after all. But they're a rich, powerful family, which has been what's kept that Palm-tree headed nutjob in as Principal this long. We'll need one of them on our side. Shouldn't be too hard, since they all hate each other." She noticed Ranma's pensive look. "If you're torn, I suggest Tatewaki. Kuno-baby is probably the easiest of the three to handle."

"No, no… I mean, I agree, but…" Ranma sighed, certain he was going to get yelled at. "I… kinda… sorta… made nice with Kuno today. I think."

Nabiki raised an eyebrow, folding her arms across her chest and leaning against the wall next to the board. "Okay, this sounds like a story. Spill."

"Well, not much to tell, but I kind of used logic to convince him that I was the pig-tailed girl's brother, and that not only was I not in the way of him courting her, but never had been."

There was dead silence for a few moments, as Nabiki digested that.

Finally, she spoke up. "So… you used logic."

"Oi…" Ranma grumbled.

"... On Kuno…"

"Uh huh."

"... And it worked."

Nabiki managed to keep her composure for another moment or two, then started giggling. She covered her mouth, her other arm wrapped around her stomach.

Ranma sulked. "It's not that funny, Nabiki."

She waved him off as she regained her composure. "No, no… it's just… all these years of bludgeoning, beating, and outmaneuvering Kuno, and the solution was a five minute explanation."

"Well, he's still got the wrong idea." Ranma muttered. "Now he's calling me 'brother', and trying to prove himself worthy of courting my sister. Had to put up with him tryin' ta be my best buddy all
day. An' he's still gonna be a royal pain for my girl side."

"Still, if Kuno-baby doesn't think you're competition for what he wants, he's pretty easy to get on your side. And once he's on your side it's tough to find a more determined ally." She sighed and leaned back against the wall. "If he actually wanted anything reasonable he'd almost be worthwhile."

Ranma frowned, hearing a wistful note in her voice. He normally ignored such things, but he was starting more and more to see the advantage to paying attention to things like tone. *It's like watching someone's moves in a fight to see what they'll do next.* He realized, finding another thing to add to his mental model of 'Socializing Martial Arts'. "So, I never asked… what's up between you and Kuno, anyway? I mean, besides money."

Nabiki scowled a bit at him, then relented and sighed. "There's nothing 'between us'. Never was."

"You wish there was, though?" Ranma pressed, leaning forward a bit.

Nabiki glared at him. "That's privileged information, Saotome."

Ranma ran that through his mental martial arts translation. *Blocking. Protecting something important? So then… I would get her to give it up in exchange for something more important, right?* "Hey, you've got my whole life up on a corkboard in your room, and you wanna go around changing it all around to protect your interests. I figure I've got a right to… full disclosure? Yeah, full disclosure."

Nabiki raised an eyebrow. "Where did you hear a term like 'full disclosure' from?"

"Uhh…" Ranma felt his head of steam die a little. "... Gangster movie." He admitted sheepishly.

Unexpectedly, Nabiki smirked, and he caught a glimpse of the girl he had spent the weekend with. "Gangster movie, huh? Not a bad mindset to be in for this." She sighed. "Alright, full disclosure, though it doesn't have anything to do with anything, just to prove you can trust me. Happy?" She crossed her arms tighter and fixed her gaze on a spot on the middle of the floor.

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_Five years ago, Kuritsu Hikarigaoka Daiichi Junior High School._

_I knew Kuno in middle school, before he ever met my sister. He was… more stable then, before… his Mom left. Still acted the noble samurai, but he actually was trying to be chivalrous, rather than just showboat and impress the girls._

The ritual was almost a daily one now, the grade 9 boys gathering around him, taunting him and pushing him until his pride demanded a response, then beating him down until all that was left was him curled into a ball on the ground, trying to protect himself from their kicking.

"You leave him alone!"

They looked up to see a young girl with brown hair standing with her hands on her hips, glaring at them.

The tallest boy scoffed. "Looks like your girlfriend is here to save you again, 'Tachi-kun'." He said, giving the huddled boy one last good kick before he motioned the rest of them. "Come on, don't want Ms. Tendo to sic her Dad on us or something."

The crowd dispersed, leaving a rather small brown-haired boy still huddled on the floor. The girl
walked over and knelt next to him, but he was already uncurling himself.

"I could have handled those ruffians, Nabiki Tendo." He said, sitting up gingerly. It was obvious his left eyes was already swelling up nicely, and likely would sport a very distinct black eye for a day or two, and his uniform had definitely seen better days.

"Sure you could have, Tachi-kun." She sighed and patted him on the head, which her irritatedly ducked out from under. She stood and offered him a hand to help him up, which after a moment he grudgingly accepted. "I thought you were studying kendo?"

*Oh my god, Kuno was that short as a kid?!*

_Hush, Ranma. He had a late growth spurt._

"I am. But it would be unseemly to use such skills against the unarmed and untrained, nor would it be seemly to come to a place of peace and education armed." He dusted himself off as best he could.

She stepped forward and fixed his collar for him, earning an embarrassed blush from him. "You can't go through junior high getting bullied on principle, Tachi-kun! Martial artists are supposed to protect the weak, not the bullies. Use a broom handle or something." She stepped back. "Or… you could tell your Dad…"

"Absolutely not!" He glared at her with fire in his eyes, then immediately deflated. "My Father said he needs me to be on my best behaviour while Mother is away visiting her family. I can't bring any trouble to his doorstep." He clenched his fist. "'There is nothing outside of yourself that can ever enable you to get better, stronger, richer, quicker, or smarter. Everything is within. Everything exists. Seek nothing outside of yourself.'"

He was still big on the flowery speech even then, huh?

*Why do you think he kept getting beat up?*

"Oh please." She scoffed. "Don't quote Miyamoto Musashi to me, Tachi-kun! I was the one who bought you *The Book of the Five Rings* for your birthday!" She folded her arms. "You could at least let me help!"

_You bought Kuno a birthday present!?_

_Shut up Ranma! Do you want to hear this story or not!?_

He shook his head, having regained his composure. "Don't be ridiculous. Girls can't fight."

"Tomoe Gozen." Nabiki replied dryly.

The boy was taken aback a moment, then cleared his throat. "*Tomoe Gozen* was no mere girl. If a tigress like that lived in this era…" He sighed wistfully. "No matter. I needs must stand on my own two feet if I am to earn the honor and respect my family name demands. I must face this trial and find my own way through." He tried to take a step, but he was more battered than he had anticipated, and stumbled a bit.

The girl caught him, and deftly slipped his arm over her shoulder to support him with the ease of much practise. She gave him an impish grin.

"Though… perhaps there is wisdom in admitting when one needs aid to get to one's next class." He added grudgingly. He closed his eyes and smiled a bit. "Though mine own weakness doth shame
me, Nabiki Tendo, your kindness and support is ever appreciated."

So, Kuno was actually a decent guy as a kid?

More than decent. His Dad was still an idiot, but he hadn't gone full Hawaiian Fruitcake at this point, and Kodachi hadn't gotten into experimenting with her various potions and concoctions. That... kinda changed when his mother up and left them all.

The setting was no different from the year previous. A group of longtime bullies, and a solitary shorter boy. The primary difference was that THEY were the ones all on the ground.

The boy glared down at them with haughty disdain, a broom handle resting on his shoulder like the blade of a samurai. "Let that be a lesson to you about laying hands on a son of the House of Kuno!"

"Tachi-kun..." The girl peeked out around the corner, watching him fearfully as he stepped over the prone bodies of his would-be assailants.

He stopped caring about the whole 'not using martial arts against the weak' thing. He was downright brutal, in fact. I found out later his Dad had had a total mental breakdown. He was rich and powerful, so it was covered up, which also meant no one was allowed to go in and help. Tachi... Kuno had to pretty much take care of things himself, including raising his sister and running the family. He... became someone else.

"Tachi-kun!" She ran up to him in the hall. He had grown quite a bit in their last year of junior high, finally taller than she was. She held her books to her chest nervously as he turned from his locker to look at her.

"Nabiki Tendo." He said dryly. "If you are seeking to cajole me into purchasing you a cinnamon bun from the cafeteria again, I fear the lunch period is nearly ended."

"What? No, I..." She flushed. "... I was wondering if you had a date... you know... for the spring dance?" She fidgeted nervously.

He looked blankly at her. "Why would I?"

"Oh! Well... No one has asked me yet... So I was thinking maybe we could go... together?" She blushed and curled the edge of her straight brown hair around one finger. You know, just as friends!" She said quickly.

He blinked again, then turned to look at her. He put his hands on her shoulders and looked into her eyes, and for a brief instant, he thought he was going to kiss her. "Nabiki Tendo." He said softly. "Why would I do this thing?"

She gaped a moment, then blushed hotly. "B-because we're friends, you idiot!" She said, louder than she'd wanted to. People were starting to stop and watch them.

"We are nothing of the sort." He replied, still in that maddeningly gentle tone. "You are a woman. A person who is weak. Naturally, you have been attracted to one of strength, such as myself. Such as my mother was to my father." He straightened. "But you are a woman beneath my station, and it would not be seemly for me to associate with you in such a manner. My training is not yet complete, and if I am to hone my spirit, it must be free of the influence of those who do not share in the Art. This was the mistake my Father made, and I shall not repeat it." He glared at her. "You are no Tomoe Gozen, and I will not settle for less."

"Wha..." She backed away, hot tears blurring her vision, quickly turning from shock and hurt to
shame and anger. "Just who the hell do you think you are?!"

"I am Tatewaki Kuno, rising star in the Kendo World." He paused a moment. "Needs must I consider further titles to convey my glory." He turned and started to walk off, flipping her a 500 yen coin as he did. "Here. This is what you sought from me, is it not? What all your ilk seek? Take it, then, and begone. Let my heart's vision only find one who walks the True Path with me."

She slowly sank to her knees, staring at the coin. She paid no heed to the whispering and murmuring of the crowd who had gathered to watch, or the ringing of the bell. She simply gazed at the brass coin resting in her cupped hands.

After a moment, she closed her eyes and impatiently wiped away the tears with the heel of her hand. She sniffed loudly once, then let out her breath, and when she opened her eyes again they were clear and dark. She held up the coin, etching the images and characters stamped on its surface into her memory.

"Fine. But if you think you're going to get off with it costing you so little, Kuno Baby, I'm afraid you have another think coming."

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Nabiki looked up from her reverie to see Ranma gaping at her. She scowled and looked away. "Close your mouth, Saotome. You're attracting flies."

"Holy… Nabiki, I had no idea… I mean… that's rough…!"

"Don't you dare start throwing pity at me, Saotome!" She said sharply. "It was junior high. It was just a lesson I had to learn. It was like any other mistake; I learned from it, I got stronger, and I fought back." She shot him a smirk that she was only half-faking. "Where do you think my reputation as an Ice-Queen was born? Or why Kuno grumbles so much about me being a mercenary? I made sure that little stunt of his cost him a lot more than 500 yen."

Ranma shook his head, her confident reassurance not meshing with his own sense of justice. "I'm gonna kick Kuno's ass tomorrow at school."

"Don't you dare!" She said sharply. "We need him, and I don't need you trying to avenge some five-year old hurt that he doesn't even remember." She scowled at him. "I don't need your misplaced chivalry, I need your commitment to the plan."

He blew up his bangs in frustration. "Fine. So, we get Kuno on our side. What then?"

"Well, on your end, I need you to keep Ryouga under control." She said. "Not to the degree of Kuno Baby, but… try and avoid provoking him. Keep him busy and away from Ukyou or Shampoo so they don't try and co-opt him for any of their schemes. And if he's got one of his own, try and lead him somewhere quiet to splatter your testosterone all over the landscape?"

"Hey…!"

"I've got some footwork to do, concerning your remaining fiancées. No free lunches at Ucchan's or the Nekohanten for a few days, okay?" She fixed him with a stern look. "Keep from picking up any more admirers along the way, and in a few days we can look at what we've got, and figure out our next step."

"Making this up as we go?" Ranma raised an eyebrow. "That sounds almost like me." He noted playfully.
"Please." Nabiki said dismissively. "I just need to see where the dice fall on this roll to decide which contingency plan to go with. Nabiki Tendo does not ‘wing it’.

Ranma got up from the bed and shrugged. "If you say so."

She stepped aside as he walked to the door, but he paused as he took hold of the doorknob and looked at her, and she was forced to notice that he was standing awfully close to her.

"No one ended up asking you to that dance, did they?" He asked quietly.

Her face scrunched into a frown. "Ranma, just… get out, okay? Before I get mad."

He looked back to the door, but still hesitated. "Tomorrow afternoon, after school. Meet me in the dojo. Wear a gi… one of Akane's should fit if you don't have your own."

She blinked. "What…"

He looked at her and smiled. "I promised I'd teach you, didn't I? Doesn't matter what's going on in my life, a real martial artist keeps his word, right?"

"Ranma, if this is some stupid way to try and repay me for all this, I already told you…"

He held up a hand to cut her off. He turned the knob and opened the door, but before he stepped out, he added one thing. "If it was me… I woulda gone to the dance with you. No matter what." He slipped out the door quickly, and closed it behind him.

Nabiki just stared at the door for a moment. There was an odd lurch in her heart, a moment's imagination where the haughty disdain of the brown haired boy was replaced by the confident smirk of a black haired lad, rubbing his nose with typical lack of couth. "Sure I'll go with you Nabiki!

Mine.

Her lips curled into a snarl, and she punched the door. "God damnit Saotome! Don't you dare do this to me!"

The next morning was considerably less tense, though Nabiki was a tad grumpier than usual, having not slept well. Both Ranma and Kasumi knew well enough to steer clear of her until the coffee had kicked in.

Truth was, Nabiki had struggled to sleep. She had had a dream that repeated her and Ranma's kiss on the beach, but it was immediately followed by the stereotypical dogpile of fiancees and rivals trying to kill Ranma or her. Except, everywhere she ran, there were more of them, looming threateningly. But more than that, Asahi and the others were there, turning their backs on her in disgust, as well as the dean of Tokyo University, tearing her future business degree in half.

And one clown, who seemed to be confused as to why he was there.

Every time she closed her eyes, it played out again, each time her waking with a start as a fiancee or rival caught her and ended her brutally.

As if I needed more reminders why I shouldn't let myself be involved with Ranma any longer than necessary. She thought glumly. She glanced over her newspaper at him as he wolfed down his breakfast with something closer to his usual vigor and appetite and felt a small smile tug at the corner of her mouth, which she ruthlessly suppressed. No, none of that.
Still, it was a good sign he was in better spirits. Working with a morose, sulking Ranma was almost impossible, and if all the various factions and factors in The Madness thought he was acting unusually, they’d probably believe she was running some kind of scam.

*This whole scheme would have been a lot easier to pull off six months ago.* She thought, mentally mulling all the ways the house of cards she was building could come crashing down.

They finished up and headed out the door, hurrying a little. Nabiki grumbled under her breath at the need to jog, though thankfully they weren't the level of late Ranma and Akane had managed in the past.

Naturally Ranma didn't even make it to the canal walkway before getting splashed. Nabiki looked up just in time to raise her bookbag protectively as the water sluiced over Ranma, barely deflecting it from soaking her as well.

"Oh you have *got* to be kidding me!" Ranma howled, wringing out her shirt as she resumed jogging, barely missing a beat. "I've got gym right after homeroom!"

Nabiki ran beside her, chuckling. "So? Just take a shower *before* class instead of after?"

The redhead scowled, looking straight ahead. "Yeah, walk past a whole locker room full of leering guys to get to the showers because Ms. Hinako won't cut me a break and let me get hot water beforehand."

"They still bad?" Nabiki feigned sympathy, though she knew from her picture sales that they were.

"I think some of them are holding out hope I'll go girl full-time or something, start dating guys." Ranma made a disgusted face. "The Full-Body Cat's Tongue thing started it, and then it got worse after Herb and that stupid ladle. A whole school fulla cute girls and they waste their time pinin' over the one who's actually a guy. It's stupid."

"'School full of cute girls'?" Nabiki smirked. "Ranma, I didn't think you actually noticed us mere mortals, what with the goddesses you normally surround yourself with."

Ranma scoffed. "I'm not *dead* Nabiki. Just can't afford to actually *look* much or I get hit." She scowled. "Uncute Tomboy protectin' the world at large from her 'pervert fiance'."

Nabiki was silent a moment, running alongside Ranma, an idea churning in her head. A grin spread across her face as an idea for a caper started to take shape. "Ranma, how would you like to remind the boys you still like girls even when you *are* one, convince the girls that you're not a pervert and are really on their side, and even make a cut of the profits besides?"

Ranma gave her a quizzical, slightly wary look. "What are you plotting, Nabiki?"

"Trust me, you'll like how this one works out. Just means you're going to have to go to gym class as a girl."

Nabiki winced, coming to a stop as Ranma hit the pavement face-first.

"Are you *sure* this isn't going to end up with me looking like an even *bigger* pervert?" Ranma hissed as they approached the school gates. She was rubbing at a rather nasty bruise on her forehead from when she had taken a tumble.

"It's a calculated risk, but I think the rewards are worth it." Nabiki reassured her. "You've had more
eyebrow-raising stuff than this blow over before, but THIS time you've got me in your corner." She grinned and pointed at herself with her thumb. "I've got study hall first period, so I'll be there if the plan needs adjustment. I'll have it all sorted out by the time homeroom is done."

"Yeah, but do you think this will change things?" Ranma sounded a little hopeful, and a lot nervous. That combined with her petite stature and inherent cute, innocent aura of her female side was making it really hard for Nabiki to resist the urge to pat her on the head reassuringly.

"It'll start the ball rolling." she replied. "Not going to make dramatic changes with one move, but we can reassess after today and figure out how to keep the pressure up."

"'Reassess', huh?" Ranma gave her a skeptical look. "This part of your grand 'Fix Ranma Saotome's Life' scheme?"

Nabiki finally gave into her urge and ruffled the shorter girl's hair. "It's a last-minute addition, but what good is a planner who can't adapt?"

Ranma blushed a bit at the attention, grumbling under her breath, but endured it rather than attempting to evade. "Yeah… well… just make sure to hold up your end."

Nabiki winked and held up her cell phone. "The wheels are already in motion."

"Yeah, well, just so long as we don't have anything to further complicate my day…" Ranma grumbled. They walked around the corner and through the gates.

… and right into one Tatewaki Kuno, self-proclaimed Blue Thunder of Furinkan High.

Before Ranma could step back from the kendoist, he had grabbed her by the shoulders. His eyes were full of tears as he trembled with barely repressed emotion.

"Oh Pig-tailed girl! I have joyous news! At last, I understand thine circumstances, and have made my peace with your brother, Ranma Saotome! And as such, he has given us his blessing!"

"I did what now?" Ranma blinked, then recollection flooded back to her.

"Okay, fine. You can have her."

Ranma's eyes widened in fear as time slowed. She had only a heartbeat or two to think before the glomp came, and with as overexcited as Kuno was, getting him OFF was probably going to cost her an article of clothing AND make her late for first period. Okay OKAY! Stay calm Saotome. Anything goes Social Martial Arts, right? I can't just punt him away or I might mess up any chance of getting Kuno on our side, and then me n' Nabiki would have to deal with Kodachi or the Principal. So… deflect and redirect? But who's a big enough jerk to deserve a fully aroused Kuno in their life?"

A grin briefly appeared on her face, then was quickly wiped away, and replaced by a quivering lower lip and big, blue eyes filled with tears. "Oh, Kuno-senpai, how I wish it could be so…" She turned away from him dramatically, holding up her book bag up to his face to block his frantic grasping attempts. "For you see, to satisfy an agreement made before I was born, my father has engaged me to another, and even my brother cannot defy him in this."

"What?!" Kuno backed off, horrified look on his face. "Your father has given you to another, when he must know your one true love stands before thee?! Who? Who is this motherless cur who has won thy hand not by merit, but by base and vile politics?!"

She turned to him, giving him the biggest, most shimmering eyes possible, her hands clasped before
her. "You've met him, Kuno-senpai. His name… His name is Hibiki. Ryousa Hibiki."

"Hibiki…." Kuno hissed, clenching his fist. The fierce rage that burned in his eyes gave Ranma a moment of pause, wondering if maybe she had gone a bit too far. "Yesss! I know the cur well! He has thwarted me in the past!"

And worked with you, too. Ranma thought darkly. In fact, her thoughts were straying mostly to a certain black piglet and it's insufferably smug look as it nuzzled into Akane's chest. And then there was that damnedable fishing rod… Oh no, Ryousa had this coming! "He… he even used magic to try and compel me to love him."

"T-then… Hibiki is the true Sorcerer?" Kuno stepped back, aghast.

"Oh yes! And if that's not bad enough." She bowed her head, appearing ashamed. "... It seems I am not enough for him. He uses his dark sorcery to sleep in Akane's bed without her even realizing it."

Dead silence.

Ranma peeked up, wondering if she had misstepped, and was greeted with the sight of quite possibly the angriest she had even seen the kendoist. His aura was actually visible, flickering like flame around him, while his whole body trembled with rage.

"It is not enough that he compels the Pig Tailed Girl to his side, but he then commits sorcerous adultery on the innocent Akane Tendo as well?! Nay…" He shook, his eyes blazing. "I SAY NAY! RYOUGA HIBIKI, PREPARE TO DIE!" He brought his gaze back down to Ranma. "Pig-tailed girl, I beg your forgiveness, I would sweep you into mine arms, but first I must free you from the clutches of this… this PIG of a man! Wait for me, and I will return when I have avenged you and Akane Tendo both!" He turned, and without another word charge off the school grounds, hollering for Sasuke.

For the first time in her life, Ranma Saotome understood the appeal of maniacal laughter, feeling the urge well up within her. She restrained herself to an evil little chuckle, wishing she could be present when Kuno finally caught up to Ryousa. Not like Kuno is actually a threat to P-chan. And it's not even like he doesn't have it coming, either, coming back to play Akane's pet even while he's dating Akari!

"Ranma… did you just…" Nabiki was trying to pick her jaw up off the floor. Seeing Ranma manipulate Kuno using her feminine wiles was nothing new, but never to any great effect. But now… either Ranma had gotten tremendously lucky, or perhaps there was something to this Social Martial Arts thing Ranma was on about. "... okay, I'll give you the benefit of the doubt and be impressed by that. I'll also thank you to be sure you deal with the fallout from this away from the Dojo."

"What, when Pig Boy finds out and gets pissed? Nothing I told Kuno was a lie." She winked at Nabiki. "And it's not like Ryousa doesn't use any excuse to come at me anyway. But if Ryousa comes after male or female Ranma, he'll just give Kuno more proof. There's no way he could turn Kuno against the Pig-tailed Girl, so the only way Ryousa'll get Kuno off his back is if he can convince him Ranma Saotome and the Pig-tailed Girl are one and the same… and even if he manages that little miracle, it works out in my favor." She held up a finger and gave Nabiki an excellent impression of her own trademark mercenary smirk.

Nabiki blinked, deciding to be a bit more impressed than she had planned. And possibly slightly aroused.
Mine.

She quickly shook her head to clear out the possessive little gremlin. Not while he's a girl too, damnit! "Alright, alright, don't sprain yourself patting yourself on the back. You're going to need your arms in working order today." She looked up at the school clock. "Alright, time for me to get to work. Go to class as normal, avoid changing back into a guy, and show up for gym in proper female gym attire." She poked her shoulder. "Including a bra, please. Don't need the males so distracted they don't notice what's going on. I know you have one."

Ranma blushed and ducked her head, mumbling, but didn't contradict Nabiki's assumption. One day I'm going to need to see what kind of wardrobe you have squirreled away, Saotome. She thought wryly. The warning bell sounded, and she gave Ranma one last wave and sprinted off to her homeroom class.

Homeroom was surprisingly uneventful. Ranma showing up as a girl was hardly anything unusual by this point. Even Ms. Hinako let her usual comment about 'delinquency' slide.

After roll call, as Ranma left for her first class, a hiss drew her attention. There were two third year girls there motioning her to join them.

The shorter of the two had doe-brown hair tied back in a ponytail. Ranma had seen her with Nabiki before, and knew she did a lot of bet-taking for the mercenary girl. The other, taller girl had long black hair, and a kind of scowl. She was a new face, probably transferred in that year.

"You're… Hana, right?" Ranma searched for and found the brown haired girl's name, and was rewarded with a smile and a nod.

"Yup! Nabiki sent us to help you get set up for the caper." She winked. "This is my friend, Megumi. She's kinda new to all this, so I'm showing her the ropes."

"Nice to meetcha!" Ranma smiled brightly and extended her hand. She noticed Megumi was slow to take it. The dark-haired girl seemed to be studying her.

"Hi. So… how do you do it?" Megumi looked her over, studying her with uncomfortable scrutiny. "You're even shorter than yesterday. Were you wearing platform shoes or something?"

"She doesn't quite believe the whole 'curse' thing." Hana explained. "Give her two weeks in this madhouse and she'll be a believer. For right now though, we've got you clear to use part of the girl's locker room to change. We've explained things so you won't get dogpiled for being a peeping tom."

She turned and lead Ranma down the hall towards the stairs.

"So… they're okay with this?" Ranma said curiously. She was guilty of using the curse to get access to the girl's facilities in the past, but the curse was public knowledge by now.

"You'd be surprised. The idea of you having a 'girl day' was kind of intriguing to them. Well, some of them are suspicious, which is why you've got us there to chaperone. Still, you don't act like the other hormone-addled boys in this school, and you're probably the only guy who actually gets the crap we have to put up with with peeping toms and panty raids and whatnot." She flipped her hair. "And I think more than a few of us wouldn't mind if you jumped the gender fence to our side for a bit. Would be nice to have the best martial artist in Japan keeping all the super martial artist lechers and creeps at bay."

They headed down the stairs, Ranma mulling that tidbit over a bit. Normally she would have quickly and loudly dismissed the idea, but viewing through the lens of Martial Arts, it was important
I never thought that there would be girls who would want me to be a girl. She shuddered a bit at the thought of frilly dresses and tea ceremonies, but then shook her head to clear it. No… that's not how any of the girls I've ever met actually are, that's just Pops talkin'. A martial artist clears their mind and calmly assesses their situation and their surroundings, right? Ranma glanced at Hana, then over to Megumi. She realized she didn't actually know a whole lot about what girls actually did when there weren't boys around. Maybe this is my chance… I dunno, to actually find out?

She shivered again. Something felt dangerous about that idea. Like seeking out forbidden knowledge. But then… wasn't that what Anything Goes Martial Arts was all about? If she was going to apply the precepts of that to social interactions as well, could she really back down from this… this…

Don't think 'challenge'… don't think… CRAP… She winced. The Saotome School of Martial Arts, as a precept, had to accept all challenges. So… now she had to see this through. Whatever that meant.

They lead her to the change room. The place didn't have the same kind sense of being a forbidden place as it did to most guys, owing to her times as a girl (Especially when she had gotten 'stuck'), but there was still a sense of crossing a threshold into someplace she shouldn't really be. As they entered, most of the girls were huddled together at the far end watching them warily.

Well, so much for being accepted. Ranma thought glumly. Still… guess it'd be way too weird to be just suddenly accepted like that. She picked a locker in a far corner, out of line of sight of the main group. She noticed Hana and Megumi seemed intent to stay and stand watch.

She shrugged. Not like I have any 'feminine modesty' anyway. Like Akane always said. She felt a little pang at that, but started to undress regardless. She had already retrieved her girl's gym clothes from her hiding spot before class, which by necessity included underwear, as her usual boxers wouldn't work under girl's gym bloomers. That meant not only fully stripping down, but putting on girl's underthings. With an audience.

She blushed, took a deep breath, and went for it, stripping off her boxers in a businesslike manner, and pulling on the plain white panties. She slipped her arm through the bra strap, and with a minimum of fuss shrugged into it and clasped it closed in the front.

"Wow. Not many guys know how to work a bra like that." Hana remarked wryly. "I might have to ask you to give my boyfriend some pointers."

Ranma blushed at that comment, plus the implications. "Yeah, well, I'm a girl right now. Girls gotta know this stuff." Ranma regretted the words as she said them. She wasn't sure what made them more uncomfortable; That she said them in the first place, and admitted she was in any way a girl in more than appearance, or that they were basically true, and she had had to learn these things out of necessity.

"You really are, aren't you?" Hana said, crossing her arms and leaning back against the locker. "Insides too? Like, do you… you know, 'that time of the month'?!"

Ranma winced as her manhood took another blow, not just from the question, but that she already knew the answer. "Yeah…." She sighed. "If I get stuck as a girl too long it happens. Pads, cramps, the whole thing." She pulled on her bloomers, trying to focus on getting dressed. "It sucks."

"Wow. You really do understand. You know, you might actually be the perfect guy." Hana grinned, then held up a hand at Ranma's panicked expression. "Easy, I'm already taken, I'm not interested in
"Yeah, well… I'd trade it all of this 'understanding' for being able to go swimming in a boy's pair of swim trunks, you know?" She pulled on her shirt and sighed.

"Yeah. Still, I'd take a curse in a heartbeat if it meant I could just splash myself with cold water and skip my period." Hana said thoughtfully. "Plus if i was ever at a concert and they had a lineup at the girl's bathroom, I could just splash myself and walk into the boy's."

"You do that anyway." Megumi, who had been quiet this whole time, added dryly.

"That's true. Still, it'd be fun." She cocked her head. "So, does it feel strange or anything? You know, suddenly being a girl, all the parts being different, your balance being off and all?"

Ranma sighed. She paused a moment, trying to figure out how to properly answer. "That's the most unsettling thing." She said finally. "It's not. I mean at all." She closed the locker door. "You'd think that, as a martial artist, it would throw me way off. Any professional athlete can tell the difference even if their weight changes by a few grams, so how about a completely different form altogether?" She turned and crossed her arms, leaning her back against the locker. "I should be tripping all over myself every time I change forms. Arms the wrong length. Wrong center of gravity. Wrong weight. Wrong muscle strength. But I don't." She looked at her hands a moment. "It's like I spent my whole life in this body, training in martial arts. It feels normal. It feels like me. And that means the changes the curse makes don't just stop with changing you physically. It does something in your head, too." She closed her hand into a fist. "That's what makes it scary. That's what makes it a curse."

Hana looked a little shocked, and suitably subdued. Megumi was quiet as always, but Ranma noticed she looked like she was pondering something.

"Well, come on. Let's get this over with." Ranma motioned them to follow as she headed for the door leading to the gymnasium.

"Hold up." Hana caught her arm, and then handed her a piece of paper. "Nabiki said to give you this."

"What is it?" Ranma looked it over, seeing a short list of girls' names. She recognized a number of them as being girls in her grade.

Hana grinned and leaned in and whispered. "Those are the girls who buy a lot of Ranma pics." She winked. "Girl Ranma pics. She said you'd know what to do with it."

Ranma blushed a bit at the list. This was the part of the plan she was a little less sanguine about. She glanced over the list, and noticed Megumi's name was there.

Oh. That… might be awkward… She glanced at the dark haired girl and blushed a bit. Still, Ranma Saotome never backed down from a challenge. Even if the challenge was a really really stupid idea.

In fact… especially if it was a really really stupid idea.

She pushed open the door and stepped out. The rest of the girls in her class were clustered around the door, apparently waiting for her. She felt a little self-conscious at the scrutiny.

"So, what's this about, Ranma?" Sayuri asked, crossing her arms and giving Ranma a suspicious glare. "Don't tell me there's another urn?"
Ranma resisted the urge to facepalm of the memory of the urn that had been buried under the girl's locker room, and all of the humiliation she had endured in the hopeless quest for a cure to her curse. "Nah, no quests today. Just got splashed on the way to school, and decide I'd rather wear a bra than deal with the idiots on the boys side over it."

"Are they that bad?" Yuka asked, earning a sour glance from Sayuri, who still seemed to be skeptical.

The conversation was interrupted by a sharp whistle blow. Everyone turned to see the source of the interruption.

Standing in the middle of the gym, wearing sweatpants and a T-shirt, was quite possibly the most muscular female Ranma had ever seen. She had light brown hair tied off on either side of her head in a pair of childish pigtails, thick black eyebrows, and a slight gap between her large front teeth, which were currently being displayed in a truly unsettling smile.

"Greetings!" She said in what Ranma could only assume was supposed to be a thick Russian accent. "I am Olga Putinskaya, your new physical education instructor. I am hearing many, many things about Furinkan sports program. ALL BAD!" Her smile disappeared as she glared at the girls and boys alike. "Your Capitalist Pig Principal has determined that this is unacceptable, even by soft, American standards, and so he has asked me to make improvements."

"One way or other." The smile returned. "Now! I have request for demonstrating of the skill in the volleyball by girl and boy's team captains. YOU WILL DO THIS! Choose first team of five amongst selves. You have five minutes, da?"

" Seriously?!!" Yuka squeaked. "We have a Russian drill instructor for a gym teacher!?"

"Nah, she's from freaking Nagano." A familiar male voice interjected. They turned to see Hiroshi and Daisuke walking over from the loose cluster of boys. "She apparently snapped after seeing how dominant the Russians were in the Seoul Olympics and changed her name and started speaking with an accent." Hiroshi said casually. "She doesn't actually speak any Russian."

"Here, watch…" Daisuke lifted his hand. "Hey, uh, teach? Вы когда-нибудь танцевали с дьяволом в бледном лунном свете?"

"DA!" She nodded vigorously, smiling, though looking slightly confused.

"Wait, how did you two find this out?" Ranma asked skeptically. "And since when you do speak Russian, Daisuke?"

"He doesn't. He just asked her if she has ever 'danced with the devil by the pale moonlight.'" Hiroshi said. "He figured he wanted to have a cool, enigmatic catch-phrase if we should ever get transported into a gangster movie universe or something."

"Hey, it could happen!" Daisuke protested. "Around here? I'm not sure why it hasn't happened yet!"

"Keep holding onto the dream, bud." Daisuke muttered. "As for why we know, well, you are looking at Furinkan High's premier detective duo!"

Ranma folded her arms and raised a skeptical eyebrow. "Since when?"

"Since last year when we realized we're practically the only two people in this insane school without a 'thing.'" Hiroshi replied. "Plus, Nabiki paid us over the summer to do some research into Principal Kuno and his background."
"Guess what?" Daisuke piped up. "Principal Kuno, Ms. Hinako, and our charming new Gym Instructor over there? They're all part of a pool of teachers that the School Board has labelled 'The Forsaken'. Crazy nutters they either don't have enough cause to dismiss, or who are, for some reason, too influential to disgrace in that way. So, they transfer them to their designated dumping ground."

"Aka, Nerima Ward, the Furinkan Community specifically."

"With Furinkan High being their primary dumping spot."

"So, you're saying Furinkan is a toxic teacher waste dump?" Sayuri asked, a slightly horrified expression on her face.

"Your five minutes are beink UP!" The Gym teacher stomped over to them, narrowing her eyes. "I do NOT see team." Her eyes passed over them. "You, you, you, you and YOU." She pointed to Ranma, Sayuri, Yuka, and two other girls. "Rest sit on bench of disgrace, wear tutus and cheer like losers you are."

"Aaahhh… we'll just be going back to our side…" Hiroshi said nervously. He and Daisuke turned, but were caught by the collar by the gym teacher and lifted bodily off the floor.

"Am I stuttering?" She growled. "You are on THIS side, so you STAY on this side. You put on tutus and cheer."

"But…!"

"TUTUS. CHEER." She snarled, and dropped them to the floor, then stalked over to the boy's side. The other girls were already finding the frilly skirts piled on the bleachers, and had started reluctantly pulling them on over the gym bloomers.

Hiroshi and Daisuke exchanged a glance, then shrugged in unison and started walking over to the pile of frilly skirts.

"Not the most humiliating thing to happen to us at this school." Hiroshi said sagely.

"Not the most humiliating thing to happen to us this week." Daisuke replied.

Hiroshi leaned over and audibly whispered to Daisuke "But… why in Russian?"

"Everything sounds menacing in Russian."

Ranma massaged the bridge of her nose. At least I got on the team. I wonder how Nabiki arranged all this so fast? She glanced over to the bleachers, and spotted the middle Tendo sitting on the girl's side, with a few others around her.

There was some kind of commotion over on the boy's side. She peered over the heads of the crowd, spotting Ukyou staring down the gym teacher.

"What do you mean I'm on the boy's side?!" Ukyou demanded. "I'm a girl!"

"Sheet say you a boy, so you on boy's team." Invanova said curtly. "Boys pick you, so you play."

"But I want to be on Ranma's team!" She glanced miserably around the bulk of the woman to her fiance, who could only give her a sympathetic shrug. "He's a boy too! Check your sheet!"
Olga glanced at her sheet, mouthing the names. She found Ranma's, and her eyebrows rose. She turned and walked over to the redhead, who watched nervously.

*Welp, the jig is up. So much for that idea.* "Aheh… problem, teach?"

Olga looked over the girl, up and down, then experimentally poked her chest. Ranma yelped and crossed her arms over her breasts, blushing.

"Sheet wrong." Olga said. "I will have fixed. You girl, play on girl's team."

"*WHAT?!*" Ukyou screeched, outraged and flushed. She glanced down at her own chest, and immediately regretted wearing her bindings today. "Look you, I'm…"

"*ON BOYS TEAM.*" Olga boomed.

"Look, Kuonji…" One of the boys put his hand on her shoulder. "You have to help us!"

"The girls have Ranma on their team!" Another said. "You're the only one who might be able to keep her from creaming us single-handed!"

"Help us, Ukyou Kuonji, you're our only hope!"

"Well…" Ukyou sighed. Her desire to play next to her fiance warred with her desire to prove herself to her, and to everyone, and pride eventually won out. "Alright. But you do what I tell you, okay? I need you boys following my lead if we're gonna beat them."

They all nodded eagerly, one of them even saluting.

She grinned. There was something to be said for having minions, wasn't there?

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Nabiki watched with satisfaction as the two five person teams formed up, as the rest of the students set about setting up the nets for the match. Ranma was on the girl's team, and Ukyou's competitive streak for the moment had overridden her desire to suck up to Ranma.

"So, what did you think of Ranma, Megumi?" Nabiki asked, curious about her newest accomplice's take on the situation. Megumi was a transfer from another school, and had a bit of a dark cloud over her. Nabiki knew why, and knew it was nothing but prejudiced nonsense. Ironically, Furinkan was the perfect place for her to be 'normal'. Still, Furinkan took some getting used to even for the most open-minded individuals.

After a few moments contemplation, the dark haired girl spoke. "She's actually a girl, isn't she?" She glanced at the redhead in question.

"Until hot water enters the equation." Nabiki noted. "Then she's just as much a guy. Upstairs she's pretty much as male as they come all the time, though."

"Hmmm." Megumi said, sounding unconvinced. "That's not what she said."

"It… wait, what?" Nabiki's mental train of thought derailed at that. She leaned over to Megumi. "What did she tell you?"

"That the curse does something in her head, too. That it makes being a girl feel normal, just like being a guy." She shrugged. "She said it was why the curse bugged her so much… because it *didn't* bug her, I guess. Not like it should."
Nabiki raised an eyebrow, then followed the girl's gaze to Ranma, where she was talking with her team as they decided on positions. *You know, I never did bother to figure out much about the mechanics of the curse. She thought. I've just been passively gathering information. I've been sitting on my laurels just because I've pieced together more than most, but I've never really dug into it, have I?* Her face screwed up, reflecting her internal disgust. *That's not going to cut it in college, Nabiki.*

A very small part of her pointed out that no one in the Tendo house had ever actually *asked* Ranma how it felt to change.

"So, what's the caper, Nabiki?" Hana asked, pulling Nabiki out of her reverie. "We brought cameras like you said."

Nabiki turned to the girl and grinned. "The usual. Get action shots of Ranma and Ukyou. We're just going for documentation this time, no set ups. You brought the high speed film, right? We don't want to use a flash during this." She held up her own camera. "Keep it subtle so they don't notice and get upset. If anyone asks, you're snapping pics for the yearbook."

"Got it." Hana grinned. "Any particular focus, or am I just looking for wardrobe malfunctions?"

Nabiki glanced at Ranma again and considered. She felt a slight pang of… *something* over all this. She didn't want to entertain the notion it was guilt, because that would open herself up to a whole year's backlog of it, but she didn't feel quite right exposing Ranma like that anymore. Especially not after getting slapped in the face with how little she actually *knew* about her girl side. "Focus on the martial arts. With those two facing off this is going to get crazy quick, so expect a lot of action pics. This stuff will slot more in the 'Girls Kicking Butt' category than 'Upskirts'."

"Roger." Hana adjusted the settings on her camera and saluted, hopping down to head over to the bleachers on the other side of the gym.

Getting the new gym teacher to agree to this little match had been a lot easier than she had anticipated. Though she had suggested basketball, since she knew Ranma enjoyed the game. Nabiki looked around. A small crowd of students who were on free period were gathering in the bleachers to watch the match.

She immediately picked out two who weren't, however. A dark haired senior, Kaito Kobayashi, this year's captain for the boy's volleyball team, and a tall blonde girl, Himara Tanaka, this year's captain for the girl's volleyball team.

Nabiki's eyes narrowed. She started to get the sense that she had stumbled into someone else's scheme. Himara had pestered Akane all last semester to join the team, and her sources said she had gone after Ukyou as well. It was well known the girl was angling for an athletic scholarship, and was seeking a secret weapon to win her a tournament cup. Any of Furinkan's martial artists would fit the bill.

She followed the girl's gaze, and found it was locked directly on Ranma. A cold ball formed in the pit of her stomach, and she realized that this little scouting session wasn't coincidence. *She's co-opting my scheme. She's after RANMA!* She felt an uncharacteristic hot surge of anger and possessiveness, and immediately smothered it with ice, her mind switching to more tactical channels as she mentally reviewed everything she had on Himara. *Form aside, Ranma is registered as a male in the school records. She'd never pass muster for an actual official tournament. How is she planning on getting past THAT little wrinkle? Her current lack of information of what the volleyball captain was up to suggested that she bide her time for now.*

"Megumi." She said softly. "I know you want to watch the match, but I need you to go pull me the
The dark haired girl blinked. "Y-yes, of course Nabiki." This was the first real task the Ice Queen of Furinkan had entrusted her with since Hana had brought her into Nabiki's little organization.

Nabiki steepled her fingers and leaned forward, focusing her attention on Ranma for the time being, the leisurely photography session she had planned forgotten. She watched Ranma smile as she encouraged her teammates, a fierce look of competitiveness already suffusing the redhead's features.

Mine.

For once, Nabiki didn't bother stifling the possessive little voice.

"So, how are we going to play this, Ranma?" Sayuri said nervously, glancing over at the other side where Ukyou was discussing strategy with her teammates.

"Yeah. We didn't exactly pick our best thanks to those idiots Hiroshi and Daisuke." Yuka said sourly.

"Yeah! They're your friends, so you gotta fix this!" Another girl piped up.

"Don't worry, I've got this." Ranma said confidently. In fact, she was fairly confident she could win the match by herself. But then, she was always confident. "Sayuri, you've played on the volleyball team before, right?"

"Yeah, for like a week before they cut me." The dark haired girl said sourly.

"Okay, so you'll serve. Just get it inside the court, doesn't matter where." She smirked. "They'll be trying to get it to Ukyou, so all I have to do is counter her."

"What about the rest of us?"

Ranma considered, then crouched down, making sure they were all looking as she traced a square on the floor. "Okay, this is the net." She drew a line along one side, making sure they were watching. "I'll be on point here in the front." She frowned, realizing the next position wasn't exactly a desirable one. "Umm... the next position is going to be here, opposite side to me and slightly back." She looked up at the girls. "Not gonna lie, that spot is going to be where Ukyou is going to be aiming. It's basically bait."

"I'll do it." One girl said without hesitation.

Ranma looked up at her. She had straw colored hair, tied back into a high ponytail, and freckles framing bright green eyes. She had a kind of earnest determination in her gaze that told Ranma she knew exactly what she was volunteering for.

"Thanks... uhh..." Ranma cursed her terrible memory for names and faces.

"Rin. Rin Ito."

"You sure about this?" Ranma said. "Ukyou has a pretty good arm. If she tags you with the ball, it'll hurt."

"That's okay." She said. "I've been trying to get on the volleyball team since last year. This is my chance to get noticed, even if it's just for taking a hit well."
Ranma immediately decided that Rin was going to get noticed for a lot more than just THAT, if she had any say in the matter. "Okay. So Yuka and…"

"Riko." The last girl, who had shoulder length black hair.

"... Riko, you'll be the setters. Stay back behind me and Rin, and we'll pass you the ball to set for me to spike. Just gotta get it up near the top of the net. You can do that, right?"

They nodded, though Ranma could see they were uncertain. It didn't matter. In fact, it would hopefully add an element of unpredictability and chaos that she could use.

They walked onto the now-prepared court. Ranma mentally assessed the other team: Two of the boys she knew were already ON the volleyball team. The other two she didn't have much experience with, but seemed to know what they were doing. And then Ukyou.

Ucchan is the real threat. She thought, narrowing her eyes as Ukyou gave her a confident smirk.

"So, you ready to finally lose at something, Ranchan?" She asked, spinning the ball on one finger, hand on her hip.

"Heh, hasn't happened yet, never will, Ucchan." Ranma grinned. She was actually looking forward to this. Ukyou wasn't anything close to a match for her in martial arts, but in this? She had a lot more skill with projectiles and implements, which would actually give her the advantage. This would be a challenge, and a chance to go all out with her old friend, something she didn't get to do normally.

Ukyou just grinned wider, then tossed the ball nonchalantly over her shoulder to the server, widening her stance to get ready. "We'll see about that, sugar."

The server tossed the ball, smacking it overhand and sending it over the net towards the mid of the field. Yuka got under it and set it competently enough, allowing Ranma to jump for the spike. She smashed it downward, seeing an easy victory already.

Suddenly Ukyou was under it, catching it with her clasped fists and deflecting it back up, to where her teammate, one of the volleyball team, was already in the air for the spike on the far side of the net.

Shit! Ranma had no way to get there in time, time slowing down as her feet finally touched the ground, allowing her to change her direction. It was already too late, as his hand was coming down on the ball for the spike.

Rin immediately dropped to the floor, one leg bent in a deep kneel, the other kicked out for stability as she caught the spike, deflecting it with her own doubled fists back up into the air, back to Yuka and Riko in a slow easy lob.

Wow. She knows what she's doing. Ranma immediately revised her estimation of the girl upwards, and leapt for the spike. However, Riko set it awkwardly, forcing Ranma to scramble for it, and by the time she got there it was too low, and she ended up spiking it into the net.

Olga blew her whistle. "Point! Boy's side."

Ranma sighed, glancing up at the scoreboard to see the point being added. This is going to be harder than I thought.
Thunderbolts and Pipe Dreams

The three rounds went easily to Ukyou and the boy's side. While Ranma could counter Ukyou and her skills fairly handily, the rules of the game and Ukyou's greater proficiency with projectiles kept them on even footing. The rest of Ukyou's team were all Volleyball team hopefuls, however. All Ukyou had to do was keep Ranma busy, and the rest of her team was winning the match for her.

*I can't win like this.* Ranma thought, eyes flicking over the other team as she probed for a weakness, an opening she could exploit... *something.*

Ukyou was lazily twirling the ball on her finger again, a smug look on her face. "Ready to give up yet, Ranchan?"

Ranma forced herself to grin confidently, even though she didn't feel it. "Not a chance, Ucchan. You know round two is where I always bounce back and win it."

Ukyou scowled. "Yeah?" She tossed the ball over her shoulder to the team server and got into a ready stance. "Well not this time, sugar."

Ranma's eyes flicked sideways to her own team. They weren't *bad,* to be fair, but they didn't have the practise or polish of the guy's team, having been picked at random.

*Though it's hard to tell. They haven't gotten the ball much.* Ranma noted. They were out of their depth, so naturally Ranma had been trying to compensate as much as she could, but...

*Wait.* Ranma's eyes flicked back to Ukyou. The taller girl's deep blue eyes were studying her, anticipating, flicking from each of Ranma's teammates, then back to her. *That's it, isn't it? Ukyou knows I've been covering all the positions, so she's using that to maneuver me into a bad spot so that her team can score a point.*

Ranma played with that in her head a bit. Ukyou was wielding her team like a weapon... no... *Is this what they mean by teamwork?* Ranma had a sudden burst of insight.

Always before when she had worked together with others, it had been chaos, a group of individuals trying to accomplish the same goal. Sometimes they'd roughly coordinate their attacks, but Ranma had never tried weaving the others *into* her attacks, passing the flow of battle back and forth, taking a secondary role to create an opening for an ally to strike. And to be fair, she had never really fought anyone that fought that way, at least not anyone who was a serious threat. It was typically one-on-one. Ranma had always paid attention to others in a battle, but always as liabilities, always checking to see if she needed to bail them out, mainly because very few of them approached her level of skill. Protecting the weak, and all that. There were a couple of times with Akane, but... *Best not to think about that.*

None of the others on Ukyou's team approached her skill level either, but rather than being a liability to her, she was using them to devastating effect. Weaving their strengths into her own rather than being burdened by their weakness. Ranma glanced at her team again. *Can I do something similar?*

Her eyes stopped on Rin, and a small smile tugged at her lips. *I think I can.*

She leaned over and touched Rin on the shoulder, getting her attention. As soon as their eyes met, she nodded to the other girl and said "Be ready."

There was a bit of confusion in Rin's bright green eyes, but she nodded and took her ready stance.
The setter served. It was a high, easy lob, back near the back of the court. Already Ranma was running through how it had gone the last few times. *I run back to get the serve… she thought as she did just that, skidding to a stop under it and raising her hands to set it up. I pop it straight up, so Riko or Yuka could pass it forward, then run to the front to try for a spike…* The ball hit Ranma's fingers, and she sent it back into the air in a high arc. Already Ukyou was getting into position on Ranma's side of the net, ready to move to block her as she ran for the spike, eyes flicking back and forth between Yuka and Riko to see who would get it and tell her which side it was going.

She never noticed the ball was *not*, in fact, going straight up.

Sensing something off, her eyes flicked up, searching for the ball, just in time to see Rin leaping for the descending ball, bringing her closed fist down in a strike against it that would send it to the floor on the opposite side of the court. Her eyes widened, her legs coiled, but it was already too late. She was out of position. Even an amateurish spike would land true this time.

That wasn't what Rin delivered, however. Ranma swore she saw a spark as her fist connected with the ball, and there was a sense of the air warping around the point of impact, everything stopping for just a second.

And then it started again with a *BANG* as the ball seemed to teleport from her hand to the floor on the opposite side of the court, just in front of one of the male players, exploding in a shower of dust and shredded rubber as the poor abused ball surrendered to forces beyond its endurance. The rapport echoed through the gym like a gunshot, framing the silence that had fallen over the rest of the players and crowd.

Ranma was the first to speak, eyes wide as she looked at Rin, who was glancing around a little sheepishly at the reaction she had elicited. "Holy crap!"

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Nabiki blinked.

Not that that was unusual. *Everyone* had basically stopped in their tracks at that shot. The unassuming mousey blonde girl had just spiked the ball with enough force to destroy it, something that had even caused *Ranma* to pause in surprise. But that wasn't the reason for Nabiki's shock.

Unusual things happening were something she was accustomed to, and could process and react to before most other people were done being shocked. The shot *had* surprised her, and she had identified the source and delved into her near-photographic memory of all the students in the school to rapidly extract a name and a basic profile of the one responsible, all before everyone else were done letting their jaws hit the floor. Rin Ito, second year, had never purchased any picture packages, cram notes, or event tickets, much less any of the more grey market stuff. Never done *anything* to pop up on Nabiki's radar.

Which was the reason for her second, more enduring bought of shock, that there was someone with that kind of ability at Furinkan and *Nabiki had no idea she existed until now.*

She furiously reviewed what she knew about Rin… which was basically nothing, as she had never had reason to, aside from her name and class as listed below her picture in the yearbook.

She glanced over at Himara, and got her second surprise.

Rather than a look of surprise, or possibly even one of joy at finding what might be the most naturally talented striker in Furinkan, her face was twisted in anger.
She knows. Nabiki realized. She knows Rin has this ability, and not only hasn't tapped her for the volleyball team, but isn't happy her talent has been displayed. She doesn't want her on the team.

It didn't take a genius to realize there was history there between them. Possibly one that Rin was unaware of, as she hadn't shown anywhere near that kind of reaction to the other girl. Either that, or Rin was a better actor than Nabiki gave her credit. Either way…

Either way, I really wish I hadn't sent Megumi away so soon. She steepled her fingers again, carefully mentally cataloguing every detail to record later, flagging half a dozen avenues of inquiry. Have I been so out of touch with what's going on at Furinkan that I completely missed a major sports team drama? She scowled a bit. I got too focused on the martial artists. I haven't been watching the teachers, or the other students. She narrowed her eyes, glancing at Himura. Well, I'm watching now.

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"What the hell was that?!!" Yuka demanded as the team huddled in the aftermath of the Spike of Doom.

"I… I just… I'm sorry! I got a little carried away!" Rin pushed her fingers together nervously. "I just wanted to show I could do this…"

"No, no, this is good!" Ranma said, grinning wider than she had all day. Her mind was already combining all the factors. Anything Goes Martial Arts, plus Anything Goes Social Arts plus Volleyball. She put an arm around Rin's shoulders and one around Yuka's and drew them in, motioning the others to get close. "Rin… you did that on purpose, didn't you? I mean… it wasn't an accident, you can actually spike that hard if you want to, right?"

Rin nodded. "It's my Dad's technique. He called it 'Judgement Bolt' when he played on the Olympic circuit…"

"Olympic…" Sayuri choked.

"I'm sorry! You're not supposed to do it so hard you destroy the ball like that! I just…" She flushed. "I have trouble controlling it sometimes…"

"No… don't control it!" Ranma said, grinning as she glanced at each of the girls. "Listen… look at the boys. They're spooked! You turned that ball into a cannonball. Can you do it again? Blow up the ball I mean. Without hurting anyone obviously."

Rin bit her lower lip, but then nodded. "If I get a set up like that again… Yeah."

"Good. We're gonna do that." Ranma said. She thought a moment, then added "Just once more, 'cuz more than that will piss off the coach." She continued excitedly. "From there, if this plays out like I think it will, I'm pretty sure we can close the gap and win."

"How?" Sayuri asked. "Even if Rin can play, that still means we only got the two of you who are any good!"

Ranma grinned. "No, it just means there are two of us who are scary good. And that means you three are gonna be able to win this!"

Riko shook her head. "I don't understand."

"You'll see, trust me." Ranma said, flushed with anticipation. She glanced at Rin. "Hey Rin? Can
Ranma clapped the two girls on the back and broke the huddle, bouncing on the balls of her feet back to the net. She was grinning in that cocky way she had when she had learned the weak spot of an opponent's technique.

"What are you grinning about, Sugar?" Ukyou said, glaring at her suspiciously across the net.

"Grinning 'cause I've already won, Ucchan." Ranma said cockily.

"Still need two more points to win this round, and then win three more rounds besides. We just need to win one more round and we take the set." Ukyou replied. "Don't see how one good spike changes any of that."

"And that's why I'm better than you." Ranma smirked.

Ukyou raised an eyebrow. "Is that so? We'll see about that Sugar.

The teacher held up a fresh ball and tossed it to Sayuri. "Both sides get ready… начать!"

Sayuri lobbed the ball up for an overhand serve. Ranma thinks we can win. She gritted her teeth and focused, harder than she ever had while she was actually playing on the volleyball team. Hit it just below the centerline, put some backspin on it. She had never been able to get the hang of the higher level serving techniques when she had been on the team, but… if Ranma believed she could win this game…

There was a satisfying smack as she hit the ball right where she had intended, soaring up high, looking like it was going to end up in the back court, then dropping like a deflated balloon after just clearing the net. One of the boys darted forward to bunt it back up, but the backspin caused it to roll off his clasped arms and hit the net instead of going straight up.

Olga blew her whistle. "Point, girl's team!" She held up her arm in favor of the girl's side. "Next is beink match point!"

Sayuri felt an odd giggle bubble up from deep in her belly. She felt all the tiredness leave her as an excited, giddy energy welled up from within her. I did it! She glanced over to see Ranma grinning at her, and giving her the thumbs up. As if she had been expecting this all along. As if she had been certain, even if Sayuri hadn't been herself.

Sayuri grinned back, and returned the thumbs up, brushing a lock of her hair from her face. Can't let Rin be the only one who has a few tricks... She thought. Back when she had been on the volleyball team, she had never expected to go far, and had been told as much. Repeatedly. She was slow. She couldn't serve straight. She couldn't get under the ball. She had no hustle. She just accepted it. After the first week it was clear being on the volleyball team wasn't going to be fun like she thought, so it was okay if she wasn't good enough.

But now? Now she was starting to wonder… If she could pull off that serve again… maybe she could change the spin a little… after all, if Ranma and Rin were going to try, then maybe she should to? If she could fake out the boy's volleyball squad hopefuls like that… maybe she wasn't as hopeless
as she was told.

She accepted the ball returned to her by the coach, mind already going over how to build on her previous success. *Maybe I am good enough for this? Maybe...* She glanced at the other side of the net. Did the boys look... nervous? She felt that excitement well up again. Ooooh, the boys being nervous about mousey, plain little Sayuri, instead of Akane Tendo, or Ranma's girl side, or some Chinese bimbo who kept smashing through the school walls? She *liked* that. *Maybe I can make them a little sorry they cut from the team!*

Sher lobbed the ball in the air, eyes steely, focused, her mind already three steps ahead of where she was, planning her next move...

Which is probably why it took her a second to figure out what was wrong when the heel of her hand passed through the air without resistance. However, she had the problem mostly figured out by the time the ball bounced off her head.

The laughter from the bleachers just kind of confirmed it.

"Point boy's team!"

Ranma turned quickly, seeing Sayuri frozen in her service pose, the ball rolling at her feet, her face beet red. *No no no no no No NO NO!* She wanted to yell at the girl for being stupid, trying to show off when all they needed right now was to get the ball over the net. A few days ago she would have done exactly that.

Ranma clenched her fists, took a deep breath, and let it out. *And then she'll get mad and yell back. Or cry and run off. Or something else bad. Damnit, she's already tearing up!* Ranma started to feel the panic rise in her throat as she could see Sayuri's eyes get watery.

She darted over and scooped up the ball. *What do I do?! What did Pops do when I messed up in training?* She winced. *Okay, telling her she's bringing shame to the Anything Goes School won't help. Tell her she's cute-NO! Kami no!* She shuddered. *Okay... honesty? Augh... this isn't gonna work but it's all I got!*

"So... uh... you kinda missed there." Ranma said, handing her the ball.

"You *think!*?" Sayuri hissed at her, snatching it away, her eyes already reddening by the oncoming tears.

Ranma held up her hands. "No, it's cool, okay? Everybody screws up."

"You don't!" Sayuri said, head down as she stiffly took her place again.

"No, no... look..." Ranma swallowed. She was going to have to get into some uncomfortable personal admissions. "I screw up *all the time.* That's what the *Anything Goes* style is all about."

Sayuri gave her a confused look.

"It's about rolling with it when you screw up and... and... coming out the other side of it ahead." Ranma tried to expand on the idea. "It's about making a jump without knowing where you're going to land, or getting into a fight you have no idea how to win, or..."

"... Or whiffing when you're trying to serve a volleyball?" Sayuri finished, though there was a small smile tugging at the corner of her mouth.
"Yeah! I mean… You learn to make it all look like part of the plan, so that nobody actually knows what you're up to!"

"Including you?" Sayuri asked, some of her familiar snark leaking back into her voice.

"Especially me." Ranma grinned. "Mebbe I can show you how to apply some of it to your serves when this is all over. For now, though, don't try and be fancy. Just got for solid, like you've been doing. That first serve you did was awesome, but you gotta make sure you can pull that off every time before using it for real." Ranma quietly swept the mental checklist of all the times she had rushed into a fight with a technique she hadn't yet successfully performed under the carpet.

"Do you mean that?" Sayuri asked as Ranma turned to return to her position, the hopeful apprehension in her voice causing Ranma to freeze.

"Mean what?" Ranma turned back, a little worried about what she might have unintentionally agreed to.

"Train with us? Help us get better at this?"

Oh! Ranma blinked. Volleyball wasn't exactly her forte… In fact she couldn't really remember the last time she had played it before that aborted tournament on the beach. It wasn't martial arts, and therefore wasn't interesting, but…

She could see it though. The same way she had seen how social interactions were like a martial art of their own. She could see how the art could apply here. Not as some hybrid Martial Arts Volleyball… but Volleyball as the martial art. Rin's thunderous strikes, and Sayuri's little trick with the backspin. There were tricks and techniques to be found in this, and places where she could apply her own tricks and techniques, and… suddenly it was starting to seem a lot like a challenge.

Ranma gave her a cocky grin, and nodded. "You bet."

Sayuri took a deep breath, lobbed the ball in the air, and performed a simple but serviceable overhand serve, sending it over the net.

Now, getting stuffed by Ranma Saotome had no shame in it for the boy's team. Nor did being caught off-guard by some kind of freakish power spike from a complete unknown. But to be hoodwinked by trick serve made by a total amateur girl that you had homeroom with? No, the pride of the boy's volleyball team would not allow that to stand.

"Hey…!" Ukyou protested as one of the boys shouldered her aside to get under the ball, bunting it back into the air as another of their fellows got into position for the strike, moving like the well oiled competitive machine they were. It was time to show why they were meant for the Furinkan High Boy's Volleyball team!

The strike seemed to float in mid air, his hand coming down in a hammer strike, the floor on the other side of the net completely devoid of opposition. It was a textbook point about to happen.

Needless to say, they had briefly forgotten where they were.

Ranma practically teleported into the path of the ball. She had enough time to smirk at the striker, and then casually tipped the ball back into the air.

As one the boy's team followed the path of the ball as it arced up gracefully into the air, coming down just as a certain diminutive blonde striker leapt upwards to intercept it.
Later reports from the team would universally insist there was a rumble, as if from dark stormclouds about to unleash their fury.

Regardless, one did not survive to be a second-year student at Furinkan without having a keenly developed survival instinct. Which the entire team heeded as they dove for cover.

The second of Rin's thunderbolts was, if anything, even more violent than the first. There was a report, like the crack of gunfire as her hand impacted the ball, forcing it to deform as her hand forced it to accelerate faster than air resistance was entirely willing to allow. The ball struck the floor with so much force it was a wonder the polished surface didn't crack from the impact, rupturing into rubber shrapnel that pelted the team as they cowered on the sidelines.

All but Ukyou, of course, who regarded her team with disgust as she casually shifted her stance slightly to avoid a chunk of rubber flying past her head. "You jackasses are pathetic." she muttered.

"Game point." Olga said, walking over to the boy's side. She nudged one of the boys with her foot. "Match is now 3-2"

"Three two!?" Ukyou protested. "They've only won one round!"

Olga crossed her arms and huffed. "Am docking round for cowardice."

"That's bullshit!" Ukyou snarled, getting up in the gym teacher's face, flushed with fury at the unfairness of having her first real victory over her fiance eroded because of being saddled with a bunch of idiots.

Olga raised an eyebrow. "... 3-3."

"What!? That's... you're..." Ukyou sputtered in incoherent rage, fists clenched and trembling. Seeing the gym teacher wasn't going to budge, and with no way to redress the injustice, she was finally forced to turn and storm back to her position. "Auuuugh!"

Olga nodded, satisfied, then turned to Hiroshi and Daisuke. "You! Cheer team! I am not hearink cheering!"

"We're... we're not actually the cheer team, coach..." Hiroshi said nervously.

"Yeah." Daisuke chimed in. "Proper cheerleading is actually a performance that requires a great deal of skill, and as we've only just been conscripted to the task, we haven't had time to really learn any routines. Maybe if we had a couple of weeks to train and prepare, we could..."

"CHEER. NOW." Olga barked, then blew her whistle once more.

Daisuke deflated a little, his pom poms drooping. "Yes, coach."

"Woo, coach." Hiroshi added, shaking one of his pom poms in the air unenthusiastically.

"Cheer for teams." She gruffed, then turned her back on them.

"Methinks things have started to turn in Ranma's favor." Daisuke said dryly, watching as the teams set up again.

"I don't know. They had the element of surprise, but the boy's team and Ukyou might come back. You know how determined Ukyou can be."

"Yeah, she really wants to win this." Daisuke rubbed his chin. "Either way, we've got to cheer
"Well..." Hiroshi considered. "I think, given how close this match is, and that our pride and honor as men is literally on the line here, there's really only one course of action we can take and be able to live with ourselves tomorrow."

"Sell out our gender and cheer for the girls' team to earn some quick and easy brownie points?"

Hiroshi nodded. "Yes. Yes exactly."

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"WHAT'S THE TEAM THAT BRINGS HOME GOLD? THE ONE WITH TWO X CHROMASOMES! GOOOOOOO GIRLS!"

Ranma glanced over at the side as Hiroshi and Daisuke started gyrating and hopping in a reasonable facsimile of a cheerleading routine. "... What?"

There was a roar of approving cheers from the bleachers as the two began their antics. Ranma suddenly realized the bleachers were almost full. Students from other classes had been steadily sneaking into the gym to watch the spectacle.

"YOU CAN HIDE, YOU CAN RUN, BUT IT'S THE GIRLS WHO GET SHIT DONE! GOOOO GIRLS TEAM!"

Ukyou needed a moment to pick her jaw up off the floor. She felt her rage rise again as the two boys posed and bounced in response to cat calls and wolf whistles from the bleachers. "WHAT THE HELL IS WRONG WITH YOU JACKASSES!?"

The two boys paused, looked at each other, nodded, and after a moment adjusting their tutus, stood tall and put their hands over their hearts, twirling their pompoms in the other hand. "Ucchan, Ucchan, she's our man! If she can't do it GREAT!"

"That's it..." Ukyou said, her voice becoming eerily calm. "I'm going to kill them all. I'll kill them all, and burn down the school."

"Uhhh... Ukyou?" One of the boys team said nervously. They had been hoping for guidance and strategy from their ringer, but from the dangerous aura that was coming off the girl...

"I'll kill them, burn down the school, and nail their corpses to the flaming chunks of wood..."

"... Ukyou?" He tried again nervously as his teammates gave him a shove from behind.

She looked up at him, her eyes shadowed for a moment, though he swore he could see a reddish glow beneath her bangs. The vision faded after a moment, though, and she straightened and smiled sweetly. "Yes, sugar? What can I help you with?" She said in the same tone of voice she used to take orders and cajole tips from her customers.

The boy shuddered, and decided he perhaps wouldn't be eating at Ucchan's as much in the near future. "Well... We were just wondering what the plan is? We're all tied up. Next round wins it."

Ukyou took a deep breath, closing her eyes and centering herself. She had made the mistake of toying with Ranma rather than finishing things quickly, enjoying finally being as good or better than her fiancé at something athletic, and made the same dumb mistake all of Ranma's opponents had made. But how was she suppose to predict one of Ranma's team picks would have a nuclear
weapon for a right arm? The rest of Ranma's team was getting inspired, with even Sayuri pulling off an impressive score, even if she doffed it on her very next serve. While at the same time, her own team was scattered, demoralized and uncertain.

She glanced over to Ranma. Did she do this… on purpose? Ranchan couldn't lead a horse to water in the middle of a lake! No… Just lucky, but she'll capitalize on that. We should end this quick. It's Ranma's serve to start… if I let her get the ball, she'll want to show off, do something fancy to look good for her team… She silently played out how she thought Ranma might approach things. Ranma didn't know a lot about volleyball, but was brilliant at faking things, given all of the weird themed challenges she got. However, that meant that she always fell back on a certain style. Heavy on aerial maneuvers.

She considered the idea, and then nodded. That'll work for a point, maybe two. Then it'll be up to just plain being better to get the last one. "Okay, I've got a plan." She said to the team, who perked up immediately. "Listen close…"

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When the boy's team took the court again, they did so with renewed confidence. Ukyou had a smile on her lips, and her eyes were flashing in that way they did when she was really getting into a challenge.

Ranma smiled in spite of herself. She had to admit, she was enjoying this, too. It reminded her a little of the times she and Ukyou had played together when they were children. Though… Ukyou had taken those times a fair bit more seriously than Ranma had.

"Ready to go out strong, Ucchan?" Ranma asked, typical confident smirk riding her lips.

"Oh, I'm not going out this time, Sugar." She put a hand on her hip, her posture full of a confidence that gave Ranma a momentary pause. "You gave it a good try, but at the end of the day you're just out of your league. Figuratively and literally."

"IF THE OTHER TEAM WILL FIGHT, RIN WILL SPIKE THEM INTO THE AFTERLIFE! GOOOOOOOO GIRLS!" Horishi and Daisuke were getting more confident in their routine now, for all of it's blatant ridiculousness.

Ukyou winced.

"Izzat so?" Ranma grinned wider, a dangerous look entering her eyes. It's time for Ucchan to eat those words! And maybe the ball!

Sayuri served the ball. Ranma tensed, preparing herself for whatever scheme Ukyou had in mind, eyes following it carefully…

"Oops!" Ukyou seemed to stumble, a bit off balance, and swatted the ball awkwardly upwards. It lobbed back up over the net lazily, slow and high, perfectly set up for a spike right in front of Ranma.

The grin on Ranma's face spread as she leapt to take full advantage of Ukyou's blunder. Looks like this is gonna be a shorter round than you thought, Ucchan! She crowed mentally as she brought the hammer down on the ball. She might not be able to spike with the kind of force that Rin could, but with such a coincidentally perfect setup…

Ranma's triumph turned to ashes before she even landed. One of the boys team slid under the ball with almost prescient fluidity, somehow predicting where it was going to go even before it fully left Ranma's hand. Unable to stop the spike, Ranma was forced to watch as the masterfully executed
smash struck clasped hands instead of the floor. Her gaze followed it up just in time to see a certain Okonomiyaki chef rising right behind it.

She had just enough time for a very small "oh."

The savage spike drove the ball right into her face, pitching her over backwards while still in mid-air, and sending the ball careening off across the gym as Ranma slammed into the floor head first.

Olga blasted her whistle. "Point, boys!"

"Senpai!" Rin yelped and ran over to her, along with the rest of the girl's team, kneeling next to the stricken neo-girl.

Ukyou grinned, hand on her hip. Part of her felt a pang of guilt for being quite so forceful with her fiance, but if she was going to be a good husband, she needed to learn a little humility now and then. *Besides,* she thought, *I can make it up to her later with a special meal... and maybe kiss her boo-boos better too!*

"Ranma, are you okay?" Rin asked, peering down at the redhead, her visage a blur of double images and blinding pot lights, all slowly swirling counterclockwise.

"That... depends..." Ranma muttered. "Did I end up engaged to anyone new while I was out?"

Rin blinked. "I... what?"

"No, Ranma." Yuka supplied helpfully. "Just the usual four."

"Three." Ranma corrected, sitting up and holding her head. "Ouch... Kodachi doesn't count."

"*Four* fiancées?" Rin boggled. "You're engaged for four different guys?! In *high school?!"*

"*Three!*" Ranma snapped, then winced again as her head protested. "$I'm engaged to *girls.* I'm a guy, remember?!"

Rin winced. "Sorry. I only transferred in this year, and I only saw you change once. A lot of the stories kinda contradict each other, too."

"Well, I..." Ranma trailed off. "Wait, what stories contradict?"

"Well..." Rin ticked off her fingers. "There's the one that you're really a girl with a boy curse, and you just say you're a boy because you'd Dad's forcing you to..."

"That's one's popular." Sayuri chimed in.

"... Then there's the one that says you're actually two people, and your female half is really an alien space cop, which is why you have red hair and super powers... Then there's the one where your whole *family* is shapeshifters... then there's the one where an alien spaceship crashed on you, remade your crushed body as a girl because it didn't know what it was doing, and your male side is just a hologram that shorts out whenever you get wet... Oooh, then there's the one where you're an alien shapeshifting robot..."

"I... no, no... no..." Ranma felt the pounding in her head getting worse. "Just... stop. I'm not an alien. I'm not a robot. I'm definitely not a robot alien. I'm just a boring old human."

"With an ancient chinese curse, who occasionally fights gods and dragons." Yuka supplied helpfully.
"I… Yeah, that." Ranma finished, deflating.

"Oh… Well… you're still cool, Senpai!" Rin asserted with a sharp nod of her head. "You can't let not being an alien robot superhero get you down!"

The other four girls silently stared at Rin for a moment.

"Okay… right!" Ranma flipped back onto her feet. "Nevermind that! Right now, a certain bunch o' jerks are about to get some cold, rubbery payback!"

"Yeah, definitely not cool enough to be a robot alien superhero." Yuka said dryly.

"Wait, senpai! I forgot to tell you…" Rin tried to stop Ranma, but the other team was already serving the ball.

Ranma narrowed her eyes. *Okay, whatever the heck happened there, it's not happening twice!* She took her stance, this time carefully watching Ukyou for treachery.

This time, it was one of the boys who lopped the shot high and over the net. It almost looked like he was trying to set it up for Ukyou to smash, but accidentally set it up perfectly for Ranma instead.

*Okay, again! But this time…* She leapt for it, eyes already tracking, trying to find an opening, somewhere they wouldn't expect. She quickly spotted it midcourt and put everything she had into the spike…

Only to have a hand shoot up from the bottom of her peripheral vision and block the shot, sending it up in a slow arc, right to where Ukyou was waiting.

"Oh n-" Ranma managed.

Yuka and Riko watched as Ranma skidded on her back to the mid-court, the imprint of the volleyball's texture visible on her face, the ball bouncing next to her as she came to a stop.

"Point boy's team! Next point beink match point!" Olga announced.

"Okay… I'm ready to hear what I'm doing wrong now…" Ranma muttered, slowly, sitting up.

"Sorry, Senpai!" Rin said, crouching next to her, looking sheepish. "I tried to tell you… They're baiting you."

Ranma sighed. "Well, yeah, I'm getting that. She rubbed her face. "But I don't get how they seem to know where I'm gonna put the ball?"

"Oh, it's actually kind of clever." Rin said brightly. "They're creating intentional gaps in their defense, so that you'll strike in those spots, and they can be ready to close up the gap in an instant."

"Oh! I think I saw that in one of my sports mangas!" Riko said suddenly, smacking her hand into her palm.

Ranma frowned. She knew that trick. She had *used* that trick in fights before. She hadn't recognized it in this setting though. *Ukyou is really pulling out all the stops!*

*Of course…* A smile spread across her face. *It's REAL easy to get in trouble if your opponent figures out you're doing it. "Okay, I know what we're gonna do. Yuka? C'mere, you're gonna be part of this…"*
Ukyou smirked as she watched Ranma pick herself up off the ground, idly spinning the ball on her finger again. She watched as Ranma took her position again, that same determined look on her face. "Ready to give up yet, Sugar?" She grinned. "Not that I'll let you. One more point is all I need."

"You're not gonna get it, Ucchan." Ranma said. "Serve the ball."

Ukyou smirked. Yeah, you figured it out, didn't you? You're probably expecting me to just keep using the same trick over and over, aren't'cha? She tossed the ball back to her server, giving her team a nod to let them know the plan changed. Sorry, Ranma, not going to wait for you to figure out a counter before I change tactics.

Ukyou followed the ball as it soured over the net to mid court on the other side. *Yuka and Rin are the weak points. All we have to do is keep lobbing to them. Ranma will either move to mid court to cover them and give us a big old hole, or they'll eventually flub. Either way, Ranchan loses this one.*

Ukyou smirked a bit as sure enough, Ranma moved back to the mid court to intercept the lob, freeing Ukyou to block Rin. *it's all about controlling what moves you can make, Ranchan. Now you'll pass it forward for Rin...*

Sure enough, Ranma set the ball up for their striker, who moved for another thunderbolt. But Ukyou was already in the air, hands up to deflect the shot. Rin's eyes widened, and she pulled the hit, trying to change the angle, but it wasn't enough, the ball deflecting off Ukyou's hands back over to their side of the net, right towards the position Ranma had vacated.

*Game, set and ma- Ukyou thought smugly, watching the ball as it... was set up by Yuka?*

*CRAP! She scrambled, but it was too late. Ranma made a leap from mid court that would have made a professional basketball player jealous as she flew in and enthusiastically spiked the ball right in the middle of the court, hitting the ground with a resounding ~smack~*

"YESSS! Finally!" Ranma shouted, bouncing in victory.

*"TWO FOUR SIX EIGHT! THE BOYS WILL CHOKE 'CUZ UCCHAN'S LATE!"* Hiroshi and Daisuke cried out, doing their best impression of cheering poses, having gotten the rest of the girls into it with them.

"Nice trick, but you still need two more, sugar!" Ukyou shot back, growling as she tossed them the ball. She noticed Ranma returning to mid court, leaving Yuka in the forward position. *What is she doing?!*

Ranma gave Yuka a thumbs up, then turned to Sayuri. "Hey, Sayuri? Remember what I said about not doing anything fancy if you're not sure you can pull it off?"

"Yeah?"

Ranma shook her head. "Ignore me. Go for it."

Sayuri glanced to the bleachers, going pale. *"Ranma, are you nuts?!"* She squeaked.

"I've got a finisher for this, but I've still got a point gap to close, and I've got nothing else that Ukyou won't be ready for." Ranma said. "You're our only hope."

"But if I flub it we're done!" She hissed.
"Yeah, well, if you just lob it we're done, too. We need an ace or nothing right now."

"This isn't how you win a match, Ranma!" She protested.

"Are you kidding?" Ranma grinned. "This is how I win every match. You did it before, I know you can do it again. Get this point, and I can finish this for us, okay?"

Sayuri ducked her head, muttering curses to a certain pigtailed martial artist under her breath. She sized up the net, the confident glare of the boys team, with Ukyou at the head. No pressure or anything, eh Saotome? I swear I'm going to ask Akane to mallet you extra hard next time I see her, just for me! She grit her teeth, lifted the ball in the air, and just for a moment, the din of the crowd, Hiroshi and Daisuke's inane cheering, and even the other team faded out.

I don't care if I do flub this. She lied to herself as the ball left her fingers. I don't… I don't care if the whole school sees me flub it again. I don't care if we win. I never really wanted to play volleyball. I don't care if I'm special like Ranma or Ukyou! I just don't… want… their… PITY!

There was a moment, a flash of something like inspiration that told her to turn her wrist slightly at the last second, hitting the ball from below at a slightly different angle than before. She felt all of her anger and frustration flow into the ball, and then she violently flung it away, not caring where it went as it left her hand as if fired from a cannon. "I DON'T CARE!"

The strike hadn't just imparted force onto the ball, but a wobbling spin that caused it to curve through the air, arcing over the net on one side and curving around to the other side. The boys dove for the ball, but it was a one-in-a-million shot, impossible to predict and get under. It hit the ground just inside the court line on the far side from where it had crossed over the net and skittered off crazily as it sputtered away whatever bizarre spin momentum Sayuri had unwittingly imparted onto it.

No one on the girl's side moved.

Olga's whistle blew. "Point, girl's side! All beink tied up! Next point wins!"

"Sayuri…?" Yuka said. "What have you not been telling me?"

"W-what?" Sayuri stammered, looking to where the ball had finally touched down, and then back to her best friend. "I mean… I just got lucky with the spin, right?"

"I'm fairly certain what you did was physically impossible."

Sayuri laughed weakly. "No… that's not… I mean, it's just… It's like that gyroscope we messed with in science class, right?"

Everyone was looking at her now. Except Ranma. Ranma was studying her. That was worse.

"Ranma if you keep staring at me like that I'm gonna tell Akane!" Sayuri growled.

"You ever studied martial arts?" Ranma asked, unconcerned about the threat, rubbing her chin as she looked the girl over. She definitely put some ki into that, whether she knows it or not. Maybe she picked it up from all the fights she's seen?

"No! I never… Yuka, tell her!"

"Well, she does read a lot of manga with martials arts in it… A lot of doujins, too."

"Yuka!" She hissed, sensing betrayal.
"... Like that one with the two really buff guys in it... one of 'em with long hair, and they always lose their shirts when they fight..."

"Yuka!"

"... I've still got to get that back to you, don't I?" Yuka continued, oblivious, until Sayuri stomped up to her and clapped a hand over her mouth.

"Really? They show any good techniques in it?" Ranma asked, obviously pondering the idea of drawing inspiration from a martial arts manga.

"Uhh..." Sayuri blushed a bit, the 'techniques' that were so prevalent in the manga not having anything to do with martial arts.

"Neat. Maybe you can let me borrow it after Yuka is done?" Ranma grinned. "If it's what showed you how to pull off a serve like that, I wonder what else it could teach me!"

Things that would put your fights with all those bare-chested guys you attract into a completely different context. Sayuri thought. Just being able to see Ranma's expression alone might be worth it. "I'll... uhh... we'll see?"

"Okay, next one just make it an easy lob." Ranma said. "We want it to go to a rally for that one."

She glanced at Riko and Rin. "Are you two ready?"

"I've only done this a few times before." Riko admitted sheepishly, fidgeting.

"I know, but I can't do it. I need to keep Ukyou focused on me, and if she sees this coming she'll put a stop to it." Ranma said. "You were on the gymnastics team for a reason, right?"

Riko sighed. "Yeah, but I'm not tough like you or Akane. I couldn't hack it against Kodachi or her cronies."

Ranma gave her that confident grin. "You don't gotta. You just gotta do a move you did in your basic training."

"Yeah... with me." Rin said nervously. "I was never in gymnastics!"

"Just worry about getting in position to do what you do. I'll take care of the landing. That's kinda what I've been training in in the last two years." Ranma replied. "I know you guys can do this." She held out her fist. "Come on, Ranma Saotome never loses, and right now you're on Ranma Saotome's team."

Rin was the first one to put her hand on top of Ranma's. "If Senpai thinks we can do this, then we can do this. Just one more point, right?"

Ranma finally realized that at some point during the game Rin had started calling her 'senpai', and she wasn't entirely sure she was comfortable with that. Thankfully she wasn't getting potential fiancee warning vibes from the girl, but still...

Yuka put her hand on top next. "Well, I think this is probably going to go horribly. But..." She smiled. "... It was kinda cool being in the middle of one of your capers for once, Ranma. Thanks for bringing us along."

Ranma blushed a little. She didn't get many compliments out of Akane's friends. Especially with how things had been lately.
Sayuri put her hand on next. "What Yuka said. Plus making me feel like I'm actually any good at this…"

Riko put her own hand on top of Sayuri's. "You are good at this, Sayuri! I've never seen anyone make a serve like that before! I'm just here to fill a spot, but you… you and Rin… and yeah, Ranma obviously… you guys could really make a go of this!"

Ranma put her other hand on top of the pile. She was grinning like a madwoman, and didn't know why. All she knew was that this was the most fun she had had in years. "Let's all make of a go of this."

They broke and trotted back to their positions. Sayuri accepted the ball from Olga, and took a deep breath. She tossed the ball, and made a serviceable, if ordinary serve, right to the opposing team mid court.

They were ready, one of the boys bunting the ball, another setting it up for Ukyou, moving by the numbers now that their win was on the line. Ukyou took her shot for the far back corner of the court, forcing Sayuri to scramble for it to keep it in play. Two of the boys moved up closer to the net, ready to block any attempts by Rin at a windup smash.

Ranma set the ball up, but for Yuka instead. Despite the girl's attempt at a spike being weak, the boys still had to scramble to fill the hole. Ranma nodded to Riko and rushed the net as if to block the oncoming spike.

Ukyou spotted her coming, forcing her to redirect to make the shot faster, unable to precisely control the angle of the ball this time as she focused on power, hoping to simply smash through the defense.

Ranma dropped to her knees, bowed her head and clasped her hands together in an unorthodox behind-the-head bunt, absorbing most of the fury and sending it back to Sayuri, who set it back to the front of the net, in perfect position for Ranma to spike. Again Ukyou and her two guards closed in for the block.

There was a moment's confusion when Ranma set the ball instead, sending it higher than normal.

It was then they noticed what Riko and rin were up to. Riko hand laced her fingers together, and Rin made a running start at her, stepping into her hands and getting a literal step up, just enough to give her a bit of extra lift, just in time for her to meet the ball at the top of Ranma's set.

With the extra height, there was no way to block, and Rin's thunderbolt could strike anywhere in the court she wished.

There was almost a crackling in the air, not unlike when a certain kendoist was around, as the entire boy's team stared up in helpless horror at the visage of their doom hovering above them.

The strike came as a literal thunderclap, as Rin threw everything she had into it. Then was an explosion and a cloud of dust and debris as this time the ball actually did break the floor, sending the boy's team sprawling in all directions.

"Point, girl's team! Winner is girls team!" Olga blew her whistle three times.

Ranma darted in, catching Rin as she fell back down, cutting off her abortive yelp as she dropped suddenly. She grinned at the girl, then self consciously set her back on her feet before anyone got any wrong ideas. "That was great!"

"We did it! We won!" Sayuri ran in, laughing and hugging both girls. "We actually pulled it off!"
Riko and Yuka crowded in, and Ranma laughed nervously, part of her half expecting to get mashed into the floor any second by an angry fiancee.

"Ranma!"

Ah, there she is now. Ranma peered over Rin's head nervously as Ukyou stalked towards her. Fortunately, it wasn't Akane, but Ukyou did get temperamental when it seemed like Ranma was paying too much attention to another female, much less four, and she had just taken a big hit to her ego at her hands, and technically she could actually hit harder than Akane could…

… Wait, why was it fortunate it was Ukyou, not Akane?

Ukyou surprised her, however, by sticking out her hand. "Good match." She said, grinning.

Ranma blinked, then smiled. A few weeks ago, she probably would have rubbed it in by gloating, but she was starting to learn when and where to switch off the rival banter. If you didn't crush your opponent, the would rise to challenge you again… and Ranma liked repeat challenges. "Thanks, Ucchan. That was a lot of fun! We gotta do this sorta stuff more often."

"R-really?" Ukyou smiled, uncharacteristically shyly as she let her own game face slip in favor of her usual 'cute fiancee' demeanor.

"That might not be such a good idea." Rin said sheepishly, kicking at a broken floorboard. "Not sure the school's maintenance budget could handle it."

Sayuri patted her on the back. "You are new around here, aren't you?"

A slow clapping caught their attention, and they all turned to see a tall blonde girl walking towards them, seemingly unconcerned by the destruction. She smiled and made a slight but formal bow. "Please forgive my intrusion. I see your reputations are well earned, Saotome-san, Kuonji-san."

"Oh." Sayuri said flatly. "Hello Himura."

Himura Tanaka smirked and brushed a few errant strands of her golden blonde hair back behind her ear. "Kamei-san! I must admit, you put on quite the display as well. Such a shame you didn't feel the need to reveal such talents while you were part of the team."

"What do you want?" Ranma crossed her arms, getting a distinctly Kodachi-esque vibe from the girl.

"I simply wished to congratulate you on your magnificent victory!" Himura explained, beaming once more. "Especially in the light of such…" She shot Yuka and Riko a sideways glance, her expression shifting momentarily as if she had spied something distasteful. "... 'handicaps'. As the Captain of the girl's championship volleyball team here at Furinkan, I am pleased to offer you both positions as starters for this year's team."

"We've been through this before, Himura." Ukyou said tiredly. "Pass."

Himura clucked her tongue and took on an exaggerated sympathetic tone. "Tch, yes, of course. Your obligation to that quaint little… food stand of yours. Commendable, I suppose. A tad disappointing that your ambitions don't appear to extend beyond it, but admirable work ethic all the same. Do come and see me if you change your mind." She patted Ukyou on the shoulder, ignoring as the other girl bristled and sputtered.

She spread her arms and beamed again at Ranma. "Now, Saotome-san! I understand you have no such obligations, correct? And I noticed your schedule was definitely lacking in extra-curriculars,
which are so important these days in order to get good placements in work and college alike! Shall I pen you in to join us for Tuesday’s practise?"

"No, thanks." Ranma muttered, hoping the girl took the hint before Ukyou went thermonuclear.

"Oh? Friday, perhaps?" She pulled out a little black book. "This early in the season we can afford to miss a few, but it's never too early to build team cohesion, hmm?"

"No, as in 'No. Thanks.'" Ranma repeated. "Not interested."

"Oh. Well, what a pity. Such a remarkable performance, and all for naught." She clucked her tongue again as she tucked away her little black book. "Well, hopefully I can think of some way to persuade you. Until then, I suppose I will just have to accept defeat, like our… rather disappointing crop of male hopefuls this year. Ah well, the boy's team hasn't seen a championship in years anyway." She turned to leave.

"Hold on." Yuka interrupted. "Aren't you going to ask Sayuri? Or Rin? They're the ones who won this match!"

Himura turned, raising an eyebrow skeptically at Yuka, as if regarding some lower form of life. "Kamei-san had her opportunity. A shame she didn't display such talents while under my tutelage, but I haven't the time to try and coax greatness out of those who aren't willing to give 100% the first time around. As for Ito-san…" Her gaze slipped over to the diminutive girl, who was nervously studying the floor. "Yes, well, do call me if you change your mind, Saotome-san. Ta ta!" She waved imperiously and sauntered away.

"What a bitch…" Ukyou muttered under her breath.

"Ukyou! Don't mutter curses at people under your breath!" Yuka admonished her. "Say them out loud. WHAT A BITCH!"

Himura hesitated a moment, twitched, then kept walking out of the gymnasium.

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Nabiki watched Himura walk out the gymnasium. She had hung by close enough to hear the conversation, but far enough to look like she wasn't listening in. She hadn't dealt with the Volleyball Captain much in day-to-day life, which was probably a good thing.

"At least for Himura. Nabiki thought darkly. She's exactly the sort of stuck up…"

"... BITCH!"

Nabiki smirked, noticing Himura's stride stutter at the bold announcement. Thank you Yuka… She's exactly the sort of stuck up bitch I would take down a few pegs as a freebie.

She pushed off from the wall and made her way over to Ranma. She noticed Hiroshi and Daisuke making their way over as well, still wearing their tutus. I really hope Hana got some pics of that.

"Well, that was epic!" Hiroshi stated, grinning.

"Inspired, of course, by our magnificent cheering efforts." Daisuke added, and the two fist bumped each other in celebration.

"So, is this going to be your new 'thing' now?" Yuka asked, crossing her arms.
"I thought you were aiming to be detectives or something?" Sayuri added.

"We can do both!" Hiroshi said defensively.

"Actually… 'Male Cheerleader Detectives' sounds almost marketable." Daisuke replied, rubbing his chin. "I could see a successful manga series based on something like that."

"We'd need more source material to base the manga on." Hiroshi said.

"Then not only can we be both detectives and cheerleaders…” Daisuke began.

"... We must!" Hiroshi finished, his fist clenched in determination.

"It is our duty as true men!" They cried together, solemnly thrusting their pompoms skyward.

"It is your duty as morons more likely." Yuka muttered, though there was a grin threatening to escape her control tugging at the corners of her mouth.

"So, what're we having for lunch to celebrate?" Riko asked, noting the time as the group started walking towards the exit.

"From what I saw them bringing in this morning, it's a banquet of day-old curry bread and instant top ramen." Daisuke said, falling in step with them.

"Seriously?! School just started! How can they already be serving day old bread?!"

"See? That's why this school needs detectives!"

Ranma hung back as she spotted Nabiki. She noted Nabiki had a sly smile on her face that told her she had most likely taken a bunch of pictures of the event and expected to make a decent profit off it.

"I guess business went well?"

"I'll run the pictures by you once they're developed to make sure they meet your approval, partner."

Nabiki said, her smile not cracking. "If Hana did her job right… and she always does her job right… They'll be actions shots. Nothing eyebrow raising."

Ranma was a bit taken aback. Nowhere in her agreement with Nabiki had they discussed getting Ranma's approval for her photo business. "Why are you being nice all of a sudden?"

Nabiki smirked. "I'm not being nice, Saotome. I'm being fair. You're a business partner now… even if technically our venture is destined to be a bottomless pit consuming all our time and money…” Her smirk faltered a moment, then recovered. "And partners get due consideration in things like this. It fosters a trusting and respectful working relationship."

"Until the deal is done and you've gotten what you want." Ranma muttered.

"Exactly! Then all bets are off." She sighed. "No questionable pics for the duration. Unless you okay them."

"Why would I…!?"

Nabiki held up a finger. "You'll get a percentage."

"Nabiki, there isn't enough money in the world to…"

Nabiki pulled out a small calculator, punched in a few numbers, then handed it over to the diminutive
Ranma stared at the figure. "No… not enough… You can't be serious?"

"That's Kuno-baby alone, Ranma." She grinned and took the calculator back. "Properly staged and framed shots? Triple that."

Ranma considered a moment, then shook her head violently. "No. Nuh uh! I'm not gonna become the school's sex object!"

"Suit yourself." Nabiki shrugged. "Go take a shower. Stay a girl though. Kasumi made us lunch so we can avoid the cafeteria nastiness. We can gauge how successful our little social engineering attempt was."

"I wish you wouldn't call it that." Ranma muttered. "It sounds so… manipulative."

"Ranma, Ranma, Ranma…" Nabiki rested her arm on her shoulder. "The difference between manipulative and popular is how successful you are at it."

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Nabiki staked out her usual spot beneath the oak tree as she waited for Ranma. She was flipping through the folder Megumi has delivered to her.

Himura Tanaka. Third year. Age 18. Birthdate… don't care… don't care… She flipped through a page or two of mundane statistics. Hmmm… Father Minoru Tanaka, Mother Sachi Tanaka… hold on… She found a sticky note appended to the parental information, and a newspaper clipping about the Olympic volleyball team. Huh, her Dad was an Olympic hopeful? Didn't make the cut, though. Explains why she's so obsessed with the sport. She tucked that back into place. Not a lot to go in in the 'white' file. Gonna need to start a 'black' file on our good Captain, just in case.

She looked up to see Ranma returning. She noted with some amusement that her entourage had returned: Her teammates seemed to have rushed through the line to get what food they could. Even Hiroshi and Daisuke had tagged along, though Nabiki suspected that might have more to do with the high concentration of reasonably cute girls in the vicinity.

"Look, I don't know what you guys think happened, but it was just a fluke hit, okay?" Sayuri said. "The ball just flew… weird."

"I dunno Sayuri. You could have super powers." Hiroshi ribbed her gently.

"Around here? No thanks!" Sayuri cut that notion off with a sweep of her hand. "I've seen the nonsense that leads to. I'll sick with being plain and ordinary, thanks."

"I don't think any of you are plain or ordinary." Rin said, hugging a bento box to her chest. She was slightly blushing and wearing a mile wide grin. "I've never had so much fun in my life, and you all just act like it's normal!"

"Well, we are all rather remarkable. My humble self included." Daisuke said grandly. "Perhaps after school we could discuss it further ow ow ow ow OW!" Daisuke trailed off into a stream of pained whimpers, most likely caused by Yuka firmly pulling on his earlobe.

"No lecherous nonsense with the new girl until she gets settled in!" Yuka said, finally releasing him. "Don't traumatize her before she's even dealt with her first panty raid."
"Ow. Unkind of you, Yuka." Daisuke rubbed his ear. "Unkind and cruel."

"And judgemental." Hiroshi piped in.

"Yes. Presuming I had perverted intentions." Daisuke added.

"Besides, knowing her arm, if she slapped you, your head would probably pop like a rotten watermelon." Yuka remarked slyly.

"But wise." Hiroshi added quickly.

"Gracious and wise." Daisuke agreed, putting an extra foot or so between him and Rin.

Rin blushed and covered her face with her bento box. "You guuuuys! I-I… I would never…"

Ranma patted her on the shoulder. "Don't take these jokers too serious, Rin. Hey Nabiki!" She waved to Nabiki and trotted over, plunking down next to her under the tree.

Nabiki handed over one of the two bento boxes she had with her, smirking a bit as Ranma dug into the meal with gusto. She opened her own and started in somewhat more daintily.

"So… you're Ranma's fiancee?" Rin asked.

Nabiki paused, pondering how best to correct the notion. It was already public knowledge, of course, but it didn't hurt to tack on some qualifications. "Placeholder fiancee. Think of it as a temporary legal arrangement to keep certain other contracts from being fulfilled before all available options have been explored."

"Huh?" Rin cocked her head.

"She means Ranma has three other crazy fiancees…"

"TRwo! Kodablchi doesn't cRount!" Ranma corrected through a large mouthful, somehow managing to avoid spraying it all over everyone present.

"Chew, Saotome. Taste. Swallow. Honestly, Kasumi's cooking is so wasted on you." Nabiki snorted. "But… essentially yes. Ranma's father has a tendency to rack up debt, and then offer up Ranma as marriage material as payment."

"Seriously?!” Rin said, eyes wide. "H-how many? I mean… if it's okay to…"

"Forty-seven, at the last count." Nabiki said dryly.

Ranma grimaced and swallowed mightily. "Forty-eight." Ranma corrected. "There was that Nigerian Prince thing a couple of months ago."

"Right, right… that's what we get letting Genma Saotome have an e-mail account." Nabiki muttered.

"O-Oh my…” Rin said. "Were… were any of those engagements to men, or all to girls?"

Ranma looked a little ill. "Seventeen of 'em were guys."

Nabiki cleared her throat. "Nigerian Prince."

Ranma sighed and deflated a bit more. "... Eighteen."
"That's rough! Eighteen guys, all in the couple of years you've had the curse?" Riko said, chewing thoughtfully on her curry bread.

"Three of 'em were before the curse." Ranma added glumly.

Ranma, Hiroshi and Daisuke all shuddered in unison.

"B-but… but that's horrible!" Rin said. "How could a father do that to their child?!"

"Oh, he never intended to honor any of those engagements. They were just scams." Nabiki said. "We've dissuaded most of them, but there are three that are persistent…"

"Two!" Ranma hissed. "Don't go giving Kodachi any leverage t'think she's got a real claim!"

"All right. Two and an obsessed yandere." Nabiki corrected herself. "One is Ukyou, who you all met. Genma swindled her Dad out of their family yatai, and she spent most of her life tracking Ranma down. Mostly to get revenge, but when they finally met up, Ranma sweet talked her…"

"Reasoned with her." Ranma corrected.

"... Shamelessly sweet talked her into being his fiancee again, rather than murdering him."

"That's… actually kind of romantic." Rin said. "She searched for him for so long, and then after all those trials, she finally found him, but instead of vengeance, she fell in love all over again."

"Uhh… yeah." Ranma blushed a little, scratching the back of her head. "It didn't seem so romantic at the time…"

"The second is a girl from China. From a tribe of Amazons there called the Joketsuzoku." Nabiki continued. "Ranma beat her in a duel over Genma eating Shampoo's victory feast."

"And then she fell in love with him?" Rin asked, leaning forward.

"No, then she tried to kill me." Ranma muttered darkly.

"See, Ranma was a girl when all this went down." Nabiki smirked. "Shampoo was humiliated in front of her entire tribe, so she gave Ranma the Kiss of Death, which meant she was honor bound to hunt her to the ends of the earth until she had finally found and killed her."

"O-oh." Rin deflated a little. "But… but if she was trying to kill Ranma, why…?"

"The law has a fun flipside." Ranma interrupted. "If an Outsider female beats an Amazon? Kiss of Death. She dragged her thumb across her throat, making a cutting sound. "But, should an Outsider male beat an Amazon in combat?"

"Kiss of Marriage." Nabiki finished. "Shampoo found out Ranma is really male, and that was that."

Rin frowned, looking like she didn't quite accept the story. "But… nobody falls in love just because some law tells them to…"

"Tell that to Shampoo." Ranma sighed. "It was like a light switch with her."

"O-okay… I guess…" Rin mumbled, still looking doubtful. "So… what about your engagement?"

"Well, see, Mr. Saotome and Daddy used to know each other when they were our age. They trained together a lot, and decided when they had kids, they'd marry them to each other so that their schools
could be joined.' It was the only engagement Ranma's Dad had any intention of honoring. So, one day he decides to drag his kid over to the Tendo Dojo to make it official."

"Except Pops is an idiot, so not only does he get us both cursed, but he decides to do this when it's pouring rain out." Ranma snorted. "So instead of Genma Saotome and son showing up on the Tendo doorstep…"

"... We get adorable redheaded girl and a panda." Nabiki finished. She noticed Ranma blushed a little at the compliment, which was unusual because Ranma was usually impervious to flattery about her female side. *Interesting.*

*Mine.*

*Shush!*

"That… eventually got sorted out…"

"Awww, Ranma baby, you're not gonna let me tell them how we learned about the curse?" Nabiki said in her most saccharine voice.

"Don't you *dare.*" Ranma growled.

"Fine, fine…"

"It *got sorted out.*" Ranma started again. "And so Mr. Tendo told me to pick which of his daughters to be engaged to. 'Cept… It kinda got picked for me. And…" She trailed off a bit.

*Shit.* Nabiki swore, cursing herself for not stopping things sooner.

"And so you ended up engaged to Nabiki?" Rin asked, oblivious to how Ranma's face had fallen.

"Not… quite…" Sayuri said, wincing.

"Actually it was Nabiki's younger sister Akane, who Ranma's been engaged to for almost two years now," Daisuke helpfully supplied. "Right up until mmmph mmmrrr mmmnh!"

"*Shutting up now.*" Yuka hissed, her hand over his mouth, until he nodded slowly. She carefully released him.

"... So yeah, huge break up. Explosions and everything. Real ones." Daisuke quickly finished.

"Daisuke!"

"O-oh…" Rin said, slumping a little as well, finally getting the picture. "I'm sorry, Senpai."

"Don't be, it's…" She choked on the words *'it's nothing!'... in the past. Look, I'm gonna go see if they have any of those ice cream bars they had a few days ago in the cafeteria. I'll see you guys in class, okay?" Sher quickly stood up, dusted herself off, then trotted away, with a little more than justifiable urgency, given how slim the chance of anything edible being left in the cafeteria was at this point.

Nabiki sighed. *Looks like I'm in for damage control. Was hoping to delay the mope fest at least until Akane got back. I need Ranma functional, dammit!*

Rin noticed her annoyance and shrank a little more. "I'm… I'm sorry! I didn't mean to…"
"It's not your fault." Nabiki reassured her, packing up the remains of her lunch and Ranma's. She noticed with some dismay that Ranma's lunch had been left unfinished. *Bad sign.* "It's still a sore point. And it'll probably only get worse when my sister comes home in a few days."

"I-is there anything I can do to help?" Rin asked, her green eyes suddenly bright with determination. "I owe Senpai for giving me my chance to get seen by the volleyball captain, even if they decided they didn't want me. I want to do anything I can!"

"Don't try and marry her." Hiroshi said dryly.

"Yeah, basically that." Sayuri chipped in.

"Actually…" Nabiki leaned forward. "Why did Ms. Tanaka turn her nose up at you? Strikers who can do what you can aren't exactly *common*, I would think. Do you two have a history?"

Rin shook her head. "Not that I know of. I mean, I tried applying for the volleyball team when I first transferred here, and I got turned down flat. They wouldn't even let me participate in the tryouts. I've been trying to catch Tanaka-san alone to try and find out if there is anything I can do, but…" She sighed. "Today was the first day she's even acknowledged I exist. Most times she just walks right past me like I'm not there."

*Looks like I'll need that file on Rin sooner rather than later.* Nabiki thought. She had a hunch that whatever was going on with Himura, Rin was tied to it somehow.

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*(So, I kinda messed up and posted a version of this with all of my story notes appended at the end. To those who saw that version… SHUSH! I will buy your silence with cookies!)*

*I'm sorry about how long it took to get to this. I hit a pretty massive writer's block, and only just now worked my way through it. My pre-readers tell me it was worth the effort though.*

*for those of you worried about how I might treat the other fiancees given how they are referenced here? I don't believe in turning any of the character into caricatures in order to justify them losing because they 'deserve it'. Shampoo's feelings for Ranma are not as simple as Ranma believes. Akane's feelings are not as blunt or heartless as they might initially seem, and that will hopefully be shown in the story. Even Kodachi, if I do this right, will have her sympathetic elements.*

*Basically... Resolving this is going to be HARD, because it should be.*)
Nabiki didn't see Ranma again until the end of the day. She had half expected to walk home on her own, but right on schedule he popped up, having switched back to male sometime during the day.

"You know, if you've got other stuff you need to take care of, you don't have to walk with me home." Nabiki said, not really wanting to tell him to take a hike, but at the same time not entirely comfortable with him transferring his usual observances from Akane to her.

"I can take off if you'd prefer." He said, not really looking at her.

Which was what I was trying to avoid implying. Nabiki thought crossly. Sometimes trying to get Ranma to not take things the wrong way had the exact opposite effect. You'd think growing up managing someone like Akane I'd be better at this. She mentally groused. "No, not at all. It's actually rather sweet of you. I just don't want you to do it because you feel obliged. I'm used to making the walk alone."

Ranma hopped up onto the fence, his hands folded behind his head. "Yeah, well..." He still wouldn't look in her direction. His voice kind of dropped. "... I'm not."

Nabiki smiled in spite of herself. You're paying attention to your own wants and needs for once Ranma? Glad to see not all of the progress we made is gone. "Well, then I'll try and be good company."

"Y'know, as long as you don't mind." Ranma added, scratching the back of his head self-consciously.

Seriously. Stop being adorable, Saotome. Nabiki thought, but she wasn't able to put any rancor behind the thought. "Well, you might have to put up with hearing about my boring day on the walk. I'm not much for walking in silence."

"Actually, I wouldn't mind that." Ranma replied. "You sorta already know about how my day went. I don't know much about what you have goin' on, y'know? Seeing as we're different years and all."

Nabiki felt a bit of blush rise to her cheeks. Being attractive to someone like Saotome she fully expected. She was rightfully proud of her looks, and confident enough to stack herself up against any of his usual girls. But being interesting to him... that caught her a little off-guard. "Not much to say. Beyond doing a little light research on our friend the Captain of the girl's volleyball team."

"I'm sure you meant 'Captain of the Girl's Championship Volleyball Team'' Ranma replied back in his best snooty voice.

Nabiki snerked, covering her mouth. "Ah, of course, my mistake." She rewarded him with a grin. "Seems she's trying to make good where her Dad failed. He was an Olympic hopeful who didn't make it."

Ranma blinked. "Oh? That's interestin'..." He said. "Rin said her Dad was an Olympian. Small world I guess, huh?"

"Rin's Dad is..." Nabiki stopped short. "Now it makes sense!"

"What?" Ranma turned.
"Oh please. You had to notice how she snubbed Rin!"

"Oh, sure. I just figured it was because she was stuck up or somethin'..." Ranma considered. "That makes sense though..."

"Consider it today's lesson in Social Arts, Saotome." Nabiki resumed walking. "When someone acts against what seems like their best interests... such as recruiting an amazing player for your team who really wants to play for you, when you're very obviously looking for amazing players? That's important information if you ever want to deal with that person. It'll not only help you if that particular topic comes up, but it'll tell you a lot about the person."

"Oh?" Ranma hopped down off the fence to walk next to her, suddenly very attentive. "What does it tell you about her?"

Nabiki felt another little flutter as his attention focused entirely on her, her traitorous mind dredging up a few memories of the last time he had been quite so focused on her. Stop that! She coughed, feigning clearing her throat to cover her reaction. "Well, in this case she's carrying a family grudge. She feels that Rin's father got something her father was entitled to, and even though Rin isn't even aware of the connection, she's decided to carry it over from their fathers to them. She feels strongly enough about something that happened before she was born and should have had no effect on her that she's willing to hamstring her own chances of success in order to deny success to someone she sees as an 'enemy', which is an irrational response. Tells me this was a very big deal in her family, enough that she's not thinking straight about the matter. Flags her as both arrogant and insecure, as she's full of herself to think she can get by without Rin, and insecure enough that she's not willing to take the chance of Rin showing her up."

Ranma blinked and whistled low. "Wow... I mean... I just got 'stuck up' out of that... But you're right. All of that makes sense when you think about it." He looked thoughtful. "So arrogant... insecure... family honor is a big deal... holds grudges... That sorta gives you an idea what to watch for when dealing with her, doesn't it?"

"Exactly." Nabiki grinned. "Now you see the difference between a beginner at this, and a pro." She smirked and gave him a sly look.

"Yeah." He said, completely without guile. "Honestly, I kinda wish I had started hanging out with you a lot sooner, Nabiki. This stuff would have made my life a lot easier."

Her sly look dissolved as she quickly schooled her expression. "*Ahem* well... circumstances were conducive to us hanging out right now, that's all."

"Yeah..." Ranma replied, and she could hear his heart drop.

"Damnit, Nabiki..." She sighed, wondering what it was about the boy that made his foot-in-mouth disease so contagious. "I don't think I would have been comfortable with it if I didn't know you as well as I do." She said, hoping to give him an alternate reason rather than just 'My little sister broke the engagement and dumped you on me.' "Spent almost two years figuring you out after all, Saotome. And you kind of have a prickly social life."

"I guess that's true." He replied, still a few notes lower than his tone should be. "Speaking of social lives... Don't you usually walk home with your friends?"

"They're not really my friends." Nabiki replied. "They're mostly my... associates. Usually we're walking together so they can give me reports on the goings on in Furinkan, or get instructions for the next day, or pass over the day's earnings. Keeps the truancy officers off our backs. They're a lot
busier than normal with all the work I gave them towards defusing The Madness."

"Isn't… that kinda lonely?" He pressed, looking over at her.

She kept her eyes closed, refusing to let herself react any further to his interest in her. "Not any lonelier than spending ten years roaming across Asia with your Dad."

"Well, no. I mean, he's an idiot and a jerk, and always selling me off for breakfast or somethin', but Pops was always there, you know? But you… even when you're surrounded by people… it's just business, isn't it?"

She ground her teeth. "Saotome… stop."

"What? I'm just sayin'..."

She whirled on him, fixing him with a stern glare that stopped him in his tracks. "I know exactly what you're doing, Saotome!" She held her finger up under his chin threateningly. "You're trying to apply what I just taught you to me. Well, you know what? That's really not a good idea." She backed off a step and folded her arms. "Don't challenge the master until you're ready."

"I'm not!" Ranma held up his hands. "I'm just… I'm just tryin' to figure you out, Nabiki. That's all."

"Yeah? Well don't, Saotome. You're getting way too perceptive for my liking. She turned and stalked down the road, intent on continuing on her way without any further discussion.

"Is it… easier to be lonely?"

She stopped and turned to look at him. Her rancor bled away as she saw the look in his grey eyes. There was something familiar to her in them. It wasn't guile or inquisition or judgement. He was honestly lost.

She was silent a moment, the wind ruffling her hair and his as she tried to think of an answer. "It's better to learn to stand on your own." She finally decided. "If you're always leaning on others, then you'll never be able to stop falling over. You can't rely on someone else to prop you up, because someday they might not be there, and then that's your fault, not theirs. Lonely is better than broken." She turned and continued to walk away, finding for some reason Ranma's melancholy seemed to be infectious too.

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"Ah, Nabiki!" Soun perked up as his middle daughter walked into the living room. "I have wonderful news! Your sister is coming home tomorrow!"

Nabiki paused, her eyes flicking over her shoulder at the boy who was just slipping off his shoes at the door. "Tomorrow? So soon?"

"Yes!" He rattled his newspaper. "Come now, I know you must have enjoyed being the baby again for a time, but you should be happy to have your sister home!"

"Akane is coming home?" Ranma asked, standing in the hallway.

"Ah, Ranma!" Sound said brightly. "Yes! And your parents are coming to stay for a few days as well. Isn't that wonderful? I'm sure Akane will announce that she's taking the engagement back, and then everything will go back to normal!"
Nabiki resisted the urge to facepalm.

"Yeah… sure…" Ranma said weakly. "I'm… I'm gonna go train in the dojo for a bit." He walked past Soun, his shoulders slumped as he slid the door closed behind him.

"Huh… I would have thought he'd be happier with the news." Soun said, concern knitting his brow. Nabiki clenched her jaw a moment, then forced herself to smile. She walked over and hugged Soun from behind. "Daddy, I love you."

"Oh!" He smiled. "Well, I love you too Nabiki! What brought this on?" He chuckled, looking over his shoulder at her.

"I just wanted you to know that, Daddy," Nabiki said brightly. "That, and when I marry Ranma, I'm totally selling the dojo." She released him, stood, and casually sauntered away, heading up the stairs to her room.

Soun twitched, having managed to tear his newspaper in half.

"I'm afraid you deserved that, father." Kasumi said, settling down across from him at the table, setting a cup of tea in front of him.

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Ranma moved through as complicated series of movements, arms weaving past each other as he pivoted on the balls of his feet, focusing on constant, smooth motions. The smooth continual motion of Tai Chi was good for clearing your mind; right now it was the best way he could think of to keep his mind from slipping back into the old worn tracks he was tired of his thoughts running day in and out.

It's not like it's bad news. I mean… Akane has to come home sometime, right? He scowled, unable to keep his mind from going in that direction. He extended his arms into a wider, windmilling motion, his feet leaving the ground briefly as he pivoted and gyrated, and then back into calm motion, bending his knees and pausing before moving into another series of patterns. And she's had all this time for Mom and Pops to work on her about the engagement thing…

His brow knit. No… No way. Not again. I can't keep just… just sweeping it under the carpet. There's something really, really wrong with how Akane and I are around each other, and if I gotta figure it out… even if it means I can't ever be with her. Because if I don't… well… it ain't gonna happen anyway. He shifted a bit, moving to harder, more forceful forms, switching to a little Hung Ga kung fu.

Actually, something is wrong with how I deal with all of the girls. He thought, moving through punches and kicks, the forms keeping him grounded and centered. Why don't I feel attracted to them? It's the same thing with Akane, it's just… He slid into a triple set of side kicks, then back into his stance. It's like something is blocking me seeing 'em as… well… interestin'. Sometimes with Akane, whatever was in the way would slip, and… and there'd be a moment… maybe if I spent as much time with the others? But… I already know it doesn't WORK. Why was it so easy with Nabiki?

Ranma had always been secretly worried there was something wrong with him… He was always being accused of being a pervert, and had it as a kind of point of pride that he actually wasn't, but… why wasn't he? Here he had all the opportunities in the world… sure, some of it was because of his girl side, that he could empathize, and he knew how violating stuff like getting groped or peeped on was. But at the same time he didn't mind guys admiring his girl side. But he never really
looked himself, even though he knew even a casual admiring glance would be welcomed by any of his fiancees… even Akane.

It wasn't that that kind of stuff didn't interest him. And then he was back to Nabiki. Alone together on the beach, Nabiki got real interesting real fast. Why? Nabiki was pretty… gorgeous, even, but objectively speaking so were the other girls. So why nothing?

He slipped into another stance, which should have gone to a rising uppercut, but feeling a bit cheeky he modified it, twisting around and pivoting his upper body to give extra strength to smashing an imaginary ball out of the air and onto the court on the other side of an imaginary net.

"Funny. I don't remember kung fu having a volleyball spike as part of any of the katas." A voice commented dryly from the side.

He started, losing his balance and nearly falling over, stumbling. "A-ah! Nabiki!" he hopped on one foot, arms windmiling as he tried to recover.

She was leaning against the wall, arms crossed, watching him, usual smirk in place. What was unusual though as she was wearing a yellow gi, which was a little short in the arms and legs. "You might want to work on the dismount as well."

"Nabiki?" He repeated, gaping, eyes wide. He blinked, but she was still there. In a training gi. He felt the color rise in his cheeks, shook his head and stammered, looking away. "I d-didn't know you trained."

Nabiki raised an eyebrow. Are you kidding me? He's seen me in swimsuits, eveningwear and I think he's even seen me in the altogether once or twice, and it's a training gi that does it?!

"Tease him."

She smirked and pushed off the wall. "You offered to train me, remember?" She purred, taking a few steps forward. "Or did you forget?"

"No, I mean… i-it's been a long day… I just… you're right, I mean…” He babbled, stiffening as she took a couple more steps closer, his voice breaking a little like it did when he was feeling particularly cornered. "Areyousureyouwanttodothisnow?"

Holy cow, I think I've stumbled onto one of poor Ranma's fetishes. No wonder he could never bring himself to seriously train with Akane. She smirked, also feeling a bit of a warm flush. Or maybe not. Never seen him like this all the times he's watched Akane train.

Maybe it's just me.

"Why not? My evening is free." She took a few more steps towards him. "Why, did you have other plans?"

"Yes! I mean no! I mean… I was just…” He stammered, furiously rubbing the back of his head, eyes darting around nervously. What the hell is wrong with me!? It's just a gi!

Yeah, but it's Nabiki in a gi.

She stepped closer to him, enough that she had to look up at him. "Well? Then teach! This is part of the deal, right?" She half-lidded her eyes. "Unless you're too distracted by something?"

"No! I mean, I'm fine! I mean it's fine! I mean there is no 'it'!" He stammered.
"Good." She said. She settled into a lazy stance, half-remembered from when her father had briefly taught them all some basic self-defense. "So… how shall we start, sensei?"

Ranma grunted and quickly pinched his nose shut. *No! I am NOT going to pull a Ryouga! It's just a gi! It doesn't matter who's in it! It's not sexy! WHY AM I BEING STUPID ABOUT THIS?!* He gritted his teeth. *She's here to learn the Art! Not for you to be stupid over! The Art comes first!* "Okay… okay…" He took a deep breath, and forced himself to look, through the lense of the Art. "Your… stance isn't bad, but your balance is off." He stepped around her, putting his hands on her shoulders and gently readjusting her center of balance. "Too much weight on the…" He glanced down, seeing the front of her gi was loose and open… not enough to see anything, but something about the potential for *accidents*… "Nnnnh… Too much weight on the back foot will make you slow."

She watched him as he moved around her, and felt something soften inside her. *He's trying. He's really trying. The poor boy is so turned on he can barely talk straight, and he's still trying to be good and keep his promise.* She sighed a bit, feeling a pang of guilt, and maybe a little something else. "Ranma."

"Mmmm?" He glanced at her, trying to look without looking.

"Would it be better if I worse something else?" She relaxed her stance and looked at him.

"No! Why!" He laughed nervously, rubbing the back of his head furiously again.

She crossed her arms. "Ranma, you're pretty obviously… distracted by me right now."

His hands immediately covered his groin and he backed up. "I'm sorry! I didn't mean… I can explain!"

Nabiki giggled and waved her hand. "Easy, easy! I didn't mean that!" She smirked. "But if that was the case… I'm kind of flattered. It's okay, Ranma. You're alone with a pretty girl and you're noticing the girl is pretty… and the pretty girl appreciates that you're trying so hard to be a gentleman about it." *And that you think I'm pretty.*

"I don't… I…" He trailed off and covered his face, beet red. "Uuuugh… Just kill me…"

She walked up to him and put her hands on either side of his head, forcing him to look at her. "Ranma? Beach Weekend Rules."

He blinked, for the moment unsure how to react, and too stunned to bolt. "Beach Weekend Rules?"

"Beach Weekend Rules." Nabiki repeated. "Whatever happens in the dojo stays in the dojo, starting with and especially this. No judgement or retribution. Okay?"

"O-okay." He said nervously, still blushing. He rubbed his palms on the sides of his slacks, not sure what to do with them, and realized his palms were sweating.

"Good." She let her grip on his head relax, but instead of releasing him she let her hands move down to his shoulders, loosely curled around the back of his neck as she leaned against him a little. "Ranma, I know you're attracted to me. I *like* that you're attracted to me. And I am attracted to you. And under different circumstances, I wouldn't be averse to acting on that attraction. But right now, if I did that, every trap waiting to spring in your life gets sprung, and every landmine gets stepped on, all at once… including the one hooked to my little sister's heart. And I can't do that."

"I know." He sighed. He tentatively let his hands rest on her hips. She unconscious smiled, and
swayed with him a little, as if to music that no one could hear. Or that was only remembered. "I think… I think that's why I block it out so much. The girls, I mean. They're gorgeous… all of 'em. But I don't even think about it. I can't. Or… or I might do somethin'... or let them do somethin'... and then everything goes wrong. Doesn't matter who, or what."

"And I messed up that reflex because I made you relax it with me." Nabiki replied. She sighed and closed her eyes, letting her forehead rest against his collarbone. "I'm sorry, Ranma."

"You couldn't have known." He replied. His breathing had slowed, and despite holding the most frustratingly arousing girl in his life, he felt oddly relaxed. Why can't it just be like this more? Why does my life gotta be full of bombs and traps?

"Yeah, I could have." She responded, looking up at him. "The Madness. It took me an afternoon to put it all together. I could have done that at any time. I could have figured all this out when it was manageable. I could have helped you fix the Shampoo thing the first time around. I could have helped you sort out the nonsense with Ryouga. I could have… I could have fixed you and Akane…"

She felt a rebellious pang at that last statement.

"I don't think you could have. I would have had to be ready to listen, right?" Ranma replied. "I kinda… don't think I would have, if things hadn't gotten as bad as they did."

She chuckled softly. "You should have gone off and found yourself a girl at the beach, like I told you, Ranma."

"I did."

*Ba-DUMP*

"Don't be stupid, Ranma." She muttered, but her fingers started to toy with his pigtail, like she had that night. "If anything had happened that night… You needed something meaningless to blow off steam… unwind that dangerously coiled spring of yours. I couldn't have done that for you."

"Why not?" He asked, scowling in frustration. "You were there for something meaningless too."

"Not with you." She said softly. "How could I go back to just seeing you as a lousy freeloding houseguest after that? How could I escape this… this nightmare of a town and find the life I wanted if I had something that… that made me want to stay? Ranma… I'm halfway in love with you and all we did was kiss, and… if-if I let… if either of us lets… this go any further… I will end up dead… or worse… and you… You would never forgive yourself because you're you."

"I'd…" Ranma felt his breath hitch in his throat. Halfways in love… that's more than Akane even admitted to. "I'd protect you…"

"No you wouldn't." she said softly. "You'd try, but you said it yourself that time you caught me when I fell off the balcony. I'm just an ordinary girl. You had to let Akane fall to save me, and you could only do that because you trusted her to save herself. Whoever you're with has to be able to do that. They have to be able to save themselves sometimes. Especially with how things are in your life. If it goes bad, your hands will be full keeping yourself safe." She dropped her head. "And I can't live as a damsel in distress. And that's all I'd be in your world, Ranma. I can't live in The Madness with you and be anything but a porcelain doll. I want to be in my own world, where I can be more than just an 'ordinary girl'."

They were silent for a while. Nabiki knew she should let go of him, push him away, say something flippant. Just like he and Akane did to each other… Did they know that's what they were doing? She
couldn't make her body obey, couldn't make her mouth form the words. Something defiantly wailed inside of her.

Mine! Please…

She licked her lips, which were suddenly dry. "When… when this is all over, Ranma… We'll talk, okay? If… if somehow things are different…"

"They won't be." He said bitterly.

She closed her eyes and hugged him more tightly for a moment, then released him, reluctantly stepping away. "It's okay if you don't think you can teach me…"

"No!" He said quickly. "No… I want to." He forced a weak smile. "Gotta hold up my end of the deal, right? Look, just try your stance again… I'll keep my mind on teaching."

She nodded, and moved back to the center of the room, resuming her stance. *Things won't change, huh Saotome?* Some small, defiant part of her thought. *That almost sounds like a challenge…*

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Later that night, Nabiki was pouring over her corkboard map of The Madness. She had added in Rin, Riko, Sayuri and Yuka's pictures, clustering them with Hiroshi and Daisuke off to the side in a kind of 'normalcy' bin. She had refined her map of the gordian knot of Ranma's relationships, sectioning off the ones that were benign and even beneficial. There were sadly, very few in that section.

She had been forced to be honest, and not put her own picture there. *I was never a benign influence on The Madness. I was* strip mining *it.* She had set herself somewhat near Akane's picture.

The relationship lines were color coded. Blue for friendly, red for adversarial, green for romantic. Thanks to Ranma's efforts, she had been able to update Kuno's lines from Green and Red to Green and Blue, though she had tacked on a sticky with the word 'unstable' on it.

Her eyes flicked back to her own picture, and then down to the two pictures representing Ranma, and the blue line running between them.

*Be honest.*

She chewed her lower lip. *Honesty is a dangerous thing, sometimes.* She was pondering a dangerous decision.

She shifted another couple of photos around, then returned to her own. *It's not just as simple as adding my name to a hat. To make this work, I'd literally have to smuggle him out of this world he's so tangled up in. I'd be committed, the potential for disaster increases EXPONENTIALLY, and I'd be in line for some serious repercussions if it falls apart. Is he really worth all of that?*

*Be honest.*

She reached up for the board, hesitated, then pulled the pins holding the blue line between her and Ranma in place. She then quickly put a green string in it's place, pinning it in place, as if she was afraid it would slip away if she didn't secure it quickly.

She released the breath she hadn't known she was holding and stepped back. It was a small, almost unnoticeable change, but… it was terrifying. And thrilling. She was about to attempt the most
dangerous theft in history: She was going to steal Ranma Saotome.

She felt a slight pang of guilt as her eyes flicked over to her sister. She paused, then walked back up to the corkboard, readjusting the pictures slightly. When she stepped back, hers was slightly closer to Ranma's pictures.

*Sorry, sis. She thought. I know you love him. But you threw him away one time too many.*

Her eyes flicked around the board. She knew she was essentially declaring war, and if any of the parties knew it before she had the whole time bomb defused, she was dead. There was a twinge of fear at that, as her eyes flicked over the trio of amazon pictures, but then her expression hardened.

*No. Ranma and I have something in common. We don't back down from challenges. Her eyes flicked over to something else she had pinned to the corkboard - A pair of punched rail tickets, the ones they had used on their beach getaway. I don't want to live in your insane little world any longer than I have to. But when I go, I'm taking Ranma with me.*

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Martial Arts wasn't the only thing that the Saotome family was proficient in.

There was the Saotome School of Putting Your Foot In Your Mouth, which was always popular, The Saotome School of Poor Decision Making, which seemed to have taken on the whole of Furinkan Ward as students.

Today, Nabiki discovered she was now a proud student of the Saotome School of Waking Up Late.

"This is your fault, Saotome!" Nabiki growled. She hadn't had her coffee this morning, having to settle for grabbing a thermos Kasumi had thoughtfully prepared for her to take to school with her. Being late for school was not something Nabiki had ever had a problem with before. One had to get up early to make sure the day's business was well in hand before class started.

"How is this my fault!?!" Ranma protested, running along the fence alongside her.

"I don't know, but it is!" Nabiki snarled.

The truth was, she knew exactly why she had missed her alarm. She had been up all night, pouring over her corkboard, rearranging photos and lines, and pondering angles of attack, trying to find a way to rebalance all of the forces to allow her to extract the two photographs in the middle without it all collapsing in on itself.

Ranma made a leap from the fence, up onto an arched doorway. Just below, an old woman was spreading water over the sidewalk to keep the dust down, narrowly missing Nabiki.

"Ha!" Ranma crowed, leaping down from the top of the arch…

… Right into the bucket of water.

Nabiki winced. She walked over and crouched next to the now sopping-wet and very female Ranma. "Maybe we should find another route to school at some point."

"That would be quitting…” Ranma muttered, lifting the bucket that was sitting on her head, pouting. Nabiki had to admit it made her look unreasonably adorable.

"Pick your battles, Saotome." Nabiki smirked and offered her a hand up. They apologized to the old
woman (Who seemed to be completely unconcerned about Ranma's sudden transformation, and more amused by the whole proceeding) and resumed their run to the Furinkan gates, this time with even less chance of making it before the bell.

"We're not going to make it." Nabiki despaired. So far this year her attendance record had been perfect. A blemish **now**…

"No, don't give up!" Ranma called back over her shoulder. "We can make it! Just as long as…"

"**RANMA SAOTOME, PREPARE TO DIE!**"

Ranma flipped out of the way as a yellow and black blur smashed the wall she was running on, sending bricks and mortar flying.

Nabiki came to a stop and scowled. "Yeah, we *could* have made it… if somehow this had magically stopped being Furinkan overnight." She folded her arms and leaned against the wall and scowled, preparing herself to wait out the epic Battle of the Bread Part 347.

Ranma landed a few meters away, squinting into the cloud of debris. "Oh come **on**…"

A familiar black-haired figure stepped out of the rubble, Yellow and black bandana and general aura of rage and malice making it pretty obvious who had decided to collect a pound of flesh from Ranma Saotome today. "**Ranmaaaa!**"

"Ryouga, why…" Ranma started as she heard the final bell ring from the Furinkan High Clock Tower. "**Damnit!** Ryouga, what did you do that for!? Now we'll get detention for sure!"

"How *dare* you just discard Akane like that, you heartless monster!" Ryouga pointed an accusing figure at the redhead, his aura already dangerously visible.

"*She* dumped *me*!" Ranma shot back.

"**That's because you broke her heart!**" Ryouga snarled. "And I'm going to make you pay for it!"

Ranma ground her teeth. "**Look**, Pig boy, this is *really* not a fight you want to start with me right now."

Ryouga's lips curled in a nasty grin, and he settled into a ready stance. "Oh, I've been wanting to start this fight with you-*Ow!*" He yelped, clapping a hand over his ear as something hit it. He turned to see a very angry Nabiki Tendo scowling at him, holding an armful of masonry chunks.

Normally Nabiki would *never* be so insane as to involve herself directly in the goings on of The Madness. But she was sleep deprived, and more importantly *caffeine*-deprived. Her rational, sensible side simply wasn't awake yet. "**Look, if you want to pick a fight with Ranma, fine.**" She snarled, "**Do it after class!**" She threw another chunk at him.

"*Ow!*" Ryouga deflected the piece of rubble, then caught the next. "**Hey!**" He started stalking towards her, intent on taking away her pile of rocks so he could commit murder in peace.

Ranma leapt over his head, flipping in mid air, and landing nimbly in front of Nabiki. "Don't you *dare* touch her!" She snarled, causing Ryouga to pause a moment in surprise.

His face quickly settled back into a nasty grin. "Akane's tears aren't even dry, and you're already making moves on her sister? Well…" He cracked his knuckles. "... That just gives me even *more* reason to pound you!"
"HALT VILE BRIGAND!"

All three turned to the Furinkan gates, which were now open. Next to them stood The Rising Star of
of the Kendo World, the Blue Thunder of Furinkan, the Bane of Watermelons,

Tatewaki Kuno. He was so furious he was visibly shaking as he glared at Ryouga with a purity of
hatred that even Ranma had seldom earned. "Is it not enough that you have soiled the purity of
Akane Tendo, and have bound the Pigtailed goddess to thyself through cruel contract? Now you
seek to force yourself upon both her and Nabiki Tendo to slake your vile lusts!? On school
grounds!? Is there no sanctity you would not defile!?!"

"Wait…" Ryouga's eyes went wide. He glanced at Ranma and Nabiki, who were huddled together
by the wall, as if… as if… He looked back at Kuno, realizing how it could look. "Look, there's been
some kind of misunderstanding…!"

"Nay." Kuno straightened to his full height, raising his bokken above his head, his eyes closed.
There was his signature crash of thunder behind him. He opened his eyes and glared at the Lost Boy
coldly. "Do not dissemble with me, blackguard. Your fate was sealed the moment you dare set foot
on these hallowed grounds! THUNDER BREAK!"

A second bolt of lightning struck the wooden sword. Kuno levelled the weapon at Ryouga, and the
captured lightning leapt from the blade, arcing and striking Ryouga directly in the chest. The force of
the bolt flung him backwards violently, slamming him into a tree nearly twenty yards away, the trunk
cracking in half from the impact.

Ryouga wheezed, clutching his chest. His shirt had a large circular burn mark on it, and the tree itself
seemed scorched, as if the bolt had gone right through him.

"Holy crap…" Ranma breathed, staring at Ryouga, then looking back at Kuno, who was advancing
on the Lost Boy, his sword held above his head.

"When did he pick up that trick?" Nabiki pulled out her camera and snapped a quick couple of picks
instinctively.

"I don't know, but Ryouga doesn't look good." Ranma watched, suddenly concerned. Normally
Ryouga would shrug off the worst of attacks as if they were nothing, but he seemed to be struggling
to stand, still holding his chest.

"He's using lightning, and he just hit Ryouga in the heart. He's probably lucky to be alive right
now." Nabiki said. She kept behind Ranma, feeling a bit nervous as she realized there was some
serious potential for consequences from Kuno's new attack.

"Now know the full power of the Blue Thunder of Furinkan High!" Kuno raised his sword higher.
"THUNDER BREAK!"

Ryouga dodged to the side. He wasn't as fast as Ranma, but his speed was still respectable, and
should have been more than enough to dodge the bolt. But as he moved, Ranma could see the bolt
curve, slamming into his side and flinging him away like a rag doll.

"Woah." Nabiki blinked, wondering if that picture would even develop from the intense flash. "It's
tracking him."

Ranma narrowed his eyes. "No it's not…" Kuno wasn't following him with his eyes. Ryouga moved
too fast, he lost track of him for a second. But the lightning didn't. Why? She glanced over, catching
sight of Ryouga's bamboo umbrella. "Hey, Nabiki… does lead conduct electricity?"
"I think so. They use it to solder electronics, right?" Nabiki nodded. "Why?"

"Because Ryoga sews lead weights into his clothes." She started after the kendoist, knowing she needed to stop the fight now. That idiot Ryoga is a walking lightning rod! Kuno will hit him every time, no matter how he dodges! "Kuno senpai, wait!"

Ryoga was leaning against the wall on the far side of the street. He was already coughing up blood, twitching from the effects of electrocution. Kuno was already raising his sword for another blast, a confident smirk on his face. Electricity crackled around him.

She grabbed his arm. "Wait, Kuno senpai, please!"

He turned to her, and the crackle of electricity faded, though the stink of ozone lingered. The maniacal rage left his eyes almost immediately. "Pig-tailed girl! You've come to cheer me on in my victory against your oppressor?"

If by that ya mean tryin' ta keep ya from committing murder… "Kuno-senpai, please…" She swallowed hard. I can't believe I am about to beg for Ryoga's life… with Kuno! "... H-have mercy on him. I… uh… wouldn't… want you to… stain your hands with the blood of the unworthy?" She smiled weakly.

"Ah, my love…" He took her hands in his. "How I would love nothing more than to sweep you into my arms, and away to celebrate this new chapter in our lives. But… for that to begin, thy ungodly betrothal to this swine of a man must needs be put to rest. And so therefore so must he!" He released her hands, stepped back, then whirled, levelling his bokken once more. "DEFEND YOURSELF, BRIGAND! I WOULD HAVE A MAN DIE ON THE END OF MY BLADE THIS DAY, NOT A... Mewling piglet?"

Unfortunately for Kuno, the intended target of his ire was nowhere to be seen. In his place, weakly struggling in a small puddle of water was a little black piglet, wearing a yellow and black bandanna.

"P-chan!" Ranma darted forward and scooped the little animal up. The little piglet was shuddering slightly, and Ranma worried the damage Ryoga had suffered was more than the little piglet could bear. But he was breathing and making noise. Thank kami for cold water magnetism!

"You know this animal?" Kuno peered over her shoulder.

"It's P-chan, Akane's pet pig." Ranma said. The best cover stories were true ones, after all. "He's always wandering off and getting lost."

"He appears injured. Did that scoundrel Hibiki claim another victim?" He prodded Ryoga's pack with his bokken. "It appears it may have escaped along with the contents of whatever has made everything so wet."

She glanced over at his pack. Probably had a metal canteen fulla water in there, exploded when the lightning bolt hit. He's lucky it didn't end up hot. "Maybe I should take the pack with me. Uhh… in case… there's other stuff of Akane's in there?"

Kuno considered, and Ranma immediately knew she had made the wrong play. "No… your willingness to assist is most appreciated, Pig-tailed girl, but there is no telling what manner of perversion this filth has secreted away in here. I will call the Student Patrol to come and confiscate this for later thorough examination. Any items of Akane Tendo's we come across I shall return to her in person."

Well, so much for grabbing a kettle and getting Ryouga on his way. She cradled the piglet with
unusual care, not liking how labored his breathing was. I really hope he'll be okay as a pig until I can find some clothes for him. She glanced over at Nabiki. I don't even know if Nabiki knows about the curse or not. She hasn't blackmailed Ryoga into next century so... I'm guessing not. She sighed and stood. "If... you think that's best, Senpai." She internally seethed at having to be deferential to the nutjob, but she couldn't afford to blow things now that she finally had a kind of peace with Kuno. At least not until she figured out that lightning bolt move of his.

"Ah, before you go!" He reached into his uwagi and pulled out an envelope.

*Oh kami, please no poetry...* Ranma winced. "Senpai, I-I don't think..."

"Here!" He proudly presented the envelope to her. "I realize your brother is not here to benefit from this, but given her admirable defense of you, I would not object to Nabiki Tendo benefitting from my generosity this day."

She opened the envelope, and pulled out two official-looking cards, rather than the flowery poetry she had expected. Both stamped with the principal's hanko.

"Hall passes!" She held them up, momentarily forgetting her previous trepidation. Nabiki came over and took one from her, whistling.

*Unlimited* hall passes. You could use these to walk in and out of class however you pleased." Nabiki plucked one from Ranma's grasp. "Do you have *any* idea how much these would go for on the Furinkan High Black Market?"

"Not enough for us to not us 'em ourselves." Ranma hissed at her, reminding her of their current predicament. She could already see the School Truancy Officer glaring at them from the gate.

"Come, let me escort you to the gate and explain the matter to our good instructor, lest you be unjustly accused of delinquency." Kuno smiled and put a hand on each of their shoulders in a way that was far more familiar than Ranma was comfortable with. From how Nabiki squirmed next to her, she imagined the middle Tendo wasn't enjoying it much either.

"Caught a couple, did you Tatewaki?" The Truancy Officer smiled, shouldering the shinai he carried. He smirked when he recognized Ranma. "Been trying to catch *this* one for a while!"

"Nay, good sir!" Kuno glared at the man, enough to cause him to shrink back a bit. "These fair maidens are victims of the true delinquent, Ryoga Hibiki. I interrupted him attempting to force himself on the both of them just moments ago. He escaped my wrath, but..." He raised his bokken, displaying the damp yellow shirt he had hanging from it. "... It appears he is now adding public nudity to his list of crimes."

The Truancy Officer adjusted his glasses and leaned forward. "Not one of our students? And assaulting two female students, right here on school grounds no less? I must admit, that is serious." He glanced at Ranma and Nabiki. "My apologies... uh... ladies." He looked a little uncertainly at Ranma, who did nothing to correct him this time.

"I would have you escort these two precious flowers to their classes. I would do so myself, but I needs must investigate further, lest that swine escapes righteous justice a moment longer than absolutely necessary."

The Truancy Officer cleared his throat. "I... uh... I see. While the sentiment is appreciated, Tatewaki, I can assure you that it isn't necessary for you to investigate..."

"Did I stutter, cur?"
This time the man practically leapt backwards, whimpering. "N-no! Of course any assistance you see fit to provide … I was merely trying to spare you any interruption of your own classes…” He withered under Kuno's continued glare. "Y-yes! I'll see to it right away, sir!"

"See that you do." Kuno said sternly. He released the two girls, almost reluctantly, then turned back to his task, his mind switching to the matter at hand. *Forgive me, o divine pigtailed goddess, but before we can be together, I must rid the world of your foul suitor. I swear to you I shall gut him like the pig that he is!*

P-chan sneezed weakly in Ranma's arms. She hoped that was a sign of improvement.

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Ms. Hinako had been skeptical about the passes at first. Which is to say she had her coin out and would have drained Ranma dry had she not held out the thing like a ward again. Even then, she had been skeptical, and confiscated the pass, though she merely dropped it in the Drawer of No Return, where all of the confiscated cell phones, game systems, music players, manga, toys, and other confiscated items went, so at least she was reasonably sure Ms. Hinako was not going to investigate further.

"You know you're not supposed to bring pets to school, Mr. Saotome." She said, though without rancor as she peered at the piglet in Ranma's arms. *Cute* things tended to get a lot more leniency from the diminutive teacher.

"He's Akane's pet. I found him outside the school. He must have wandered off or something and gotten lost." Ranma said, which was truthful enough. "I'm just looking out for him until I can take him back home to Akane."

"Is he sick?" She peered at him, Normally she would be making a huge fuss over the adorable animal, but from the way he lay bonelessly in Ranma's arms, breathing shallowly, even her attenuated sense of tact alerted her that some discretion was advised.

"I think he got in the middle of the fight between Kuno-senpai and Ryouga." Ranma said *Again, truthful enough. Ryouga was definitely in the middle of that fight. I'm hoping he'll be okay. If… if it's not too much trouble, if he wakes up I'd like to be excused to the washroom to get him some water?"

"Oh! Of course!" She nodded. "Please, let me know if he does! Poor widdle guy." She bit her finger. Absently she reached into the Drawer of No Return and fished back out the hall pass, absently handing it back to Ranma. "If Akane doesn't want him for some reason…"

Ranma grinned, a bit of a wicked edge to her smile. "Oh, trust me teach, you will be the *first* person I call." She walked back to her desk and settled in.

After all the excitement of the morning, it was difficult to focus on the lesson. Ranma propped her chin on her fist and made an attempt to look attentive, but she was focused almost entirely on pondering Kuno's new trick. *The thunderbolts aren't a new thing. Never really figured out how he did that during his crazy speeches, but then again, I never figured he'd learn how to weaponize it either!*

Unconsciously she started to gently scratch P-chan behind the ears as the piglet stirred, slowly recovering from his ordeal.

*Wha… what hit me? My chest hurts… Musta got knocked out…* Ryouga's mind reluctantly returned
to awareness of his surroundings. *I'm on a desk? Must have...* His thoughts trailed off a minute, finding it hard to string them together. There was something rubbing the back of his head, and it was making him feel sleepy and relaxed. *... Must have gotten splashed. Is that Akane petting me? Feels nice... I think I'm safe for now...* Still hurts... *maybe I'll just sleep...* The little black piglet started making soft grunting noises, the boneless slump becoming more of a relaxed sprawl.

Ranma didn't notice Ryouga reviving. Focused on pondering Kuno's new move, mentally probing weaknesses and counters, her fingers ran on autopilot, falling into the natural human instinct to pet cute things when they responded favorably. She ran her nails along the piglet's back, automatically responding to his contented grunts, allowing them to guide her fingers to the best spots.

The little piglet was somewhere between awake and asleep, mind lulled into a pleasant trance by the attention. Ryouga simply wasn't home anymore. When the fingers paused a moment, he grunted and nudged them with his head, wanting to stay in that contented floaty happy place longer.

*That* Ranma noticed. Her eyes went wide as she realized what she had been doing. And how Ryouga had been reacting. *Oh my god... Ryouga, you pork-flavored SLUT! It's not just Akane, is it!?* She felt bile rise in her throat, followed by a surge of anger. The piglet nudged her hand a bit, then grunted, sneezed, and opened his eyes slowly.

"Ms. Hinako?" She thrust her hand up in the air. "I think he's awake now, may I be excused?"

"Oh? *Oh!* Yes, Mr Saotome, you may!" Hinako clapped her hands in delight, seeing the little piglet moving around groggily. "Bring him back here as soon as you've gotten him some water please? I... I mean, I'm sure the class would find it instructional to... uhh... 'observe' him?"

"But Ms. Hinako, this is english class..." One of the students protested.

Hinako held up a coin and drained him in half a second, leaving his withered form to slump silently to his desk. As he was no martial artist it wasn't enough to cause her form to change.

*"Please Mr Saotome?"

"Oh, sure, no problem teach." Ranma nodded, scooping up the groggy piglet in her arms and making a dash for the bathroom.

She managed to get there before Ryouga was fully aware of his surroundings. She had to resist a mighty urge to spike him into the bathroom tile. "God, you are disgusting! She growled, dropping him into the sink and going to the other one, turning on the hot water to wash her hands, which felt soiled in the worst way. The water triggered the change, returning him to his natural form.

The piglet leapt for the sink but Ranma blocked him, sending him bouncing across the floor. "Not so fast, pork-butt. I ain't got a stitch of clothing for you to wear. So unless you wanna run around the school stark naked with a lightning-wielding psycho after you, you just stay put, got it?"

P-chan growled, bristling.

"No, I am *not* giving you my clothes. I ain't got anything to spare, neither. So just pipe down and put up with it until I can smuggle you back to the dojo, okay?" Ranma shook his hands dry before reaching for the air dryer. "Geez, no gratitude. You'd think you wouldn't mind bein' a pig a bit longer, what with you not bein' too particular about who's scratchin' your ears and all."

The piglet squealed, outraged.

"Shut up, shut up, I ain't tellin' Akane." Ranma waved off his outrage. "Look, Akane is coming home tonight. Just... be a good piglet, don't bite me or run off, and I promise I'll take ya to see her,
Normally Ranma wouldn't be so accommodating of his rival, especially where Akane was concerned. However, part of his subconscious was quite vocally reminding him that he was the one who had sicced Kuno on him, and guilt had merged with relief that his sometimes friend had recovered to the point where hand-delivering him to his ex fiancee was actually palatable. As annoying and frustrating and bafflingly stupid Ryoga was, on some level he was still that sullen, depressed kid Ranma had lead home from school every day, who for brief moments seemed like he just needed a friend.

The piglet squeaked, sitting down immediately, the picture of obedience.

Ranma chuckled softly. "Good. Now… you are feelin' okay, right?" He crouched down, reaching out to gently prod the piglet, checking the piglet's chest for damage. He was rewarded with a pained squeal and a snap. "Easy, easy… okay, so the ribs are still tender." He held up his hands. "D'ya want to stop at Tofu's on the way back?"

The piglet growled, then cautiously shook his head and sat back down. Why is he being… nice!? Ryoga thought, frustrated. 'Nice Ranma' always meant he wanted something, but usually that became obvious before now.

Ranma for his part, was considering, running through the options in Anything Goes Social Arts. Ryoga'll never ask for help unless he's totally down. But he'll accept it it seems. Doubt he's buying this nice routine though. I wouldn't. He snorted mentally. Actually I DON'T. Why am I bein' nice to pork butt? He scowled. He'll just go cuddlin' up to Akane and… His expression darkened further… And they'll TOTALLY deserve each other.

He plucked the piglet up by the bandana, then reconsidered and plopped the pig into the crook of his arm, earning a confused grunt from the piglet. "Yeah, this ain't exactly my first choice neither, Ryoga." Hey, at least I got to change back before lunch.

He stepped out of the bathroom, only to immediately trip over something. Whatever the object was upended, and he was soaked with grimy, soapy water.

"Oh! I'm sorry miss!" The janitor ran over. "I didn't know anyone was in there!" He righted his water bucket after making sure the redhead was alright. "But… what were you doing in the boy's bathroom?"

Ranma ground her teeth. "What indeed?" She grumbled, sitting cross-legged on the floor as she wring out her pigtail, staring daggers at the bone-dry little piglet on the floor a few feet away who was doing a tremendous impression of snickering.

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"Ranma Saotome to the Principal's office…" The generic feminine voice of the school secretary came over the intercom. "Ranma Saotome, please come to the Principal's office."

"Awww what now!?" Ranma moaned, slumping in her desk. The rest of her classmates, lead by Ms. Hinako, were crowded around her desk making a big fuss over P-chan. This time the porky little attention whore at least had the decency to be shy and look suitably embarrassed by the attention. Ranma unconsciously flicked her fingers as if to get something unpleasant off them. I just wanted to make it until lunch at least without everything going horribly. I'm never gonna get the taste of floor dirt and Mr. Clean outta my mouth. She spat out a bit of errant grit as she stood up.
"Ms. Hinako, you don't mind watching P-chan here for me, do you?" She asked, not really wanted to be saddled with the piglet for whatever nonsense the Principal had cooked up.

"Oooh, aren't you the cutest widdly piggy-wiggy?" Hinako giggled as she play danced the poor mortified piglet around like a doll on the desk. "Yes you are! Yes you are!"

"I'll… take that for a yes." Ranma smirked, and made her way out to the Principal's Office.

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Furinkan's Principal was a perfect example of Money over Madness.

Some years ago, as the story went, The head of the Board of Education, Tatsuyuki Kuno, had a nervous breakdown. Dark rumors abounded regarding his home life. He was put on indefinite leave, and sent to Hawaii to recuperate. His wife filed for divorce in absentia, though she left him custody of their two children.

After three years of unrestricted exposure to ultraviolet radiation and fancy drinks with umbrellas in them, his condition hadn't seemed to have improved significantly. In fact, his condition had worsened, his previous obsessive-compulsive behavior with regards to proper student dress code, (particularly hair style) having become entangled with an intoxication with Hawaiian culture that bordered on the psychotic. So, on the hook for his continuing disability benefits, the remaining members of the School Board did the only rational, moral thing they could think of.

They had him declared cured, flagged him as employable (and therefore no longer eligible for the benefits) and made him the principal of Furinkan High. They also dedicated a sizeable portion of the budget to remodel the school however Kuno wished, to ensure that he remained as Principal in their safe little containment zone.

In short, Principal Kuno was a dangerous nutjob with an obsession for shaving his students' hair, redecorating everything in a Hawaiian theme, and nursing a serious grudge against one Ranma Saotome.

Because of course he was.

Ranma knew all of this as she walked up the steps into Principal Kuno's 'Hawaii Zone'. The entire upper floor of the school had been converted into his little Hawaiian playground, like some kind of kitschy theme park ride, complete with fake palm trees, walls painted with beach scenery, tinny canned sound effects, and cheesy ukelele music.

Ranma unconsciously checked to make sure her pigtail was in place and attached. She wasn't ready to part with her pigtail, should the Principal make one of his regular attempts to snip it off.

She made it to the large oak desk at the far end of the Hawaiian diorama, where Principal Kuno sat, resplendent in his Hawaiian shirt, Shaded glasses, and palm-tree styled topknot. He had his hands clasped on the desk, and that massive, shit-eating grin that made Ranma want to punch something (Specifically, him.) "Eeeeyyyyy Keiki! Or mebbe it be 'Wahine' today, eh?" His smile twisted into more of a smirk.

Ranma glared as she stepped past a palm tree. Before she could deliver a retort, she realized someone else was there and stopped short.

Kuno gestured to the figure on his left. "You be knowin' Ms. Hikmura Tanaka, ye?" The tall, blond haired girl smiled, that usual self-confident smirk that made Ranma uncomfortable.
There was something about the way the girl looked at her… predatory in a way, but unlike how Shampoo or even Ukyou sometimes looked at her, this wasn't some sort of interest in her as a person. This was detached, cold… like Ranma's whole existence was just a move on a chessboard. She shivered involuntarily. "We've met."

"Oh, we've more than met, Ranma." Himura adopted a mock hurt tone. "You've quite swept me off my feet with your prowess on the volleyball court." She fluttered her eyes at the girl.

"Yeah, don't even joke about that." Ranma growled, earning a cruel laugh from the girl.

"Ah, so many romantic problems." She said, crossing her arms. "It must be terribly distracting. I fail to understand why you tolerate it. But you needed worry, I am not some silly schoolgirl who has been smitten by your masculine wiles." She stalked forward a bit, walking up uncomfortably close to Ranma, forcing the much shorter redhead to look up at her. "I am far, far more interested in the woman I see before me right now."

*Now* Ranma saw something more like lust in her eyes. But it wasn't anything carnal. More like… *for meat*. "I'm not into that lady, sorry." Ranma said in a low voice.

"Oh of course you are." She scoffed. "Deep down you're male, after all. But that wasn't what I meant either. My interest in you lies purely in your remarkable potential. Untapped and raw though it might be."

"Look, I already told you, I'm not interested in playing volleyball for you." Ranma growled.

"And what sort of Captain would I be if I took 'no' for an answer so easily?" She leaned in and whispered in her ear. "Such a shame you had the poor graces to be born the wrong gender." She straightened and whirled away, sauntering back to the Principal's desk. "Thankfully you're halfway to correcting that grievous flaw. And the good Principal, at my urging, has agreed to help you to take the next step."

Images of hair shears and certain vulnerable parts of the male anatomy flickered through Ranma's mind, causing her to turn a little green. "What do you mean?" She asked, her voice cracking a little as a note of panic entered it.

Kuno's hand blurred, flicking something through the air at Ranma's head. Ranma snatched it out of the air defensively, crouching and ready to leap over the desk to pummel the crazed Kuno family patriarch. Then she glanced down at what she had caught.

"A… student ID?" She held it up. In fact, it was *her* student ID. With her name, picture, and basic information.

*Her* picture.

She blanched. The picture on the ID was of a smiling redhaired *female* Ranma Saotome. "What did you do?!" She demanded, nearly crushing the laminated card in her hand.

"Careful, wahine, is five dollah charge to replace those." The Principal commented.

"What did you do!?"

"It's quite simple, my dear." Himura said. "He corrected your gender on your registration."

Ranma blinked, then charged forward, slamming her hands on the desk, her eyes bright with fury.

"YOU REGISTERED ME AS A GIRL!?"
"Of course he did." Himura replied. A cold tone of amusement entered her voice as the redhead glared at her. "Isn't that what your little stunt yesterday was about, Saotome? Attempting to gain acceptance from the female populace for your chosen gender? I was impressed and decided to support your efforts towards transition." She put her hands on her hips. "Or… was that merely the act of a male who was committing some form of fraud? Sneaking into the girl's change room while the vulnerable female students of Furinkan were present, misleading our new Gym Instructor about your gender… I understand you were even wearing the female gym uniform, is that not right? Now, while that is perfectly acceptable for a young female student of this school, for a male to do it… well, that would be…"

"Grounds fer da expulsions, ya?" Kuno finished for her, smirking.

Ranma's eyes were shaded by her bangs, her fist clenched. She was trembling with rage. "How… how dare you…"

"Tch, oh please." Himura sighed. "Don't bother with your threats or your impotent rage, Saotome." She leaned in closer to the girl. "Or do you intend to go back on your word and harm someone who is not a martial artist?" She smirked as the redhead raised her eyes to glare into hers. "Good…" She murmured, almost purring. "… That's the 'you' I want." She spun away, playing with a lock of her hair. "Now, before you try and protest, let me assure you we have ample photographic evidence to ensure that if you refuse, you will be shunned by every educational facility in Tokyo." She held up a number of photographs, some Ranma recognized. "Thanks to your little friend, Nabiki Tendo."

"Nabiki…" Ranma stared, feeling a cold knot in her stomach. She promised!

"Oh, I'm sure she wasn't aware that's what these were to be used for. She is so… singularly focused on feeding the baser urges of the student populace that I daresay she never bothered to check. But then… considering her breeding it's not surprising her business acumen doesn't extend further than the next sale." She leaned in, her finger lifting Ranma's chin. Ranma suddenly understood Ryouga's tendency to bite while in piglet form. "Oh, but I know you far too well to think you would just sit idly by and allow this to happen, hmmm? All wrapped up in your ideals of 'manliness' and such." She leaned back. "Therefore, I am willing to be sporting about this, and offer you an opportunity to recover your scholastic manhood… should you want it…" She smirked and looked the girl up and down. "Though given your recent propensity to attend school as a woman, I am beginning to wonder if your are in fact all that attached to it?"

"What. Are. Your. Terms." Ranma said tightly. Her aura was visible now, licks of red and gold curling around her, rather than her usual cool blue.

"Mmm, direct. Perhaps I could make a worthwhile woman of you yet." She chuckled dryly. "It's quite simple. The first half of the volleyball season is quite… dull. Competition for the regionals is weak and… uninspired. So, we will evenly split the games between myself and my team of elites, and yourself, and a team of… whatever is left over." She carelessly swirled her fingers in the air. "We will each play an equal number of games. If your team wins the most games, we will change your registration back immediately… if you truly wish, that is. However, if I win, your registration will remain as it is for the duration of the school year. You will join my team of elites, and if you are a good girl and play hard, and if we win the championship… then I may be able to convince Principal Kuno here to be merciful and change your registration back in time for the next school year." She smiled and held out her hands. "If we tie… which is unlikely… We will have a dead heat match between the two teams. Either way, you get what you want back… eventually. So long as you play our little game."

"And if I refuse?" Ranma asked tightly.
Himura smirked. "You wish to teach at the Tendo Dojo, yes? I imagine applying for a teaching license will be difficult with a sex offender charge on your record." She held up the photographs. "Even if you aren't convicted, there is enough here to make it very difficult for you to carry on your vaunted little school, hmm?"

Ranma didn't seem to move, but suddenly the photographs were gone, clutched in Ranma's hand, not Himura's.

Himura seemed completely unconcerned. "Help yourself. I have the negatives somewhere safe." She said airily. "Feel free to show those to Nabiki. Maybe ask her how much your manhood earned her?"

The pictures were mostly of her in male form. Usually taken just after being splashed with hot water. There was that one time in the girl's changeroom during the mess with the urns, another time where she had been splashed during the match with Kodachi, various other ones of her in male form in female clothing. Each one a humiliating memory. There was even a few from yesterday, showing her in female form changing with the other girls. Goddamnit…

"Well… what say you?" Himura replied. "If you decide you just want to play for my team, I would be happy to accept you at any point in the season; I only really need you for the finals. But I'm afraid this little challenge of mine is a time limited offer."

"One condition." Ranma said softly. "My team is the same as yesterday."

Himura blinked, then laughed. "You're hardly in any position to…"

"Deal." Principal Kuno said quickly.

Himura glared at him. He grinned back at her.

"It be no fun if dere be no challenge, ye?" The Principal clasped his hands in front of him. "I be overjoyed we be comin' to de accord. Da wahine will be havin' de big fun havin' Ranma Saotome on dere team… so to speak."

"Don't enjoy this too much." Ranma said darkly. "When I win this, I'm going to spike a volleyball right through that stupid coconut you call a head."

The Principal just chuckled. He reached under his desk, and pulled out a clear plastic wrapped package, tossing it to Ranma. "We be seein' 'bout that. Da wahine will be havin' stricter rules, ye? Can't have de school idols setting de bad example. So you be needin' t'wear th' proper school uniform from now on, or ye be off da team… and den you an de wahine here can't have de big showdown, ye?"

Ranma stared numbly at the package. It was a Furinkan High uniform. A girl's uniform.

"That wasn't the agreement." Himura said tightly.

"Dems da school regulations." The Principal replied back smugly. "Nuttin' I c'n do, wahine."

Ranma trembled, gripping the package. "You're going to pay for this." She said softly. "Both of you." She turned, and slowly walked back the way she came, pausing only to put her fist casually through a plaster palm tree as she walked past it.

Himura chuckled. "Oh, my dear sweet innocent little girl. You are going to be such fun!"
So, Himura got SCARY in my head.

I'm getting nicely ahead in my writing now, so I'm doing my best to do two or three edit passes before posting. Sorry for the gobbledygook that got appended to the last one., I will be more careful from now on.

I'm so glad so many people are enjoying this story. It's been a lot of years since I was in a place where I COULD write, which is probably why I came back to Ranma ½.

This isn't the only story idea I have, but I think I'll focus on finishing this before starting up a new one. How do you guys feel about a Sci Fi fusion fic, centered around a couple of OCs?
Nabiki was waiting at her usual place under the tree when she spotted Ranma coming. *Still stuck a girl, I see.* She held up a kettle she had prepared for just this eventuality and waved.

Ranma's eyes were hooded as she walked up to Nabiki, a plastic wrapped bundle in her arms. Immediately Nabiki could sense something wrong.

"Ranma?"

Ranma raised her eyes. Anger and betrayal burning in them. She held up a handful of photographs, then tossed them to the ground at Nabiki's feet. "I hope you got a good price for these, Tendo."

"What…? Ranma..." Nabiki kept her eyes on the girl, but knelt to pick up a few of the photographs, her eyes flicking down to them. Then she paused and gave them a better look. *What the hell?*

She recognized them, of course. They were some old shots from the past year, but… "Ranma, I *didn't* sell these."

Ranma snorted. "Oh come off it, Tendo. You can't seriously expect me to believe…"

Nabiki held up one of the pictures. "Ranma, these are off the *discard pile*. Look at them! You think I'm going to sell shots of your male side in girl's clothing to Kuno? No one would buy these!"

"Someone did." Ranma said coldly. She knelt in front of Nabiki and plucked a photo from the ground, holding it up for her to see. "And I bet Kuno would pay a pretty penny for this one, huh?"

Nabiki gaped. The shot wasn't too unusual by itself. She had taken plenty of pics of Ranma undressing. But this was in the girl's locker room, and in the background of the shot…

Rin Ito.

There was only one time both Ranma and Rin had been in the change room together, and therefore this picture shouldn't exist.

"You promised." Ranma said flatly. "You stood there and *lied* to me." Ranma's eyes were starting to glisten with barely restrained tears. "I *believed* you…"

Nabiki looked into the redhead's eyes, horrified. She felt a cold pit in her stomach. Her eyes started flicking back and forth as she raced through her memories of the event. *I told Hana to just take sports shots!* "Ranma, you have to believe me… I didn't…"

"No." Ranma said softly. "I'm done believing you, Tendo. Do you know why? Here's another photo for you. Let's see if you get this one." This time she held up a laminated student card.

Nabiki almost missed it, almost asked why Ranma was holding up her student card, had even opened her mouth to ask… but snapped her mouth shut, eyes going as large as saucers as it clicked that the photo was of female Ranma.

"Yeah. Nice one, huh? Probably one of yours too." Ranma said softly. "Principal Kuno changed my registration. I'm a girl on the school rolls now, and if I don't go along with it and play volleyball for Himura? They're going to use these photos to report me as a lecher and a pervert and get me expelled and charged. So… I hope you got a good price, seeing as you gave them the negatives and
everything." She put the card away and stood. "Thanks for the hot water, by the way. Looks like I won't be needing it." She turned and walked away, the package tucked under her arm.

Nabiki gaped, feeling that cold feeling spread, her extremities tingling as somehow everything had gone horribly wrong, and it was her fault, and she didn't even know how.

She let out a shaking breath, blinking sightlessly, her mind whirling as she tried to find the thread, the place where she had gone wrong, where she had made the mistake that had caused everything to unravel… until one thought slipped through the maelstrom.

*I don't sell my negatives!*

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Hana was leafing through a stack of receipts, whistling to herself happily. She heard the arm slam into the locker above her head, chirping "Hi boss!" without pausing her counting.

"Hello, Hana." Nabiki growled. "Funny thing I'm hearing today…" She fished out the pic from the locker room, but Hana wasn't bothering to look up at it.

"Something about lewds in the locker room, stuff from the discard pile being sold off… oh, and negatives being sold. Big no-no." Hana rattled off, folding the receipts and tucking them away, then pulling out a clipboard and ticking off a few items on a list. "Yeah, that was me." She patted Nabiki's shoulder. "Nice try on the physical intimidation, by the way."

Nabiki was speechless for a few heartbeats. That cold pit in her stomach was twisting itself into a grand old knot of frozen awful, and she knew she had missed more goings on than just sports drama. "How long have you been Himura's pet?"

Hana chuckled, and finally rewarded Nabiki with a scornful look. "Oh please, Nabiki. Himura is a client. She pays the big bucks for the special requests, and I get it done. Just like we've always done."

"Not 'we' Hana." Nabiki growled. "You know what my instructions were. What my *rules* are!"

"Yeah." Hana smiled wickedly. "'Irrelevant.' Do you want to know why, Nabiki?" She brought herself face to face with the taller girl. "Because you're *gone* next year."

"What?" Nabiki hissed.

"I was perfectly happy to wait my turn, you know." Hana continued. "But you got lazy. Got sloppy. You haven't been on your game since your little sister came back from China. You've been coasting, and if I had waited until you were ready to step down, you'd have pissed away *everything* we've built up. Worse, you started to get all doe-eyed around our number one moneymaker. You're just another one of his flock now, and you're too arrogant to realize it. You're the one who broke your own rules, Nabiki. The old you would have been the first one to say you needed to go."

Nabiki bristled, but part of her wondered if the girl was right.

"Oh, did I make things awkward for you and your latest beach conquest?" Hana asked, smirking at Nabiki's intake of breath. "Oh, I know about your fun there, too, Nabiki. I imagine Ranma's fiancées would be interested in getting a copy of *those* prints, wouldn't they? Maybe even your sister? Especially your sister, I think." She smirked. "Just a little bit of insurance to make sure the transfer of power goes smoothly."
"You don't honestly think you can run this whole operation…"

"Nabiki, look around you." Hana clipped her pent to her clipboard. "Who's been doing your recruiting for the past year? I already run this operation. Now, I believe in fair's fair, so you'll still get your payouts, and everything'll be on track for you to go to business school at the end of the year. You just sit back, relax, read your manga or something, and everyone who was gonna get a happy ending gets one."

"Not Ranma." Nabiki growled.

Hana chuckled and ducked under her arm. "He was doomed from the start and you know it. Pity you hitched your wagon to him in the end. Now, as much fun as this has been, I'm a very busy girl. Ta!" She gave Nabiki a little wave and then trotted off. Nabiki watched as she met up with another group of girls, all surrounding one particular tall blond. Himura.

Nabiki narrowed her eyes at the girl, then turned and walked off silently.

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Ranma sat at her desk, staring at the student card. Her eyes were dull and empty as she flipped it over in her fingers. She felt numb.

Someone is always trying to take something from me. Even if I never did anything to them. Even if I never met them before. She gripped the edges of the card until they dug into the flesh of her fingers. What did I do to deserve this!?

Ryouga was not the most empathic creature in Nerima, and that was already a pretty low bar to start with. But he knew depression pretty well, and he always had a sense of when something was over the line with Ranma. That sense of seeing Ranma miserable, and not feeling happy. He edged around her hand and curiously glanced at the card she was holding.

It took a second for the significance of what he saw to sink in. The piglet grunted in surprise. Why is Ranma's picture of his girl side on his ID? He turned and looked at her, and oinked inquisitively, sitting on the desk in front of her.

"I seem to have stumbled on someone who's even better at blackmail than Nabiki, Mr. P." She said softly. "And she went straight for the manhood to get what she wanted." She tapped the edge of the card on the desk. "I'm stuck as a girl again, at least at school."

"Bwee?" The piglet cocked his head. Curse matters were serious business. After the matter with the curse-locking ladle, there was something of an unspoken agreement between them that matters involving the curse called for a truce of sorts… at least until Ryouga was certain the problem wasn't contagious.

Must be bad if Ranma is THIS down about it. Ryouga usually only saw his rival this down when faced with a problem without a clear path to a solution. I guess he's… she's… he's…? The pig scowled. Dammit Ranma, only you could ruin PRONOUNS for me! I'll try and remember to add it to the list the next time I'm beating the crap out of you. He glanced up at the girl, neatly fitting his mental overlay of male Ranma over her. You'd BETTER not milk this for sympathy with Akane! I won't allow it! He snorted once, then curled up on the desk to wait out the end of the day.

"Senpai?"

Ryouga looked up as a slight girl with green eyes, straw colored hair, and freckles nervously approached Ranma's desk. If anything she was even shorter than Ranma's girl side, and looked like
she might crumble if you looked at her sideways. *What is this? Don’t tell me he has another one!*

"Hey, Rin." Ranma said lifelessly. She flicked the ID card, spinning it on her finger. "What's up?"

"We… Me and Sayuri and Yuka… well, all of us… We were wondering when… you know, you said something about… I mean, if you're not too busy…" She glanced over at Ryouga. "Oh! What a cute piglet!"

Ranma sighed. *That's right, I volunteered these guys for this, didn't I?* She glanced down at Ryouga, who was growling, ignoring the attempts of the blonde girl to pet him. "Oh calm down, pork-butt. They just wanna train in volleyball. I'm not two-timing Akane."

Rin blinked. "You mean… he understood all of that?"

"Yeah, he's a lot smarter than he looks. Which isn't saying much. Hey!" Ranma yelped as she narrowly avoided getting nipped, jerking her finger out of range. "What did I say about biting, huh Mr. P?"

"So he's Akane's pet? And he's protecting his mistress? That's so sweet!" She finally managed to find the magic spot just behind P-chan's ears.

*Ranma Saotome, when I get... get some... mmmnh... hot water... I'm going... going to... do... something... bweee...* Ryouga's usually unstoppable 'Kill Ranma' train of thought suddenly ran out of track, skidding to a stop on the bright, sandy beaches of *The Zone*, which all good little piglets went to when someone found *The Spot*.

The piglet gave something that sounded like a sigh, slumped bonelessly onto his front, and started making soft, contented oinking noises, eyes half closed.

Ranma was torn between amusement at the thought of Ryouga being so easy to disarm, and mild nausea. "You are such a little bacon tramp." She muttered. She looked at Rin. "Actually… I kinda need to talk to you guys. I… I think I screwed up."

"What?" She turned and beckoned to the other girls, who had been waiting a respectable distance away.

"Not here." Ranma said, as the bell rang. "Let's go out to the field."

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Rin was cradling P-chan, scritching behind his ears, keeping him zoned out and drooling a little as he rumbled and snorted. Yuka, Sayuri, and Riki flanked her, standing next to the soccer goalposts, all attentively looking at Ranma.

"Alright Ranma. You've got our attention." Sayuri said.

"Five hundred yen says it's a new fiancee." Yuka said dryly.

"Nah. Five hundred on a new rival." Riko replied, putting a hand on her hip.

"G-guys, don't…" Rin chastised them. She turned to Ranma, "Senpai, tell us what's wrong?"

Ranma sighed. "Principal Kuno and that Himura…" She struggled a bit with finding an appropriate noun for the predatory blonde. "... girl have got a scheme going." She took a deep breath. "Turns out Himura has a nasty streak a mile wide."
"I could have told you that." Sayuri sniffed. "You should hear some of the crap she did to us in training…"

"She's got compromising photographs of me and is threatening to have me charged with sexual deviancy and expelled." Ranma interrupted, clenching her fist.

Sayuri blinked, momentarily silent. "... Okay… Yeah, that beats anything she did in training…"

"Oh no Senpai!" Rin covered her mouth. "Why would she do something horrible like that?"

"Yeah… I mean, Himura holds a grudge, but she's got no reason to beef with Ranma." Yuka said. "I mean, she actually wants Ranma… for… " She trailed off, eyes widening as she put blackmail and volleyball together. "... oh."

"She wants me to play on the girl's team this year. To makes this an even sweeter deal, she got my registration changed to my girl side." She flicked her student ID onto the ground contemptuously. "And the Principal's gonna enforce it. If I wanna be a guy on school grounds ever again, I gotta play ball with her."

"Literally." Rin knelt and picked up the ID. "B-but… where would she get those kinds of photos? I mean… I know Senpai used the girl's changing room, but she was a girl at the time, so it's okay, right?" She looked at the others. "She didn't do anything wrong?"

Yuka sighed deeply and patted her on the shoulder. "Poor, innocent flower." She muttered. "Ranma has a…" Riko winced. "... Bit of a history of… 'questionable decisions'?"

"Hey, I had good reason for alla that stuff!" Ranma protested. "It's not like I was doing panty raids er nuthin'! I was looking for a cure for my curse, okay?"

"In the girl's locker room." Sayuri replied skeptically.

"Look, there was this pot, okay? And… and it doesn't matter, it was a bust anyway." She turned away from them, slumping and looking down at herself. "Obviously." She muttered.

"O-okay…" Rin said, standing and timidly tugging on Ranma's shirttail, clutching the student ID. "... I guess I sort of understand, but… why are there pictures?"

Ranma turned and threw her arms up in the air. "Because Nabiki!" She snarled. "Because every stupid, humiliating, degrading thing that happens to me has to be photographed for posterity, and sold to the highest bidder by Nabiki Tendo!"

"Nabiki sold you out?" Rin shrank back, aghast. "B-but… I thought she was…"

"Nabiki loves money." Yuka said, folding her arms. "And also money. But above all else, she loves money. And pics of Ranma have been her best seller."

"Apparently it was her chance to get rid of some unwanted stock. She called it her 'discard' pile."

Ranma muttered. "Pics of me in girl's clothes after I had gotten splashed with hot water 'n stuff. Oh, and she had her minions taking lewds in the changing room the day of the game."

Rin yelped and covered herself, accidentally dropping the groggy piglet. "There are pictures of us?!"

"Hana." Sayuri growled. "Ooooh I should have broken that stupid camera of hers!"

"Megumi had one too." Riko said. "At least she did in the changeroom. I didn't see her during the
Rin shivered, huddled crouched on the ground, arms wrapped around her knees whimpering at the thought of pictures of her changing circulating around the school. The little black piglet nosed her in concern as she rocked slightly back and forth.

"Well… hang on… You said that we were involved in this somehow, and that you screwed up?" Yuka asked.

Ranma took a deep breath. *Well, this is where I throw my best chance of winning away.* "Himura decided to be 'sporting' and offer me a chance to win back my registration as a guy and get out of all of this. Each of us leads a volleyball team for the first half of the season. Whoever wins the most games wins. She takes her 'elites', and I get whatever is left over."

"Well, *that's* not gonna work!" Sayuri said, narrowing her eyes. "Anyone still on the team at this point is *definitely* gonna be her cronies, even if they're not part of her personal favorites. They'll just throw the games!"

"Yeah, I realized that." Ranma said, bracing herself. "That's why… umm… I kinda asked for you guys to be my team instead."

"Well, what?!" Sayuri, Riko and Yuka all said in unison, and Rin snapped out of her BSOD.

Ranma held up her hands. "Wait! Look I Know It Was Wrong Of Me To Volunteer You Guys I Didn't Mean Nuthin By It I Can Just Forfeit And Play For Her Stupid Team"

All four girls clustered around the cringing redhead, eyes wide.

"You wanted *us*?" Sayuri said, agape.

"Senpai! I'm so honored!" Rin gushed, hugging P-chan to her chest.

"Ranma, why *us* you dope?!" Yuka scowled. "You could have had Ukyou and Akane on your team!"

"I didn't think of it, okay?" Ranma cringed again. "Besides, she only barely went for *you guys* because the Principal made her. Look… I know that wasn't fair of me. You don't get anything out of this, so I'll just go tell her she wins, and I'll play for her stupid team. I can get my registration fixed for next year, and she'll have graduated and taken her stupid blackmail pics with her." She slumped a bit. Part of her wanted to argue, railed against accepting a loss of any kind, even one so blatantly unfair. But despite wracking her brain, she hadn't been able to think of anything she could offer. *First rule of Social Arts - If you want something from someone, you gotta offer 'em something in return.*

… Or trick 'em. Ranma thought, wincing. *Like Pops does. But… I ain't gonna be like that! I don't want to…"

"Earth to Ranma?" Sayuri waved her hand in front of Ranma's face, having apparently been talking to her while Ranma was struggling with her internal dilemma. "You back? What's the plan?"

Ranma blinked. "I just said…"

Sayuri smirked. "Yeah, no, seriously. What's the plan?"

The rest of them looked at Ranma expectantly.
"Didn't you hear me?" Ranma said, confused. "I said I'm gonna go forfeit so you guys don't have to worry that this'll come back on you or nuthin'."

"You also said 'Ranma Saotome doesn't lose" Riko said.

"He says that a lot, actually." Yuka snarked.

"You also said we were a team, Senpai." Rin said earnestly. "And you're our team captain."

The all nodded in solidarity, and gave Ranma an expectant look. They were ready for whatever muttered protests, tearful gratitude, or macho bluster Ranma could muster.

… Wide-eyed terror? Not so much.

Ranma backed away, shaking her head. "No… You're not gettin' nuthin' out of this… why would you…?" Ranma's current model of Social Arts was based entirely on self-interest, which worked fine for more of the self-interested sorts Ranma dealt with on a daily basis. It was perhaps a little sad that none of the experiences Ranma used to build the model included examples of a non-family member doing something selfless for someone else, except…

".. You've all fallen in love with me, haven't you?"

There was silence on the soccer field for a long moment. The wind blew through, whirling a scrap of paper along the ground. Nothing else stirred, and no other sounds were made in that pause.

"WHAT!??"

"Of course… it only makes sense…" Ranma continued to look horrified, backing away, shaking her head, as if they had all morphed into demons. "... I mean, we played a whole match together. It's happened with less!" her gaze flicked around wildly as she ran through the usual scenarios in her head. "Now you'll want to get engaged in exchange for winning the game, and drag me off to run some family business, and you'll probably try and poison or drug or hypnotize me and…"

~SMACK~

Ranma yelped and rocked back on her heels, holding her cheek where an angry red handprint was already starting to appear.

"GET A GRIP SAOTOME!" Sayuri growled.

Ranma recovered quickly, still holding her wounded cheek. "What'd you do that for!?"

"Because you were hysterical, dumbass!" Sayuri replied, not backing down "What the hell is wrong with you!?! What on earth would make you think we're in love with you?! I know you've got a big ego, but…!"

"Well why else would you help me!?!" Ranma demanded. "What else could you all possibly get out of this?"

Sayuri quirked a skeptical eyebrow. "We… help out a friend?"

Ranma gave her a blank look.

"You know… like friends do?" Sayuri expanded, trying to lead the redhead to the answer, but seeing no mental traction in her blue eyes.
"You… do know we're your friends, right Senpai?" Rin asked nervously.

"Well… yeah…” Ranma replied. "But that doesn't mean you just do stuff for nothin', right?"

There was another moment of silence.

"How many friends have you ever had, Ranma?" Yuka asked cautiously.

Ranma scratched her head in thought. "Well, lots I guess. There's Ucchan…"

"... Who aren't now fiancees."

"... Oh. Uhh… Well… Ryouga and I were buds…"

"Who aren't trying to kill you on a regular basis."

Ranma felt a bit of sweat on the back of her neck. "... Well, there's always…"

"... Not Hiroshi and Daisuke." Yuka concluded. "We know them. They're idiots."

"I…” Ranma trailed off weakly, then went silent.

Sayuri rubbed her forehead. "The most popular guy in school, and he doesn't actually have any friends. You are such an abused puppy, Ranma." She took the redhead by the shoulders and shook her lightly. "Listen to me. You have been horribly horribly mislead about how friends work, okay? We're gonna take an afternoon sometime soon and sit you down and watch some videos to start your reeducation on this. But for right now, understand that friends do do stuff for each other, without needing repayment, because that is what you do for people you care about. No necessarily love, not… turn into a crazed yandere over. It's normal for just friends to do nice stuff and support each other. Got it?"

"Yeah… I guess." Ranma said uncertainly. "So… none of you are going to try and drag me off on a date?"

"No. Not a chance." Riko said, making a face. "You've used the same bathroom as us! I don't think I could ever date anyone who's used the same bathroom as me."

"Marriage is going to be an interesting problem for you then, Riko." Yuka observed.

Riko batted her eyelashes and placed her hand on her chest daintily. "That is why I intend to marry rich. Separate bathrooms please."

"Rin, what about you?" Sayuri asked. Everyone suddenly had their attention on the girl, who shrank, blushing a little.

"Oh n-no! You don't have to worry about me!" Rin said. "I'm not into girls."

Another moment of dead silence.

"I'M A GUY, DAMNIT!"

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Nabiki was tapping away on her computer, quickly navigating through archaic newsgroup interfaces and old library databases. Next to her was an open filing box she had retrieved from her closet. There were folders and books of negatives and receipts covering her bed, and she had run down her cell
phone battery making calls.

She had already checked her safety deposit boxes at the Furinkan Credit Union. Both the one she had set aside as joint access for her and Hana, and her own personal box were cleaned out. Hana had never had access to the second one, the only way she could have gotten into it was...

"Furinkan Credit Union. Wholly owned subsidiary of Tanaka Pharmaceuticals." She muttered, confirming what she had already suspected.

Himura was loaded. Her grandfather was the CEO and majority shareholder of a large pharmaceuticals conglomerate. In fact she made the Kunos look like panhandlers. None of which had been in Himura's file.

Of course it wasn't. Nabiki thought. Hana would have cleansed it. Made the file as boring as possible so I never noticed her. I wonder how long she's been in Himura's pocket? She considered and discarded half a dozen ideas on how to deal with the situation, her frustration growing by the minute.

Hana was right. She decided. I was sloppy. I was too quick to hand her the keys. Without better information, I can't trust ANY of my sources from the past year.

She glanced at the pile of documents and books of negatives on her bed. What she had kept personally, from her first two years at Furinkan, she still had, but that put all of her information woefully out of date. To top that off, Hana had pics of her and Ranma at the beach, which would almost certainly get her killed if the fiancees saw.

She allowed her gaze to switch over to the corkboard. She had been avoiding it ever since she got home. She stood up and walked over to it, stopping after a moment and hesitantly reaching out to touch the green line between her picture and Ranma's.

How arrogant was I to think I could pull this off? She thought, feeling an ache in her chest. I'll just steal him from The Madness! Out from under the noses of all these other people who want a piece of him! And then we'll live happily ever after, and the past will never come looking for us.' She laughed bitterly. Nabiki Tendo when did you become such an idiot?

Her fingers traced down to Ranma's pictures. It was never going to work, was it? She thought. Not because of you. Because of me. It was easy for Himura to break your faith in me... because I never deserved it in the first place. Slowly, she unpinned the green thread, and removed it from the board.

Her vision clouded, and she rubbed at her eyes with the heel of her hand. I'm... I'm not going to cry over this! It was... it was just a longshot. It was silly of me to think... A hot tear fell on her hand, and she rolled her head back and squeezed her eyes shut to try and keep it all in. Damnit Ranma...

A few minutes of trying and failing to compose herself, she looked blearily at the board again. She smiled as her eyes fell on the pictures of Shampoo and Ukyou. "He did it to you too, didn't he?"

Her fingers reached out to touch Shampoo's picture. "A proud Amazon Warrior, honor bound to kill the Outsider so she could return home to resume her destiny to lead her tribe..." He fingers traced down to Ukyou. "The woman scorned, abandoned as a child, with her identity and pride shattered, living her whole life just to finally get her revenge. And he made you fall in love with him so hard you gave up everything just to be near him... just to have a chance. All without him even meaning to," she sighed, noticing she still had the green threat in her hand, lightly threaded among her fingers. "Why did I think he couldn't do the same to me?"

It's funny. The two people in the world who might understand how I feel are the ones who would kill
me if they found out I feel this way. She thought glumly. But even before she completed the thought, there was a spark there. She wiped away a last errant tear as her brow knit, ideas starting to come to mind. Risky ideas. Insane ideas, really. Ideas that could well and truly get her killed.

But... if I'm right... If I'm RIGHT, this would completely undercut Hana's insurance, and give me some freedom to move, and some allies to make moves with. She considered her corkboard. She had been on the verge of taking it down, but now?

She took Ranma's pictures, and moved them to the side, and then took her own picture and put it in the middle. She added a picture for Hana, and then started remaking the lines, referencing them to herself rather than Ranma. There wasn't much to start, but she was going to need a way to keep track of things once she started. Her eyes flicked to Shampoo and Ukyou's pictures again.

They understand revenge. She thought. They'll understand how I feel. I just hope it's enough.

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"So… seriously, nothing?" Riko asked.

The group was walking together towards through the shopping district. Riko had suggested that ice cream was necessary to lighten the mood, and no one, least of all Ranma, had argued.

I really AM spending a lot of time as a girl these days. Ranma thought glumly. Still, couldn't exactly go get ice cream as a guy…

"If ice cream is unmanly, then manliness is no longer a worthy goal."

Ranma smiled a little at that memory of the older boy. I kinda wish you were here to talk to, Asahi. You… seemed like you had this stuff figured out.

"I-I'm sure Ranma's guy side is-is objectively cute, b-but…" Rin seemed to want to try and pack herself into the school bag she was hugging to her chest.

"It'sjustweirdbecauseIthinkofherasagirlPLEASEDON'THATEMESENPAI!"

Ranma casually waved her off, having gotten over her initial outrage. People had had preconceived notions of her gender before. Though it was kind of nice in this case that it was being used as a reason to not laden her with further unwanted romantic attention.

"B-besides…" Rin shrank even further. "He's… not really my type."

That drew the attention of the entire group, eliciting a squeak from the girl and causing her to bury her face in her satchel.

"No, no…" Sayuri put a hand on Rin's shoulder. "You can't stop there. So what is your type?"

"Mrrfgle" Rin replied, quite obviously beet red behind her bag.

Ranma had to admit to herself that she was curious now, too. Having her guy side declared 'second best' in terms of looks was tugging on her competitive nature.

"We're here!" Riko announced. Ranma looked over to see an extremely fancy-looking ice cream shop. It was the sort of place that would have driven off his male side like it was surrounded by a force field. Even as a girl she was a little uncertain. There was just so much pink…

Her doubts fled as they stepped inside, however. The menu was covered in pictures of the various
ice cream confectioneries they sold, and Ranma found her mouth watering almost immediately. Elaborate mountains of ice cream, molten fudge running down them like lava flows. Brightly colored sundaes with every imaginable topping. Parfaits...

"Oh no…” Yuka whimpered. "My diet…”

"Oh live a little!” Riko said, practically skipping to the counter. "Hello Mr. Kotomine! The usual please!"

"Riko!” The man behind the counter smiled. "I see you brought friends this time!"

"Uh huh!” Riko replied, and Ranma had to admit she was employing a fairly effective variant of the 'kawaii' routine Ranma herself used when she indulged in her parfait addiction.

"Well then.” He turned and presented the girl with a mouth-watering chocolate fudge brownie sundae. "Oh the house, as promised." He winked.

Yuka scowled. "Riko, you sold us out for sweets!"

"You don't have to get anything.” Riko singsonged as she headed for a booth with her prize. "They do have diet soda!"

Yuka glared daggers at her, then glanced back at the menu board and whimpered. She wrung her hands in indecision. "But… my diet…"

Sayuri, Ranma, and Rin had no such hesitations. Ranma ordered the strawberry and mango parfait, cradling the treat like a precious treasure as she hurried to join Riko in the booth. Sayuri followed with a decadent-looking banana split, while Rin selected a modest chocolate dipped cone.

Riko had already dug into her sundae, a look of profound bliss spreading across her face.

"So… is it worth selling out your friends for?” Sayuri quipped, settling in next to Ranma, though there was no rancor in her words.

"I'd sell you guys out for one of the samples.” Riko moaned, digging her spoon back in. "Just taste it. You will agree with me."

Sayuri raised a skeptical eyebrow, digging her spoon into her ice cream and taking a taste. Her eyes went wide, then she melted back into her seat. "Ooooh yeah… I'd betray me for that..."

Ranma dug into her parfait. She was a fiend for the treats, but she doubted they were that good… right? She popped the spoonful into her mouth. Her reaction quickly mirrored Sayuri as the smooth, creamy dairy flavors mixed with the rich fruit preserves and melted in her mouth in a sweet, sugary hit.

"They churn their own ice cream.” Riko said, as Rin sat down next to her and sampled her own treat and similarly melted. "They make their own fruit fillings and pastries. They source all their stuff from the shopping district here, and the district gives them the best stuff they have in return."

"My wallet and my thighs hate you already.” Sayuri said, wolking down another heaping spoonful. "My tastebuds may convince them to forgive you, though."

"So… you never did… uhh… answer the question, Rin.” Ranma tried to ask nonchalantly. "What sort of guys are you into?”
Rin nearly snorted her cone, covering her mouth and coughing. "S-senpai!" That earned a glare from the piglet she had been carrying around.

"No, no, she's right." Sayuri beamed. "This is important for... uhh... team bonding."

Rin whimpered, glancing from one to the other. Blushing furiously, she bowed her head. "I-I like guys with glasses..."

"Ohhhhhhhhh?" Sayuri leaned in a bit closer, already thinking of a few doujins of hers the girl might be interested in for... 'educational purposes'.

"A-and... long hair, too." Rin continued shyly. "Not many guys around with both, though. O-oh! And it's nice if they're tall!" She blushed a bit and went back to her ice cream.

"Oooh, sounds like the super bishie type!" Riko said. "Know anyone who fits the bill?"

Rin shook her head. "I-I know. It's silly to be so particular. It's not like... many boys notice me anyway." She scooped some ice cream off her finger and offered it to P-chan, who one would swear was blushing before he daintily lapped at the treat.

Ranma, for her part, was trying desperately to contain a fit of giggles. Once she had them firmly locked down, she rejoined the conversation. "Rin, have you ever eaten at the Nekohanten before?"

"O-oh? No... that's that chinese restaurant near the school, isn't it?" She shook her head. "I've never been there. I don't eat out much... it ruins my appetite for dinner." She blinked. "Why do you ask?"

"Oh, no reason. Random thought. Something made me think of it. They have good ramen, though." Ranma smirked. "We should go there sometime as a group. Trust me, I think you'll like the ambiance."

There was a crash as a massive platter was slammed down on the table. They all looked up to see Yuka, having just placed one of the largest ice cream desserts they had ever seen. It was the one from the picture, an ice cream Mt. Fuji, complete with chocolate and caramel fudge lava flows and brownie boulders.

Yuka had a mad gleam in her eye as she held up her spoon. "If I'm gonna cheat, I'm gonna cheat big! BANZAI!"

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Ranma didn't get home until later, stopping by Doc Tofu's for a quick hot water kettle before he got back. The last thing he wanted was to get lectured by his mother for being too lazy to change back.

Nevermind that things always seem to conspire to splash me, and cold water is way more common than hot. Ranma thought glumly. It'll be nice to see her and Pops though. Dunno how I'm gonna explain all this stuff at school though...

He paused, sighed and let his head thunk against the door frame. And I left pork butt with Rin! I forgot she even had him! He's gonna hold THAT against me a while. So much for a peace offering with Akane...

He slid open the door. "I'm home!" He called out, announcing his presence as he kicked off his shoes at the door.

"Ah, Ranma!" Kasumi leaned her head out of the kitchen. "Your parents are in the living room..."
"Ah." Ranma said, trying to keep the trepidation out of his voice. "... And Akane?"

"She's upstairs unpacking."

Ranma took a deep breath. He knew his parents, especially his mother, were disappointed in him since the fiasco of the wedding, and particularly for the fight that put the final nail in the coffin of his and Akane's engagement. They had suggested Akane spend her time out with them, rather than Ranma, and he was sure it was in an attempt to 'fix' things.

Ranma walked into the living room. Nodoka Saotome was sitting at the table, sipping tea. Genma was already in his usual spot, playing shogi with Soun.

"Ah, you're home!" Nodoka immediately brightened at the sight of her son. "You stayed after school?"

"Ah… yeah… Helpin' out with the Volleyball team." Ranma said sheepishly.

Which is true, technically, right? She don't gotta know it was helping four girls eat a mountain of ice cream AS a girl.

"As long as it does not interfere with your training." Nodoka cautioned, earning a wince from Ranma. "While I understand the necessity of a certain level of education, it is important you do not let it distract you from your true calling, my son."

"Yeah, I won't." Ranma sat down at the table. "So, uh, how was the trip?"

"The train ride was long, I won't bore you with it." Nodoka replied. "The weather is nice, thankfully. We have also made great progress on the repairs to the house. I hope you will come and see it soon."

"Yeah, I'd love to." Ranma said honestly.

The conversation trailed off into awkward silence. Both of them were aware of where the conversation was about to go. Nodoka loathed to lecture her son upon first seeing him, but… there did not seem to be much else to fill the empty space.

"When are you going to apologize to Akane?" She asked quietly.

Ranma sighed. He felt tired suddenly. The old reflex to defend himself, to protest writhed in his gut, but it was a tired, sickly thing by now, beaten and starved. "I did apologize to her. She didn't accept it." He said carefully, not wanting to start a fight, but not quite willing to just surrender.

Nodoka sighed. She reached over and put her hand on his. "Ranma, I understand your frustration. I do! You and Akane are both… people with a great deal of passion, and strength and independence. Neither of you are used to being in partnership with another, and that is a difficult thing. The ebb and flow of a relationship… can be stressful."

"There isn't any 'ebb and flow', Mom." Ranma replied. He sighed deeply. "Just conflict."

"And that is what you must learn to mitigate, my son." Nodoka replied. "This arrangement between the two of you… it is important, I hope you understand that. It is bigger than just you and Akane. The two of you represent the future of both our families."

"I know… and… and I've tried..." Ranma tried to protest. "Especially after what happened at Jusenkyo, but..."
Nodoka squeezed his hand. "The challenges you face I know you can overcome, as a man amongst men. You and Akane are destined to be together. Your resistance to this only causes you pain. Go… talk to her. Beg her forgiveness, and to take you back, so that we can put all of this behind us."

No! This isn't what I want! I DON'T WANT TO DO THIS ANYMORE! Something rebelled within Ranma, and he reflexively jerked his hand away, startling his mother. "I'll… I'll go talk to her." He mumbled weakly, rubbing hand as he stood and bowed, slipping out of the room quickly before things got any more awkward.

Kasumi watched from the hallway outside the kitchen, quietly listening and watching. Oh Ranma…

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Ranma took the stairs two at a time, hoping lightly on the balls of his feet. He was hoping he could just slip down the hallway, grab his bath things, slip back downstairs, and manage a quick soak in the furo before dinner without having to bump into…

"Ranma?"

His head snapped up, but he already knew by the voice who it was. He had heard it in his dreams plenty since he had last seen her. He stopped dead at the top of the stairs, gripping the handrail, like an anchor to keep him from going forward or back.

Her dark hair was a little mussed. It looked like she might have been taking a nap, but it just served to soften her face, and make her look more angelic. She was wearing shorts and a t-shirt, but in his mind's eye he still saw her in that red chinese shirt she had borrowed from him, smiling at him as she cupped his cheek.

The moment stretched for an eternity before either of them spoke. They both opened their mouths, then shut them again. Finally, after a few more tries, Akane spoke up.

"This is… a little awkward, huh?" She said softly.

"Yeah." Ranma breathed. A little tremor ran through his arm, and he gripped the railing tighter as he felt the maelstrom of emotions warring inside of him.

"Your mother has been helping with my cooking." She said after another pregnant pause. "She says my vegetable stir fry is getting better…"

"Mnnn." Ranma replied noncommittally.

"She and I have been talking a lot, actually." Akane said softly. "I… she always wants to hear about you."

"Mnn." Don't, Akane. Please… Don't...

They were silent another few moments. Finally, Akane managed a weak smile.

"Ranma… maybe… maybe we should try again?" She said. "Mother Nodoka and I were talking, and…"

"Akane, don't."

Akane inhaled sharply, eyes widening.

Ranma was gripping the railing hard enough to cause it to crack, his eyes shadowed. "Please,
Akane…” He shook his head. "Please don't make me do this again."

"Ranma, I…” She took a half step forward, reaching for him.

"I love you… but I don't like myself when I'm with you."

Akane froze, hearing her own words thrown back at her. Her eyes started to cloud. "Ranma, please…"

"It's not your fault, Akane." Ranma shook his head. "This week? This week has sucked. But… I got a glimpse… an idea… It ain't enough, you know? Just… just loving you." He looked up at her, and his own eyes were wet. "I'm… it's like there's all this stuff that I'm supposed to know… that I just don't. Basic people stuff. How… how am I supposed to… to act right with someone I love if I don't even know how to act around regular friends?" He took a deep breath. "I know… I've always known… that you needed something from me. Something… something that should be easy, but it isn't. And… and as much as I want to give it to you… I can't. I don't know how. And as long as that's true, we'll… we'll just keep tearing each other apart."

"I'll… I'll be more patient." Akane said, taking another step towards him, drawing closer. He shuddered as he caught a whiff of her scent. She rarely wore perfume, mostly she usually smelled of clean soap, and a warm fragrance of her hair that he couldn't give a name to. He wanted to reach out and pull her in close to him and just lose himself in that… just for a moment. "I'll try and be more understanding. And… and if you know what the problem is, then together…"

"Enough, Akane!"

She jerked back. He hadn't said it loudly, but there was a force behind it that rocked her back on her heels.

"I can't… I can't keep hurting you… And I can't keep getting hurt by you." He shook his head. "Don't you get it? If we keep at this… we're gonna end up hating each other."

Akane stared at him a moment longer. He felt his resolve waver, but before it could, he saw the storm clouds roll in in Akane's eyes, her expression twist as the sting of his words took their toll.

"Fine…" She said, her eyes hardening. "Go off and marry Ukyou. Or Shampoo. Or Nabiki for all I care! At least… at least I tried, Ranma! At least I cared enough to do that! Which is more than I can say about you!" She whirled and ran off, opening her door and slamming it behind her as she locked herself in her room.

Ranma closed his eyes, slowly and painfully releasing his grip on the railing. The end of it had shattered in his hand, driving several splinters into his palm and drawing blood. He stared at it dumbly, then slowly resumed his walk to the room he and his father had once shared.

After both had left, another door cracked open, and Nabiki peeked out. Her eyes flicked to her sister's door, then took a more lingering look at the door Ranma had just closed behind him. She curled a piece of green string around her finger. She glanced at Akane's door once more, then slipped out of her room and padded quietly down the hall.

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Ranma already had the first aid kit out by the time he heard the quiet knock at his door. "Go away, Akane." She sighed.

"It's Nabiki." The middle tendo replied from the other side of the door.
"Then really go away, Nabiki." He growled. He plunked himself down cross-legged in the corner of the room furthest from the door, fishing a set of tweezers out of the kit and examining his hand.

"Ranma… look, we need to talk about what happened."

"What's there to talk about?" Ranma replied.

Nabiki sighed. The door jerked, and she slid it open, stepping inside, and then sliding the door closed behind her. "I'm not doing this through a door."

"I thought I locked that." Ranma said darkly, not looking up. He gently eased a splinter out from under his skin, dropping it onto a sheet of tissue paper. "You did. If you jerk the doors upwards in their tracks in this house, it pops the locks open." Nabiki said quietly. "Same problem with the furo door. It's why Akane keeps walking in on you."

"Just because you can open a door doesn't mean you're welcome inside." Ranma said, extracting another splinter. "Please leave."

"Do you want some help with that?" Nabiki asked, watching him tend to his injured hand.

He stopped, finally turning his head to look at her, an incredulous frustration twisting his features. "If you were a martial artist, you'd be out the window already, you know that, right? What do I have to do to get you to leave me alone, Tendo?"

She winced a bit as he continued to address her by her last name. "I'm not here to ask forgiveness."

"Yeah…" He turned back to his hand. "... Yeah, at this point I'm kind of not in a forgiving mood."

"Look, you need to know what's going on." Nabiki said. "I'll leave you alone after that. But… Himura got to my people, okay? Hana cut me out."

"So someone out Nabiki'd Nabiki Tendo. How terrible for you." Ranma finished extracting the splinters, dabbing antiseptic on the spots lightly. It wasn't bad enough to need anything more; the small cuts had already stopped bleeding though they would likely sting for a bit. He stood up, grabbing his bath towel. "It isn't about me right now." Nabiki replied, reaching out to grab his arm as he tried to push past her. "If Himura has compromised Hana, then she knows everything about you that I do."

He glared at her coldly. "Then I'm in luck, aren't I?" He pulled his arm away. "Cuz you don't know anything about me."

That hurt. He felt a pang of guilt as the hurt flashed in her eyes. She opened them again, and stepped out of his way, bowing her head. "Just be careful, okay Ranma? I still don't know everything that's going on with her, but she's dangerous."

"Yeah, I always am." Ranma said, waving her off casually as he headed back down the hallway towards the stairs. She watched him go. You're also a terrible liar, Saotome.

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"Time to wake up, boy!"
There was the sound a surprised yelp as Genma bodily hurled the teenager out the window, followed by a splash, and an outraged feminine cry from the pond outside.

What Ranma was having difficulty parsing was that he was still dry, in his futon, and male.

He scrambled up and ran to the window, spotting Genma squaring off against a soggy and very annoyed Akane, still in her pajamas.

"Hey Pops! I think you need to get your prescription checked! You grabbed Akane!"

"Quiet, Ranma!" Genma called back up. "I know what I'm doing! Akane asked me to train her exactly as I trained you, so that's what I'm doing!" He looked back at his opponent, a little unnerved by her visible red ki aura. "Though I was hoping she would have given up by now…"

Akane gave a battle cry and charged at the older man, starting with a series of punches that he dodged, followed by a roundhouse kick to his side.

Genma caught her leg and smirked, but it lasted only a moment before she pivoted, sacrificing her stance to spin and lash at his head with her other leg, forcing him to release her and dance back. She rolled herself back onto her hands and flipped herself neatly back onto her feet, slipping back into her ready stance.

Genma threw a strong right punch that she deflected just to the left of her head with her arm, getting inside his guard enough to grab the front of his Gi. She pulled him roughly back as she rolled onto her back, kicking her leg up and propelling him up and over, and into the pond himself.

"You're getting slow, old man." Akane said with a fierce grin, bouncing back to her feet as a disgruntled panda emerged from the pond.

"Don't get cocky, boy!" The panda produced a wooden sign, then a second one that read, "I haven't taught you everything I know just yet!" With that, the Panda charged, using the signs as improvised weapons, forcing the dark haired girl back as she dodged his swipes and strikes.

Ranma had dashed downstairs to get a better view, finding the rest of the family there watching. He slipped in next to Soun and his mother, watching wide-eyed. "Could someone explain to me what the hell is going on?!"

"Language, Ranma." Nodoka said gently.

"Saotome has graciously offered to teach my baby girl his side of the Anything Goes School." Soun said, tears running down his face. "I'm so proud of her!"

"They're going at it pretty hard!" Nabiki noted, watching with interest.

Ranma returned to watching. Nabiki was right, Pops wasn't holding back. The impressive thing was Akane was keeping up with him. They've been doing this... what, a week maybe? And Akane has improved THAT much! It was frankly amazing. But what was more…

The look of utter glee on Akane's face. She had obviously taken some hits, and was favoring her right leg, but her grin was a mile wide. She was having the time of her life, like a kid on the best amusement park ride ever.

Is this what she wanted all this time? Ranma felt a stab of guilt, and a sinking realization of how easily he could have made things better between them. She just wanted to play too. And I never let her.
His eyes flicked guiltily from Akane, to Nabiki, and back again. He sighed. After a night's sleep, the rancor had drained away, and now he was just left feeling awkward and guilty about the whole mess.

*MessES.* He corrected himself glumly. *That's TWO Tendo sisters I've screwed things up with.*

Genma attempted to block a strike from Akane, but the dark haired girl simply smashed right through the wooden sign, grabbing a handful of fur and bodily heaving the massive beast over her shoulder. However, Genma managed to get a hold of her clothes in the process, and rolled with the throw, pulling her along and throwing her over his shoulder in turn and pinning her to the grass, knocking the wind out of her. She gasps, and looked as if she might get up, but found the remaining sign at her throat. It now read *"Yield?"*

"Hmph… You got me this time old man." She growled, but nodded her surrender. Genma growfed, and walked back towards the house, plunking down at the table and reaching for the kettle he had prepared beforehand.

"I'll get you next time." Akane sniffed, but she couldn't quite keep the smirk off her face.

Genma had poured the hot water over his head, transforming back. *"In your dreams, boy. You have a long way to go in your training still. Now, cleaned up and into your gi, I'll meet you in the dojo in ten minutes."*

"But… what about breakfast?" Akane protested.

*"There's no breakfast for losers, boy. You can eat AFTER you've proven to me you AREN'T one!"

Akane growled, but stalked off to the furo room. *"Baka Oyaji."*

Ranma leaned over to Nabiki and Kasumi. *"Have… you ever had that weird sensation that everyone around you has gone insane and nobody bothered to let you know?"

Nabiki smirked at him. *"Welcome to the edge of The Madness, Ranma. Buckle up and enjoy the show."*

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Breakfast was quiet. Genma had wolfed down his portion and trotted off to spar with Akane further, at least sparing Ranma half of the awkwardness he was due that day. He found himself eating at a more sedate pace. Truth was, he had a problem.

"Mom? I… uh… have a bit of a problem." He said nervously. He ignored Nabiki's curious look.

"Yes? What is it?" Nodoka smiled, setting down her chopsticks and folding her hands as she gave him her full attention.

Ranma took a deep breath. *"Truth is… The Principal of the school is… kind of on my case. He's kind of issued a challenge."

"Has he?" She smiled. *"That's to be expected. You are Furinkan's premier martial artist, after all."

"Yeah." Ranma replied uncertainly. *"See, the thing is… he's got it arranged that… until I complete his… uhh… challenge… I've gotta attend school as a girl. Or he'll expel me."

"I see." Nodoka closed her eyes in thought a moment, considering. She took a deep breath, then
nodded. "I'm sorry, Ranma, but that just isn't acceptable."

Ranma winced. He was afraid of this. "Then… what should I do?"

"This is your challenge, son. That is something you must discover for yourself." She said. "I accept that your curse is… an unfortunate reality, and one that you have managed admirably. For the most part. But… you already indulge in too much worrisome behaviour in respect to it. Further indulgence, even in the name of answering a challenge, I feel would run the risk of eroding the progress you've already made as a man amongst men."

"But… He'll expel me."

"That is also unacceptable." Nodoka replied firmly. "You must answer this challenge quickly and firmly, without compromising yourself. You cannot allow your curse to be a vector your opponents use to attack you." She smiled. "I know you will find a way."

"With all due respect, Mrs. Saotome, those are mutually exclusive." Nabiki piped up. "Ranma can't complete the challenge while refusing to observe the conditions of the challenge!"

Nodoka gave Nabiki a surprised look. She sighed. "I… am a bit surprised, Nabiki, but pleased you are coming to my son's defense. That is proper for a fiancee, even if your status as such is just a… temporary measure." She smiled. "But overcoming such contradictions is the heart of the Saotome School." She placed a hand on Nabiki's shoulder. "You aren't a martial artist, dear. I don't expect it to make sense to you. Trust in Ranma to find a solution." She smiled at Ranma. "Right, son?"

"Yeah… sure…" Ranma replied. He sighed and put down his chopsticks, finding his appetite was gone. "I'd… better get going early then. You know… challenge stuff to do." He stood up and bowed. "Thank you for the meal." He said formally, then headed out into the hall.

Nabiki, for her part, kept staring at Nodoka. She waited until Ranma was out the door before she spoke again. "What the hell, Mrs. Saotome?!"

"Language dear." Nodoka picked up her chopsticks and resumed eating.

Nabiki shook her head. Her calmer, colder, mercenary side was telling her to take the information she had and just go, that there was damage control to do, but something hot and angry bubbled up within her. "No, this isn't okay! I know about this challenge, and I know what Ranma is up against. You making it literally impossible for him isn't helping him to be a 'man amongst men'!"

Nodoka sighed heavily and put her chopsticks back down. She gave Nabiki a pitying look. "I understand this is frustrating for you, Nabiki. And it heartens me that you have grown fond enough of my son to be so protective of him. But allowing him to disregard the obligations of his honor simply for the sake of convenience is not honor at all, and not the action of a man amongst men. It is something you will understand when you are older, my dear."

"Like how saddling him with endless marriage agreements so your husband can stuff his belly is honorable?" Nabiki snarked. "Do you have any idea how impossible the situation is your husband put him in?!"

Nodoka winced a bit. "My husband's… indiscretions… are regrettable. But that, too, is Ranma's responsibility as a Man to put right. I know that seems unfair…" She held up a hand to forestall Nabiki's protest. "...But life is not fair, and part of being a man amongst men is being able to bear these burdens, heavy though they may be. I know that is difficult to grasp when you are young and idealistic… I know it was for me when I was younger."
"It's not 'idealism'!" Nabiki protested. "Saying 'life is unfair' isn't justification for making Ranma's life even more unfair! Where is the honor in abdicating all of your responsibilities as his parents?!

"Nabiki, that is quite enough…” Nodoka began.

"You aren't my mother!" Nabiki snarled, startling the woman. "My mother was responsible enough to clean up her own messes, and admit to her own mistakes." She stood and stomped out of the room, slamming the sliding door behind her hard enough to rattle it on the track.

Nodoka simply gaped. She cleared her throat, taking a deep breath to calm herself. "Soun… indulges that girl far too much." She muttered to herself as she took a sip of her tea. I cannot allow the engagement to remain in the state it's in much longer. Nabiki is definitely not suitable for Ranma. She sighed. She means well, but she simply lacks understanding to be a proper wife to him. She doesn't understand that as much as I wish to help my son, I CAN'T. Codding him now would simply undo all of the progress Genma and I sacrificed so much for.

She glanced out the door into the yard, hearing the sounds of Genma sparring with Akane. I begin to wonder… as attached as I am to Akane, is she the best choice either? It is not proper for a wife to be so… competitive with her husband. She sighed. Perhaps Nabiki DOES have a point. Selecting a proper wife for her child is a mother's duty. Maybe leaving the matter in Ranma's hands to resolve is not the proper thing to do. She considered. Maybe it's time for me to meet these other potential brides formally.

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"You know, you look like an anime stereotype right now, Akane." Nabiki observed, amused as Akane ran up with a piece of toast in her mouth, pulling her schoolbag over her shoulder.

"Shut up, Nabiki." Akane growled around her mouthful. She slipped her shoes on and followed her sister outside. "The Panda kept me from getting ready until I could pin him."

"You're even starting to sound like Ranma." Nabiki noted, amused. "Should we be considering a pigtails for your next hair style."

Akane's expression darkened. "Don't even joke about him, Nabiki. I'm so done thinking about him." She raised her chin, but Nabiki could see a tightness in her jaw.

"Yeah… I heard." She said softly. "For what it's worth… I'm sorry."

"What do you care?" Akane asked sharply. "Other than just pushing the engagement back onto me now that you've made your money off it, huh? How much you planning on charging me for Ranma this time?"

Nabiki winced and closed her eyes. Yeah, I poisoned THIS well pretty good too, didn't I? "Akane, Ranma is in real trouble."

Akane stopped in her tracks. She peered at Nabiki, her eyes widening. "You're serious?"

Nabiki nodded. "Principal Kuno and a senior named Himura Tanaka are screwing with him."

Akane scowed. "Another girl? What did Genma promise her parents?"

Nabiki shook her head. "It's not like that. She's not after him to marry. In fact, she doesn't like his male side at all."
Akane's face twisted into a mask of disgust. "So, she's a pervert then. That's a perfect match for him then." She huffed and turned, resuming walking.

Nabiki massaged her temples in frustration. "Would you listen, Akane!? She's threatening him with sex offender charges!"

Akane stopped again, looking at her aghast. "What did that lech do to bring that on?"

"Nothing!" Nabiki exclaimed, losing her patience. "Akane, Ranma is not a pervert, and you damn well know it!" She walked up to her little sister and poked her in the chest. "Could you get off your high horse for long enough to help me keep Ranma from ending up in prison?!"

"I…" Akane's expression flickered between anger and a touch of concern. Finally she dropped her head and sighed. "Fine."

"Okay. So, Himura wants Ranma as a ringer for the girl's volleyball team for her championship run. She got the Principal to change his registration from boy to girl, and he has to play for the girl's team or get expelled. But if he doesn't show up to school as a girl in uniform, he'll get kicked off the team."

"Okay. How's that different from the full body cat tongue, or when the curse got locked?" Akane asked. "Ranma can just got to school as a girl like he did then."

Nabiki shook her head. "Nodoka forbade it. It's not 'manly'." She put a hand on Akane's shoulder. "That's why I need you on board with this. Because I'm pretty sure Ranma is going to stop at Tofu's and switch there, but if it gets back to his Mom that he's attending school as a girl…"

"Oh no…" Akane covered her mouth, grasping the situation at last. "Poor Ranma! Okay… okay, what do you need me to do?"

Nabiki breathed a sigh of relief. Finally, something that went easier than expected. "Just… be aware, okay? Run interference for him. And don't let anybody take any pictures. At all."

"What? Why?" Akane asked, confused.

"Himura bought out my… uh… my associates." Nabiki said, trying to avoid the word minions. "I'm done taking pictures, so if anyone is snapping shots, it's not me, it's Himura. She's already got my negatives, and anything more she gets will just make the noose around Ranma's neck tighter."

Akane's expression darkened. "So this is your fault then!"

Welp, so much for 'easy.' Nabiki swore mentally. "I… Yes, okay? Yes, this is my fault." Nabiki growled. "And Ranma is very aware of that, and he isn't exactly happy with me. And that's why… as your sister… I am asking for your help to fix this before something goes really really wrong, and something happens that Ranma can't just bounce back from."

"What do you get out of this?" Akane asked suspiciously. "You never help out of the goodness of your heart!"

"I also never did anything to hurt anyone. Not really. Embarrass, maybe. Inconvenience? But… do you have any idea what Ranma would go through if Himura goes through with her threat? Even if Ranma beats the charge, it'll follow him his whole life. Getting expelled wouldn't be terribly great for him either." Nabiki gave her sister an imploring look. "Believe it or not, I do care about Ranma, and I will do whatever it takes to avoid his life getting wrecked because of my screw up!"
Akane regarded her sister a moment, looking into her eyes and seeing something in there. Something familiar. She put her hand on the one on her shoulder. "He got to you, didn't he?"

"What?! No, Akane, this is… I don't…" Nabiki stammered, not expecting that level of insight from her younger sister.

Akane squeezed the hand and smiled. "It's okay. I know how you feel. I know… exactly how you feel." She took a shuddering breath. "He drives you mad, doesn't he? All arrogance and confidence, even when he has no idea what he's doing… and you can see him walking into the fire over and over and he won't listen… and somehow he keeps coming out the other side."

Nabiki felt a lump in her throat. "He… He's trying to be better. He's learning, a little."

Akane's eyes dropped, though her smile never did. She sniffed lightly. "Then he's doing better with you than he did with me."

Nabiki shook her head. "No… No he's not, sis. I mean… look at the mess I got him into?" She gestured towards the school. "I've spent almost two years exploiting him and making his bad situations worse for money. It's a little late for me to jump on the bandwagon. I just… I just want to get him through this. After that…" She felt her breath hitch in her throat. "... After that he's all yours."

Akane looked up at her. There were a few tears in the corner of her eyes, but at the same time, there was hope shining there. "R-really?"

"If he's what you want." Nabiki said, softly. "Be sure of that, first. Promise me. Take some time to really be certain that he's the one you're willing to bet your whole future on. But if he is… Go all in."

Akane nodded. "What about you, though?"

Nabiki smiled. "I'll get over it. It… it was a nice fantasy."

Akane looked unsure. Nabiki squeezed her shoulder once more. "Come on. We'll be late if we keep dawdling, and getting detention isn't conducive to scheming. I'll explain the rest as we walk."

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Ranma plucked at the blouse of the school uniform. Doc Tofu had been understanding, like he normally was. He even promised not to breath a word to Ranma's parents under 'Doctor Client Privilege', whatever that was. Ranma wasn't sure if that would cover Kasumi freakouts though, so she resolved to let Kasumi know what was going on at the end of the school day. She was fairly certain, with Kasumi's stated opinion of the Seppuku Contract, that she'd be willing to keep the secret.

This sucks. Ranma thought. I hate keeping secrets from Mom like this, but what choice do I have? He almost hopped up on the fence, but realized at the last minute this was probably a bad idea in a skirt, and ended up doing a halfhearted skip.

Ugh, look at me. Ranma thought miserably, looking down at herself. Mom is right, this isn't manly. If she knew… She shuddered. That was something she never wanted to deal with. The idea of being forced to fulfill the contract…

Would this even bug me that much if it wasn't for that? She thought glumly, looking at her hand. It was smaller than her male side's, dainty, almost delicate. But still hers in some undefinable way. Was it being a girl that drove me crazy with the Full Body Cat's Tongue and the Chiisuiton? Or was it
not being able to change? She clenched her hand into a fist. I've done everything Pops taught me to do. Mom said I'd fulfilled the contract. So why... do I feel like such a fraud?

She rounded the corner, reaching the gate.

"PIGTAILED GIRL!"

Ranma reflexively held up her schoolbag, holding it out as Kuno faceplanted into the satchel, twitching, his hands still flailing and grasping uselessly. No. No I am NOT in the mood for this idiot right now. She pondered a moment while Kuno rebooted. Eh, mebbe I can get him on my side for this? Not like he likes the Principal any more than me.

"Kuno-senpai... I-I'm sorry. I would gladly leap into your arms, but... The news is so terrible my weak, womanly heart can hardly bear it!" She cranked up the drama, placing a hand over her heart.

"Offmh fair pfig-tailed girl, mwhat ailfs thee so?" Kuno mumbled from the other side of her bag.

"The Principal, your father, has banished my brother!" She cried, hamming it up a bit more for Kuno's benefit. "He denies my brother the education he needs to carry on my family's school. If I don't play volleyball for the cruel taskmistress Himura Tanaka, then my brother can never return! And if he is seen on the school grounds, we will both be expelled!"

Kuno extracted his face from her back, the impression of the straps still visible as red welts. "What's this? My Psychotic Progenitor is imposing his vile schemes on your and my future Brother-in-law?" He straightened, clenching his fist. "Aye, he has long sought to clip the pigtails of you and your brother both. It seems if he cannot do so through honorable combat, he would stoop to trickery and scheming. Does his depravity know no bounds?!" He grabbed her by the shoulders, his eyes suddenly filling with tears. "Pig-tailed girl, I know now what I must do. There can be no joining of our families while this Pompous Patriarch sits at the head of the Kuno clan. I, Tatewaki Kuno, shall show to him there is room for only one Kuno at Furinkan High, and wrest from him control of our family both! Wait for me, my love, until I have returned victorious!" He drew his bokken and ran back into the school, ranting on about victory.

I feel kinda bad using him like that. Ranma thought glumly. For all his faults, Kuno had been downright reliable since she figured out the right way to phrase things to him. If he would only calm down the grabbiness around his supposed 'loves' he might even have been a halfway decent friend.

At least... by MY standards... Ranma thought, remembering Sayuri's lecture on friendship. She continued on towards the school. She bowed her head, lost in thought as she made her way to her homeroom class on autopilot. As she stepped into the classroom, she noticed a lot of the students clustered around Rin's desk.

"Oh, Senpai!" Rin's head popped up from the crowd. She gently extricated herself from the group and bounced over. In her arms she was carrying a very familiar and a very cross little black piglet.

"Senpai, I'm so sorry!" Rin bowed deeply, then held out the piglet, head bowed in submission.
"IcompletelyforgotIwascarryinghimuntillgothomeandhadtoopenthefrontdoorandIdidntknowwhatyouraddressher voice continued to get higher and squeekier as she rapidly ran short of breath, but kept going.

"Rin? Breathe." Ranma commanded her.

Rin suddenly sucked in a deep, grateful breath, coughed a bit, then hiccuped. "~Hic~... Sorry!"

Ranma gently took the piglet from her offering hands, deftly avoiding Ryouga's attempts to nip her. "It's fine. Thank you for taking such good care of him. Honestly he gets lost so easily I'm surprised
you managed to hold onto him."

"Oh, it wasn't easy." Rin cringed. "He kept wandering off, so I had to keep a constant eye on him, and I tried to give him a bath but he would go anywhere near the water, and then he did wander of sometime during the night and I thought I lost him but it turns out he got lost and ended up in the hall closet, and then I got really scared when I found him bleeding from his snout when I was getting changed for school, and I thought I had done something horrible, but he seems to be okay now please tell me he's okay!"

"Wow, that seems like quite the adventure." Ranma held up the piglet by his bandanna. "I'm sure Akane would love to hear all about it."

P-chan immediately stopped struggling, his eyes going wide. He shook his head rapidly.

*Granted, there's no real reason for her to get mad her piglet was being cared for overnight by someone else, but given how jealous Akane gets…*

She smirked, then tucked the piglet into the crook of her arm. "I'll make sure I get him home this time." She walked over to her desk and settled down, depositing him on top of it. "Look… I'm sorry about forgetting you with Rin. I kinda got distracted by having my life turned completely upside down."

The piglet huffed and looked away.

"Akane is coming to school today, you can see her in a few minutes," Ranma continued. "We've got a spare set of clothes for you at the dojo, and I'll loan you my pack if you really wanna take off. Otherwise, I'll see if I can find out where Kuno put your stuff."

"Bwee?" The piglet turned, giving him an inquisitive look.

"Akane's doing pretty good. She's started training with Pop, and that seems to blow off a lot of steam." He sighed. "And yeah, still not engaged to her."

The piglet snorted.

"Look, man, give me a break! I'm tryin' to own up to my faults and do what's best for her right now" He poked the pig in the belly, earning a snap. "Besides, why are you still so hung up on Akane, huh? Haven't you been dating Akari for something like six months now?"

P-chan froze, then seemed to deflate a little. "Bwee…"

"Been having trouble finding your way back to her farm?"

P-chan nodded miserably.

"Well, no wonder you're so eager to take my head off." Ranma muttered. "You've at least gone on a few dates with her by this point, right?"

P-chan seemed to shrink further.

"None? Seriously?" Ranma felt the urge to take a jab, but his growing awareness of the negative effects of that caused him to curb the response, taking an extra beat to formulate a response. He noted it took a lot more effort than it did with Nabiki. "Well… I'm not one to talk." He took a deep breath. *Need to make peace with the rivals.* "If you want me to, I can try and help. Mebbe we can trek out there on the weekend or something."

The piglet looked up at him, and the look of disbelief, and beneath it the wavering, flickering candle
of hope, was a little embarrassing to see.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, don't go all doe-eyed on me." Ranma muttered. "Focus on not getting lost today first, 'kay?"

More students were filtering into the class. Akane finally slipped in, just barely beating the last bell. She looked a little out of breath. Ranma considered just keeping quiet and letting her take her seat before slipping the piglet onto her desk, but... *That wouldn't be manly, would it?* She glanced down at herself and scowled. *Not that I really qualify right now.* Regardless, she scooped up P-chan and walked over to Akane's desk, not sure of the reception she'd get.

"Uh... hey, Akane..." She said sheepishly. As soon as the girl looked at her, she held out the pig awkwardly. "Umm... here."

"P-chan!" Akane exclaimed, practically snatching the piglet from Ranma's grasp. "It's been so long! Where have you been, baby?" She hugged the piglet tight to her chest.

"Figured you'd want the little porker back." Ranma said, turning to leave. Akane reached out and caught her hand. Ranma turned, and was met with one of the most brilliant, genuine smiles she had seen on the girl's face in weeks.

"Thank you Ranma. Really, I mean it." Akane said. There were practically tears in her eyes. "You have no idea how much I've been missing P-chan. This was really sweet of you."

Ranma had frozen, like a deer caught in headlights. Her heart had leapt into her throat. When it came to looks, Akane was certainly cute enough, despite Ranma's protestations. Even beautiful when she dressed up. But her most disarming quality was her smile. It was like a thousand megawatt spotlight. Blinding and stunning, and the reason so many tended to fall in love with her so hopelessly. And for all of her frustrations with the girl, Ranma was not immune.

"I... ummm... Well, I mean..." Ranma mumbled, blushing. She rubbed the back of her head nervously.

Akane had an old familiar feeling bubbling inside. *This. THIS is what I want it to be like.* She thought. *Ranma can be so sweet when he tries!*

There was something else, though. An uncomfortable awkwardness. In the past, it had always resulted in one of them tossing out a casual insult to break the tension, reset things to a comfortable distance. But now?

*You're losing him.*

*I know, but...* Akane had a moment of fear stab through her, that these moments would soon not come again if she didn't do something. *What can I do?*

*Reward him.*

*But... He's a girl right now...* Akane thought. To be honest, Ranma's girl side hadn't even been much of a concern for her. In a lot of ways it made it more comfortable to be around Ranma; It cut the supermale machismo when it was coming from an adorable redhead who was shorter than she was. Being both was all she had even known Ranma to be. But still... *with the whole class here?*

*Nabiki would.*
That cinched it. She had always been jealous of the way Ukyou or Shampoo could be so free with their affection for Ranma, but she had never worked up the nerve herself. But after last night, and then the revelation that Nabiki was now in the race…

When Uncle Genma had been teaching her to roof jump, he told her "Sometimes you have to leap without knowing where or how you will land. If you stop, you lose all your momentum, and you never end up getting anywhere."

All of this played out in a fraction of a second. The track this particular line of thought ran on was well-worn and deep, and every time she would reach the edge and put on the brakes, realizing she couldn't see the other side. This time, though… She jumped.

She put her hand on Ranma's shoulder, leaned in, and kissed her cheek. There was that same sensation of fear, of free fall as the bottom dropped out of her stomach when she had started roof running with Genma. But there was also the exhilaration. She held it just a bit longer than she needed to, stood a bit closer than she needed. Ranma's cheek was warm, her skin soft, and she smelled of nice things. It made her think of cinnamon and oak, though it wasn't really either of those. Ranma smelled like Ranma, even though she smelled differently depending on the form. But it was a smell she decided she liked.

She stepped back, and felt a small thrill at seeing the redhead's reaction.

Poor Ranma was blushing. Not the red face of humiliation, but… honestly blushing, with a look of shock and surprise that Akane found rather fetching on her. *Maybe I'm starting to see why Shampoo glomps her as a girl* Akane thought wryly. *She's cute when she's flustered.*

She smiled at her and turned and returned to her desk, her heart pounding. *I can't believe I just did that!* She felt that same excitement she had when she had landed that first uncertain jump. That sensation she had felt when she had fought Kurumi for the second time and realized that she could actually *win.*

Having done it once, part of her wanted to do it again. She hoped Ranma gave her an excuse again sometime soon.

Ranma for her part had completely thrown a mental piston, and was still standing in the middle of the aisle, brain sputtering as she tried and failed to process what had just happened.

*Akane just kissed me…*

*She's gotta be under a spell! A potion, or another reversal jewel type thing, or…*

*She smells nice…*

*She kissed me while I was a GIRL…!*

*Did Shampoo switch bodies with her or something? Nah, her Japanese is too good…*

*She kissed me while I was a girl IN FRONT OF THE WHOLE CLASS…!*

*I should be nicer to P-chan more often…*

*She kissed me while I was a girl in front of the whole class AND UCCHAN.*

There was something very much like the sound of squealing tires as Ranma's disjointed and jumbled thoughts suddenly crashed into each other in a massive pile up of realization as she turned slightly,
seeing the Okonomiyaki chef standing just inside the doorway to the classroom, having ducked in just slightly before Ms. Hinako herself. She was staring at Ranma with wide eyes, the look of hurt and betrayal just starting to seep into her expression.

*Oh shit...*

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Nabiki did her best to focus on class, but her mind was worlds away. In her notebook she had unconsciously scribbled a representation of her corkboard diagram, scribbling notes and thoughts as she ran through who might be left she could trust.

*I think I'm going to just have to write off anyone at the school itself.* She thought glumly. She had passed several of them on her way to class, and they way they avoided making eye contact with her told her all she needed to know. *This obviously isn't a spur of the moment thing. They all knew about it.*

That left a number of resources *outside* the school that she still had to feel out. That left her resources a little threadbare, and kept leading her back to an inescapable conclusion; *I need to get the other fiancees on board.*

Which raised the problem of Hana's blackmail pics. There was a way to defuse that, but it was risky, and if she had read the players wrong… She shuddered. *It would definitely cut the number of fiancees down by one.*

"Ms. Tendo!"

Nabiki looked up, realizing the teach had been calling on her, eyes going wide as she realized that she had absolutely *no* idea what he had just asked her, or even what topic they were on currently. The rest of the class tittered around her, not at all opposed to seeing Nabiki's usual smug confident demeanor crack and having her go down a few pegs.

Before Nabiki could open up her mouth, there was a crash from outside that rattled the walls. Then the thumping of feet, and the sound of objects being thrown through the air.

"I'm sorry I didn't do anything Ucchan please let me explain!" Ranma's voice came as the redhead rushed past the room. Nabiki swore there was a doppler effect. Several silver flashes followed, and then an *extremely* enraged Ukyou Kuonji.

"Ah, sorry sensei, I'll be happy to answer any question you have for me in a minute, but first I need to keep those two from wrecking the school." Nabiki bowed and ran out of the room before the stunned teacher could protest.

"Ranma Saotome, prepare to die you two timing jerk!" Ukyou howled, taking a swipe at Ranma with her battle spatula that narrowly missed the redhead, caving in a whole group of lockers.

"Ukyou, please, just lemme explain…!" Ranma pleaded, looking behind her and realizing she was rapidly running out of hallway.

"She's not even your fiancee anymore you jackass!" Ukyou brought her spatula down in a savage strike that shattered the floor tiles.

Nabiki noticed that despite her apparent rage, there were tears in Ukyou's eyes. *Damn it all Ranma! Can't you keep from blowing things up long enough to deal with the LAST thing that blew up?* She noticed Akane was running after them, looking honestly concerned, rather than insanely jealous,
telling Nabiki *exactly* who the 'she' Ukyou was referring to was.

*Now!* *Now you take the initiative!*? Nabiki internally raged as she stalked forward. The chaos was *far* less entertaining when she wasn't making a profit off it, and with everything *else* that was happening, she just wasn't in the mood. She stomped in between Ranma and Ukyou of them, holding up a hand to each of them. *Stop. Right now!*

The authoritative note in her voice was enough to catch both of them off guard, and they automatically obeyed.

She pointed at Ranma. "Ranma. Akane kissed you, didn't she?"

Ranma nodded dumbly. Ukyou started to protest, but Nabiki held up a hand in her direction. "As a girl?" Nabiki clarified. She was pretty sure, but…

Ranma blushed and nodded again, and Nabiki noticed her sister blush as well. *Well... damn. I didn't know you had it in you Akane.* Nabiki had to admit to being grudgingly impressed. Public displays of affection towards Ranma's girl half were usually a major trigger for the girl. *Maybe I misread jealousy as homophobia?* She turned to Ukyou. "You're mad because you didn't get to kiss Ranma, right?"

"She had no right..." Ukyou said tightly. "... She broke the engagement!"

"But it happened, and you're mad." Nabiki pressed. "And right now we're in the middle of school, so we're looking more for quick fixes than long term relationship counselling. So if you got to kiss Ranma too, would that be enough to even the books for you and let me get back to math class?"

"*WHAT??*" Akane and Ranma yelped simultaneously.

"Akane, hush, you kissed someone else's fiancee in front of them. You don't get a vote." Nabiki said sternly. She looked at Ukyou and quirked an eyebrow. "Well?"

"W-well...I mean... in front of everybody?" Ukyou was blushing fiercely, twiddling her fingers. In her boy's uniform, with her hair tied back and breasts bound, she looked like a nervous teenage male about to ask a girl out to the prom. *No wonder I used to get so many orders for pics of her. I wonder if she realizes the illusion is that good?* Nabiki thought.

"Akane did it in front of everyone in class." Nabiki pointed out. "You gonna lose to her?"

"*Nabiki, stop helping!*" Akane snarled.

"I-I guess." She swallowed, and took a step over to Ranma, putting a hand on the shorter redhead's shoulder. "If... if Ranma is okay with it, that is."

Ranma's eyes were wide, and in full panic mode, as they flicked from Ukyou, to Akane, to Nabiki, then back to Ukyou. She made a soft whimpering noise in her throat, like an abused dog about to get hit.

Nabiki shot a glare at Akane that cut off the younger Tendo's building rage. She mouthed the word *camera*, and thumbed behind them.

Akane glanced in that direction, seeing Hana raising her camera, snapping pics of the entire event. She remembered her discussion with Nabiki that morning, growled and cracked her knuckles, having found an eminently suitable target to bleed off some of her hyped up emotion on.
You always had great timing Hana. Nabiki smirked. And now that Akane has something to keep her busy… She felt a certain satisfaction hearing Hana's yelp as Akane reached her. "Now or never, Kuonji." She said softly to the okonomiyaki chef, and gave her a firm push.

Ukyou stumbled forward, nearly knocking Ranma over, wrapping her arms around the shorter girl to steady herself. The two of them blushed, looking at each other.

Normally they would have stammered, blushed, and eventually Ranma would have said something stupid to ruin the moment, or another fiancee would crash in, or something else would occur, and thus the balance and status quo would be maintained. Fear kept anything from happening.

But after a year and a half, fear gets tiresome. And both of them had grown tired and frustrated with it, and so both of them, for separate reasons, and through separate journeys and trials, managed to reach the same point at the same time.

Ranma managed a smile, and said. "Go ahead, Ucchan." And closed her eyes, awaiting the kiss on the cheek. *I'm tired of making them all unhappy to keep them from being even unhappier. Screw the consequences, let Ukyou have this.*

Ukyou had been restrained by an odd mix of shame and insecurity. She had spent most of her life hiding herself away. While she would happily match Shampoo or Akane's advances on Ranma, whenever she got her alone, she always settled into those old, comfortable, 'best friend' routines. Cook a meal, talk about their problems, laugh… and nothing ever went anywhere. Because stepping over that line meant she could lose it all. As long as she was just 'there', in the gaggle of fiancees, it was safe. Ranma was never going to single her out. But if she pushed, and lost, she could lose him, even his friendship. And so she had been afraid, and hid in Ranma's 'best bud'. And it had hurt.

And she was done.

As soon as Ranma assented, she leaned in closer, and cupped the girl's cheek. She waited until Ranma opened her eyes again, and looked into hers, and saw her intent. She waited until she saw Ranma's eyes widen in realization, and then she closed her own eyes and did what she had been wanting to do for so very long.

"Mmmmnh?!" Ranma felt Ukyou's lips press against her own. For a brief moment, she had a horrifying, sickening flashback to Mikado, and the overwhelming urge to push Ukyou away. She put her hands on the taller's shoulders… and felt her trembling. She realized the kiss was different. It was gentle… questioning, Ukyou's lips touching hers, but not forcefully claiming, questing, like Mikado's. She tasted the faint bitter salt on her lips, and realized Ukyou had been crying.

She was afraid, and sad, and… and looking for acceptance? There were so many subtle little messages that she could feel through the connection. She felt a pang herself, remembered how she felt when Akane had rejected her, when Nabiki had rejected her, and for the first time she put two and two together and understood what Ukyou had felt when she had been rejected so long ago.

She slipped her arms around her neck, and pressed back into the kiss. She wasn't thinking anymore about repercussions, or the crowd, or what was going to happen in the next 30 seconds. All she was thinking was that she knew how much it would hurt if she rejected Ukyou now, and she couldn't bear to do that to her.

After a second she wasn't thinking about the sting of rejection, either. Because Ukyou's lips were soft, and her arms strong, and her body warm, and she felt the tingle of the heat she had gotten a taste of on the beach. It was different, but the same, somehow, and she didn't want to let it go this time.
Nabiki watched, realizing very quickly she had made a mistake. Experience taught her this was going to be a peck on the cheek, or maybe the lips. Something timid and awkward and not this.

She had given Ukyou an opportunity and expected her not to take full advantage of it, and she was quickly realizing this was quite possibly the dumbest thing she had done in her young life.

Something seemed to have sparked in both of them. The kiss had started off innocent enough, if a little close. Ranma had been stiff as a board, as usual when she was kissed, and then… and then she had melted. And the kiss had evolved into something very intense, very passionate, and very real.

And despite appearances, it was also a kiss between two girls, so about half of the male spectators had passed out from blood loss.

Mine!

Something quailed within Nabiki's breast as she watched. It hurt, it made her angry, and she had no one to blame but herself, which made her angrier. But worse, it made her sad. Because all of her cynicism couldn't keep her from seeing that Ukyou deeply and desperately loved Ranma, and that Ranma was responding to that. Just how she had seen glimpses of Akane's own feelings, and how Ranma responded to her.

Most of us have to lose this, don't we? She felt a pang, of regret, of sadness… not because she might lose Ranma, but because she might win, and what that would do to at least two people who cared for Ranma as much as she did, if not more. It kept her from intervening, from yelling at them to come up for air, or from doing anything but watching them as the kiss deepened. Part of her wondered where Kuonji had learned to kiss like that at an all-boys school.

Finally, the kiss trailed off, and slowly their faces moved apart, just enough to look into each other's eyes. Ranma's heart was pounding in her chest, and she had a real and fundamental sense of loss, because she could sense that things would never quite be the same between her and Ukyou.

A few feet away, Akane had watched the entire scene, jaw agape. She had Hana pinned up against the locker, and was holding her camera with the other hand. Almost absently she smashed the camera against the wall, earning an outraged squawk from the mercenary girl. She tossed the ruined camera in the trash, and after a moment, tossed Hana after it, and started walking down the hallway towards the two. She was still in that quiet place of disbelief that she went before she got really really angry.

This time, however, she didn't get the chance.

"WHAT FOUL SORCERY IS THIS!?"

She turned to see Tatewaki Kuno, shaking with rage, and glaring hateful daggers at, of all people, Ukyou Kuonji.

"Deceiver! Foul Illusionist!" Kuno howled, stomping forward. "Unhand the pigtailed girl this instant, and release her from thy ensorcelled grasp!" He drew his bokken, levelling it at Ukyou.

Ukyou stepped back from Ranma. "I would have thought you'd enjoy seeing two girls kiss, sugar."

"Nay! No woman art thou!" Kuno snarled. "I see it clearly now! You've used some form of trickery to change your aspect to a more pleasing shape to elude my suspicion! Perhaps the magicked waters of some spring. And yet, unlike a true maiden, you took no notice of the pre-eminent male of Furinkan High! And now, you return to your true form and reveal thine intent! To steal the lips and
"What..." Ukyou boggled at the incredible leap of stupidity that she had just witnessed. "I'm a girl jackass!"

"Nay, thou shalt not trick me again. Thou art as male as I!" Kuno snarled, raising his bokken over his head. "Now you shall know my wrath! THUNDER BREAK!"

Fortunately for all involved, Kuno elected to use his new ability indoors. In fact, his bokken was touching the metal frame of one of the fluorescent light fixtures. This meant that the entire fury of his thunderbolt was immediately dispelled into the school's electrical system.

Unfortunately, The Furinkan High electrical grid was not designed to withstand anywhere near that kind of voltage. Pretty much anything that had a fuse blew out spectacularly. What didn't have a fuse arced impressively, and one of those arcs managed to trigger the sprinkler system.

The sprinklers started erupting in series, starting where Kuno was standing. He immediately screamed, yelping and trying to cover himself, and from the steam it was apparent why. Ranma's eyes widened in fear as more sprinkler heads started erupting, showing other students.

"Ow! Hey, that's hot!"

"I already had my shower today!"

"Augh!"

"They're going off in the classrooms too!"

"Run!"

Ranma exchanged a glance with Ukyou and Akane, a half second acknowledgement that they knew what to do. Without any further ceremony, Ranma scooped up Nabiki in bridal carry and started to sprint for the window, followed by Akane and Ukyou.

They passed by the bust of the Principal. The head swivelled to follow them, and there was a soft whirr from inside. Probably a camera of some sort.

If I get hit with that water and he gets it on camera, I'll get kicked off the team! Ranma thought, panicked. And if I get kicked off the team, I get expelled! She pushed herself to move faster, spotting the window at the end of the hall. The sprinklers were starting to erupt just behind them now. Everything was going in slow motion. She heard a yelp from behind her as Akane and Ukyou were sprayed, and with a last surge, she leapt, curling around Nabiki protectively and rolling as she crashed through the window, the brightness of day momentarily blinding.

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Well, THIS turned into a monster chapter.

Big thanks to my proofreader Zen for helping me with this.

This is a little bit of the characters getting away from me, but in a good way. I wanted to treat the girls fairly and give them all a fair shake. This has also resulted in things getting even MORE chaotic. Poor Ranma. Also seems that Principal Kuno is more interested in getting Ranma expelled than playing by Himura's little game, hmmm? I mean... HOT water in the sprinkler system? That's not suspicious or anything.
Hope you all enjoy! And please keep reviewing and commenting! It helps me keep going!

And what is the OTHER Chinese Curse? It's the one Ranma has suffered from his entire life: "May You Live In Interesting Times."
"Well, *that* was fun." Ukyou commented dryly. Which was about the only thing about her that was dry. She shook out her shirt, her jacket already hanging over the fence around the roof of Furinkan, leaving her with only her bindings to maintain her modesty.

Akane scowled, not having the same option without stripping down to bra and panties. She shivered a bit, crossing her arms as she leaned next to the door for the roof access, keeping guard. "I'm guessing we can thank the principal for the hot water in the lawn sprinklers, too."

"Did you see which way Ranchan went? Did she get hit?" Ukyou asked, wrapping her arms around herself. The wind that had picked up had a bit of a bite to it.

"Pretty sure she dodged the sprinklers. I lost track of her when I smashed that camera in the statue outside." Akane replied. "How did we not notice he had put up those stupid things again?"

"He puts them up every other week or so. We didn't hadn't gotten around to smashing them this time." Ukyou muttered. "Probably because they hadn't started doing anything obnoxious yet."

"Remember the ones that fired Bowl-cut wigs and Buzz-cut hair caps?" Akane said, a small smile tugging at the corner of her mouth.

"Yeah. Ranchan shorted them out by switching from male to female in front of them over and over." Ukyou chuckled a bit, then went silent, shooting a guilty glance at the other girl. "Look, Akane…"

"You cheated, Ukyou." Akane said, refusing to look up at the other girl. "I never kissed Ranma like *that*.

Ukyou scowled. "Don't start crying 'foul' on me, sugar! Or did you conveniently forget you're *not* engaged to Ranchan anymore?"

"That's not…!" Akane looked up, pushing away from the door to protest, then stopped and hung her head. "… That… that was a mistake."

"Yeah, just like the last time you did it?" Ukyou asked, her expression hard. "Or every time you start screaming at him that the engagement is off? You wanna lump in all the times you've called him a pervert and told him you hate him, too? Or are you still gonna stand by those?"

"That's not fair!" Akane snarled, swiping the hair with her arm. "You know what he's like! All the stupid insensitive stunts he pulls! All the times he insults my figure, or says I can't cook, or…"

"You *can't* cook, Akane." Ukyou cut her off sharply. "I'm not going to coddle your stupid domestic fantasy anymore, just because no one else has the guts except Ranma. You can't cook, and rather than tasting your own cooking, accepting the consequences of your mistakes, and maybe having some chance of *improving*, you force your toxic crap down Ranma's throat, then make it his fault when he gags!"

"Oh yeah?! What about you!?" Akane stepped forward, getting into Ukyou's face. "Giving him all that free food, pretending he's your best friend so he'll tell you all his problems…"

"*I am* his best friend!" Ukyou growled back.

"That *wasn't* a 'best friend' kiss." Akane smirked. "You keep playing up the friend card because it's
all you've got. You're just fooling him into trusting you, thinking you'll support him, but it's only so you can get him for yourself! You can't accept that you've been in the Friend Zone from the start!"

Ukyou smirked. "Like you said, that wasn't a 'best friend' kiss." She leaned in nose to nose with Akane. "And Ranma kissed me back."

Akane's face twisted, hurt and rage flickering across her features. "You're lying."

"Ask your sister when you see her. She got a good look." Ukyou stepped back, turning away from the dark haired girl and stretching nonchalantly.

"You're lying!" Akane snarled. "Ranma would never…"

"Why?! Just because he never did with you!?!" Ukyou whirled on Akane. "You lived with him. You had all the chances in the world to take the next step if you really wanted to. I heard about that whole 'Romeo and Juliet' thing. Tape, Akane? Was the idea of actually kissing him for real that repugnant?! Or did you just want him to think it was?"

"That's not… it wasn't…" Akane felt her anger warring with hot shame. Normally she would just get angrier to push the shame away, but… she felt something else rising when she did. Despair. Every time I get embarrassed I get angry. Every time I get angry Ranma moves away from me a little further, and this time he's not coming back! Her rancor drained, and with her only real defense against her own feelings compromised, she was left with no real choice but to actually feel what she didn't want to feel.

She wrapped her arms around herself and turned away from Ukyou, trying to hide her reaction as everything she had been cramming down with false self confidence and paving over with rage started to bubble up through the cracks. All the fear, all the insecurity, all the self-doubt. Her self confidence splintered, and she started shuddering as the weight of it all became intolerable. A tear dropped to the ground, followed by another, a gasping sob escaping her lips as she struggled and failed to hide her humiliating vulnerability from her rival.

Ukyou was hardly Akane's biggest fan, but she didn't hate the girl by any stretch, and she had had enough experience with genuine despair to recognize it when she saw it. The hardness in her eyes softened as the dark haired girl trembled and struggled to hold in her emotions. She sighed and walked over to her, gently turning her around by the shoulders and giving her a hug.

That ruptured the floodgates. Akane buried her face in Ukyou's shoulder and started bawling uncontrollably.

Ukyou patted her back, and mumbled reassuring things, and otherwise just let the girl vent it all. She had some idea what Akane was feeling, after all. Those same, scary feelings that gnawed in the back of her mind, that had bubbled up just a few minutes ago, and pushed her to do something reckless.

The flood took a few minutes to subside, with Akane unable to do more than cling to Ukyou and sob. Gradually, the sobs faded, her breathing slowing as the surge of emotions ebbed. Still, that black despair squatted in her gut like frozen lead. After a few more minutes, she spoke. "I didn't want this…"

"Didn't want what?" Ukyou asked softly, moving her hand to Akane's hair.

"I didn't want to love him. I didn't want to need him." Akane answered. "I tried to fight it. To just be okay on my own, like I always was. Then someday I forgot what that was even like. And that… that terrifies me. And so I pushed and pushed, but he was always there, and it was okay. As long as I
didn't push too hard he would always come back, and as long as I didn't stop pushing I didn't have to accept that… that…" She trailed off, voice quavering. She held to Ukyou tighter.

"That you loved him." Ukyou finished for her.

Akane nodded and sniffed. "I'm so stupid! I couldn't even say it except when I was hurting him, when I was pushing him away my hardest. And… and… he didn't come back. And now I know I can't… I can't be without him… And I'm already losing him." She shuddered. "And the worst part… the worst part is I still want to push!"

Ukyou nodded silently. I stayed his 'best friend' because it was safer. More comfortable. I didn't have to be vulnerable. She took a deep breath, realizing with a little joy that she had overcome that hurdle herself in their relationship. But at the same time, she felt a pang of guilt, because the girl she was holding was paying the price.

"How are we supposed to live without him?" Akane finally said. She laughed bitterly and rested her chin on Ukyou's shoulder. "How dare he make us love him… how dare he make us need him when we'd have to do without him one day."

"He wouldn't be worth fighting so hard for if I could answer that, sugar." Ukyou replied.

Akane finally released her death grip, and Ukyou gave her a final squeeze before gently easing her off her by the shoulders. Akane smiled bashfully, and Ukyou reached up to wipe a tear from her cheek. "Look, maybe we should go talk…"

She never finished the sentence. At that moment the door slammed open, and a very wet and thoroughly enraged Tatewaki Kuno burst out onto the roof, his eyes locking onto Ukyou as the new target of his ire.

"You!" He snarled, his eyes widening. Already electricity was crackling around him. "Not content to ensorcell the Pig-tailed girl, now you seek to slake your base and vile lusts with the beauteous Akane Tendo?!" He howled. "And you degrade her by forcing such unwanted attentions while wearing your feminine guise?! Have you no morals, deceiver!?!"

"Oh for the love of…" Akane whirled on him. "Who I kiss is none of your business, Kuno! And for the record I'd much rather kiss Ukyou than you!"

Kuno took a step back. "What is this? Madness from the mouth of my love? Nay…" He clenched his fist. "The Deceiver's hold on you is stronger than I had feared!" He held up his bokken, his eyes locking onto Ukyou again. "Fear not my love! I shall smite this false angel and show you his true form!" Electricity began gathering around the end of his bokken again.

"Dammit! Ukyou's battle spatula was a few feet away from her. She wasn't exactly sure what this new move of Kuno's was, but she didn't want to risk facing it unarmed. She turned and coiled, making a leap for her weapon.

Akane caught the movement in the corner of her eyes, seeing Ukyou making a diver for her battle spatula. At the same time, Kuno's bokken was engulfed in blue-white lightning. As he began his downstroke, she put two and two together. Electricity! Ukyou's spatula is metal! "UKYOU NO!"

The bolt arced and split fingers of lightning striking and electrifying the fence, the bulk of the strike
going for the largest piece of metal, the spatula. There was a report like a gunshot, and Ukyou was blasted backwards by the thunderbolt, slamming into a utility shed.

"Ha! See how the foul incubus crumbles before the might of Tatewaki Kuno!" Kuno said, a maniacal look in his eyes.

"YOU BASTARD!" Akane reacted without thinking. The rage was back, but this time it wasn't there to cover anything.

Kuno saw her move, and smiled, spreading his arms wide. "Ah, yes! The spell is broken! Come to me, Akane Tendo! Together we shall..."

The first punch landed squarely in his gut, knocking his breath and words away and slamming him back against the closed door behind him.

Akane didn't give him a chance to recover. She howled, her next blow striking him in the ribs, the next in the solar plexus, the next the collarbone. Her hands started to blur as her rage fueled her strikes, pushing her faster and harder as she began to approach a fair approximation of the Kachū Tenshin Amaguriken.

Kuno wheezed as her assault denied him any air at all. She added kicks to the repertoire, pushing herself faster as she roared in rage. The frame of the metal door began to crack and warp, the hinges groaning. Kuno made a weak coughing noise as something crunched inside him, but Akane was far beyond caring at this point. She rocked back on her left foot, spun and delivered a final fierce spinning roundhouse kick to his chest. The overstressed hinges ripped free from their mounts, and the whole door popped through the ruined frame into the stairwell. It fell back with Kuno still on top of it and slid down the stairs, clattering and crashing to a stop on the floor below.

Akane panted. Her fists stung from the beating she had just delivered, her arms ached from pushing herself faster than she had ever gone. For a moment she stared, a little horrified at what she had just done, but then she heard a cough from behind her and forgot all about Kuno, turning and running over to Ukyou.

The Okonomiyaki chef was curled up on the ground. She moaned again, coughing a little, but didn't stir. Akane knelt next to her.

"Ukyou! Oh God, Ukyou!" She gently gathered the taller girl into her arms and stood. "I'll get you to Doc Tofu, just hang on, okay?" She coiled and leapt, thankful that she had bullied Genma into teaching her how to roofjump. She alighted briefly on the fence, and then with another bound was gone.

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The quiet groundskeeper's shed rattled a bit as the lock was snapped off. The door opened, and two figures slipped inside.

"Did anyone see?" Ranma asked as he ducked inside. He was damp, back in his male form, the girl's uniform tight and ill-fitting on his larger male frame.

"No, I'm pretty sure Akane smashed the statue before you got hit." An equally damp Nabiki replied, following him and closing the door behind her. She released the breath she hadn't realized she was holding, and leaned back against the door. "We should have known the Principal would have traps set up to catch you as a male on school grounds."

"Bad luck Kuno set them off." Ranma muttered. He walked over to the utility sink and turned the
cold water faucet, making a face as steam rose from the sink. "Hot water in all the cold water pipes. Hula-brain really went all out this time."

"Here." Nabiki scooped up a bucket and stuck it under the tap, letting it fill just enough for the water to cover the bottom. "That should be enough, we'll just let that cool enough to trigger the change." She turned off the tap.

"Yeah, good idea." Ranma squirmed. "You have no idea how uncomfortable this is."

Nabiki patted him on the shoulder. "Come on, I'll unzip you. No point in you popping a seam trying to breathe." She pulled over a couple of crates to make some makeshift seats. She noticed something and reached behind them to tug on a strap, connected to something too heavy for her to move. "Hey, is this…"

Ranma walked over, looking at what she had found. He reached down and lifted the pack up with a grunt. "Well, whadaya know? That's where Kuno stashed Ryouga's stuff."

"See if he has a comb?" Nabiki sat down on one crate, motioning Ranma to sit on the one in front of her. "Your hair is full of glass."

Ranma sat down heavily, opening the pack and fishing around. He was briefly tempted by the clean folded clothes inside, but being a guy on school grounds would just make the whole exercise he had gone through moot. Plus that would mean wearing Ryouga's underwear, which was a level of intimacy he was not willing to share with the lost boy. He found a small grooming kit and passed it over his shoulder to Nabiki. "Uh… you don't have to, you know." He said, suddenly feeling a bit sheepish.

"Don't be stupid." Nabiki replied, fishing a comb out of the kit, then proceeding to unbind Ranma's pigtail, setting aside the whisker that had been used to tie it. "Didn't your hair used to grow like crazy when you undid your pigtail?"

"Dragon whisker expired almost six months ago." Ranma replied. "Pops was pretty heartbroken that he couldn't use it to make more of that hair growth gruel." He bowed his head a bit, submitting to her attentions as she picked out the largest pieces of glass. "So… when are you gonna yell at me?"

Nabiki sighed. "I'm not going to yell at you, Saotome." She said softly, working his hair loose, and running the comb through it, teasing out smaller pieces of glass carefully.

"That kiss wasn't what you meant and you know it. I knew it." Ranma sighed. "You don't hafta pretend you're not mad."

Nabiki blew out a frustrated breath. "Alright, fine! I'm angry." She growled and returned to brushing. "So?" Ranma prompted.

"So I'm still not going to yell at you, Saotome." Nabiki snapped. "It wasn't your fault and… Ukyou is your fiancee. You have every right to kiss her. More than that, even. And I told you to."

He reached back, catching her hand and stopping her, turning on the crate to look at her. "You're my fiancee too, Nabiki. And… and I don't wanna think about what Akane must have felt." He looked down. "I don't… I don't think sometimes… until after, and…"

"Ranma, what were you thinking about." Nabiki asked, scowling. "When you kissed her back, I mean?"
"Nothing! I mean… I didn't mean…!" Ranma stammered, but trailed off when he saw Nabiki's expression. "... I-I mean… I… I was thinking about Ucchan. About… about how this was… was… really the first thing she had ever asked for from me. And how I didn't want to tell her 'no'. And… and after a second… I wanted to give it to her." He blushed.

Nabiki leaned in and cupped his head. "That's what you're supposed to feel when you kiss someone, Saotome. You're supposed to think of the person you're kissing." She said softly. "You did it right, and with the right person. It's not your job to take care of all the other people on the sidelines when you do it."

His eyes remained downcast. "But… I mean…" He looked into her eyes. "It was like that when I kissed you, too."

Nabiki's eyes widened a bit, and she hastily let go of his face, straightening and looking to the side, anywhere but meeting his gaze.

His eyes dropped again. "Am I just a Casanova?" He shuddered a bit. "I mean… you're supposed to only feel that way about one girl right? I felt… I felt some of that when Akane kissed me on the cheek too. I went from not feeling anything to not being able to turn it off." He clenched his fists. "What the hell is wrong with me?"

"Puberty." Nabiki said dryly. "That's probably my fault too. I gave you the crash course." She folded her hands in her lap. "Look, Ranma… It's okay. You're still not a pervert or a Casanova. It's just…" She took a breath, trying to think how to explain it. "You've got this notion that holding hands is the same as a declaration of eternal devotion. And it's not. It's okay to hold hands, and go on dates and even get kissed and kiss back. Even if it's with different people. You're hardly the only one, you just… have terrible luck with having it all made a public spectacle." She winced again, remembering how much of that was directly her fault. "This is the time when you're supposed to do all that stuff. To kind of figure out who you fit with."

"Yeah… but… my parents…" Ranma started weakly.

"... Are an idiot, and stuck living in Feudal Japan respectively, and which one is which seems to vary from day to day!" Nabiki said sharply. She took a breath and closed her eyes, getting her sudden flare of temper under control. "I'm sorry… I didn't have any right to say that."

Ranma opened his mouth, then closed it again. He should be defending them, right? Certainly his Mom. A good son wouldn't let that kind of slur stand. Pops IS an idiot. He's got that coming, but… Mom is good right? She at least CARES. So… why aren't I saying anything? He slumped, feeling a surge of guilt. I'm being petty, just 'cause she's strict…

Nabiki pushed his shoulder. "Turn around, I'm not done with your hair yet."

"I can do the rest myself." Ranma said, reaching for the comb, but she jerked it away.

"Yes, you can. But you're not going to," Nabiki said sternly. "Now turn."

He did as he was told, feeling her come up behind him again and resume brushing. He shivered a bit… not because having her comb his hair was unpleasant, but because it altogether wasn't. It felt entirely too good, and he really didn't think it was okay for him to be feeling like that so soon after what happened with Ukyou. Or Akane.

"So… uh… how do normal people work this out?" He asked tentatively, trying to distract himself from the feel of her running her fingers through his hair. There was something very primal about
being *groomed* he didn't want to think about right now.

"Normal people don't have arranged marriages anymore. Much less *three*." She scoffed. She was silent a moment, obviously thinking about it. "They date. They get awkward. They do stupid things. They break each other's hearts. They recover." She was finally satisfied all the glass was gone, and started weaving the braid again. "And eventually they figure out what they're really looking for. Usually in time for them to have grown up enough to be ready for a real adult relationship."

"You're guessing that last bit." Ranma stated astutely.

"Yes, I am." Nabiki admitted. "And… maybe not everyone manages that last bit. Or they don't figure out what they want before they decide, and make a bad decision. Like Kuno's parents. That's why this whole engagement thing is so stupid. They should have waited until we were at least through high school."

"Then we might have ended up with other people." Ranma said, twiddling his thumbs.

"Would that have been so bad? Give us a chance to work it out for ourselves. Do the arranged marriage thing if we don't find someone on our own by the time we turn 30 or something, like those marriage pacts they have in the movies between childhood friends." She tied off the end of the pigtail, giving it a gentle tug to make sure it was secure. Kasumi would probably want to redo it later, but at least she had managed to get it straight.

"What about uniting the schools?" Ranma asked.

"They're not even one generation removed from each other, and neither Daddy nor Mr. Saotome have any pupils except for you and Akane, and Happosai is the Grandmaster of both schools. They *are* united." Nabiki huffed. "There isn't even a separate dojo for the Saotome School, and the Tendo branch doesn't have any special moves beyond the basic teachings. It's just an excuse because they got drunk when they were young and thought it'd be neat if their kids got married so they'd have an excuse to hang out and get drunk more."

Ranma turned and looked at her. "You really don't think there's anything special about the Tendo School? Even though it's your birthright?"

"There is exactly *one* thing about the Tendo school that is special, and it's not the teaching of some crazed ancient lecher, or a run down old dojo." Nabiki said. "It's Akane Tendo, plain and simple. Besides her that dojo hasn't produced a single thing of worth."

Ranma quirked an eyebrow. "It produced you."

Nabiki felt her cheek grow warm, the offhanded compliment catching her off-guard. "I'm… not a martial artist."

"No, but you're one of the most formidable people I've ever met." He gave her a lopsided grin and stood, walking over to the bucket and sticking his finger in. "I think it's cool enough now." He picked it up and dumped it over his head, the water in the bucket just enough to wet his hair, but it was enough to trigger the change.

"So, wanna get out of here?" Ranma grinned over her shoulder at Nabiki, reaching back to readjust her bra and zip up her dress.

"I… Yeah… sure, one minute." Nabiki shook the stunned expression off her face and stood up, walking over to the door. "Stand back, if the Principal is out there with a hot water gun or something it's better if he hits me with it than you."
"Careful, it could be really hot." Ranma said. "Like, scalding."

"Good point." Nabiki reached into her pocket and pulled out a compact instant camera, tossing it to Ranma. "If he soaks me, snap a pic. If someone can win a million dollars over accidentally spilled hot coffee, imagine what I'd be able to get for intentionally scalding a student with a pre-meditated water hose?"

"That doesn't stop you getting burned!"

"Burns heal, and a hundred million yen would be a terrific anaesthetic." Nabiki replied, cracking the door open. She peered out, but didn't see anyone. She sighed in disappointment and motioned for Ranma to follow. "Coast is clear."

"You actually sound unhappy 'bout that." Ranma muttered. "You are a weird girl, Nabiki."

They stepped out blinking into the daylight. After her eyes adjusted, Nabiki could see a number of fire trucks parked on the street outside the school, and students milling about in the courtyard.

"Looks like they evacuated the school." Ranma said. "Don't see any sign of Pineapple head."

"Well, the school electric system blows out, and the sprinkler system goes off. Not to mention they're going to find the sprinkler system got tampered with to connect it to the hot water boilers. I imagine Principal Kuno has a lot of explaining to do, and a lot of paperwork to fill out. Doubt they'll let any students back into the school today." Nabiki smirked. "Bet the fines are going to sting."

"Do you see Ukyou or Akane out there?" Ranma asked, peering around as she stepped out of the shed. She had Ryouga's backpack slung over her shoulder.

Nabiki shook her head. "I really hope Kuno didn't catch up with them."

"Hey, what's that?" Ranma pointed into the crowd as a stretcher was brought out from the school.

They walked to the edge of the crowd, trying to get a look at who was being wheeled out on the stretcher. For a moment, Nabiki was worried it would be Akane or Ukyou, but then suddenly an arm emerged from the covering sheet, clutching the splintered remains of a bokken.

"I YET STAND!" Kuno announced, before the ruined bokken slipped from his grasp as he passed out once more.

"Well… I guess that answers whether he ran into Ukyou and Akane." Nabiki said dryly.

"I don't see any more stretchers, so I guess they managed to deal with his new technique okay…" Ranma said, though there was an edge of uncertainty in her voice. Her thoughts dwelt on how much metal Ukyou typically had on her person.

"We should probably make ourselves scarce before someone thinks to start asking us questions about what happened." Nabiki said. She turn and took Ranma's arm, guiding her away.

"We headed back home?" Ranma asked.

Nabiki shook her head, taking a deep breath. "No. I need to talk with the Amazons about all this. We don't need Shampoo popping up at the dojo and blowing your cover with your parents."

Ranma winced. Nabiki could tell how much she disliked keeping secrets from her mother. "Yeah… I guess."
"We also need to tell her you kissed Ukyou."

"WHAT?!" Ranma gaped at Nabiki, aghast.

Akane landed a bit heavily outside the clinic, stumbling a bit. She wasn't used to carrying someone while roofjumping, and Ukyou was still a limp, dead weight. She ran up to the door and threw it open, almost causing it to jump off its tracks. "Doctor Tofu!"

The young doctor emerged from his back room immediately. "What is all this commotion… Akane?" He saw the distraught girl carrying the okonomiyaki chef and his eyes narrowed as his professional instincts took over. "In here." He stepped back into the back room and waved Akane to bring Ukyou in waving her to lay her down on one of the beds as he wheeled over a cart of instruments. "What happened."

"It was some kind of new attack from Kuno. Like a bolt of lightning from his sword." Akane hiccuped. "She hasn't woken up yet. I rushed her directly here."

"You did the right thing." Tofu said. He opened one of her eyes, shining a light into it, checking for reaction. Did she take a blow to the head?"

Akane nodded. "She was knocked back when the bolt hit her spatula. It threw her into the roof shed."

"Tell me about this attack of Kuno's." Tofu said, continuing his examination. He checked her hands, noting the burns on the palms. He gently started probing her chi flows with his fingers, feeling the disruptions, especially around the back of the skull.

"It's… it's not like any I've seen before. It isn't like the Mōko Takabisha or Shishi Hōkōdan or any of the others ones I've seen. It was electrical… seemed to be drawn to metal." She watched him work, wringing her hands.

"Did you smell ozone when he used it?" Tofu asked. He pressed a few pressure points on Ukyou's neck and chin, redirecting her chi flows and trying to restore order to chaotic aura.

"Yes! Yers I did… that's what made me think we should avoid metal, but before I could warn Ukyou…" She looked at him. "You know what it is?"

"I might." Tofu replied. "If I'm right, it's a gross misuse of the technique. Fortunately, I don't think Ukyou took the worst of it. Most of the damage was caused by the bump on the head." He stepped back and adjusted his glasses. "She appears to have a concussion, which is the worst of her injuries, and some minor burns on her hands." He looked at Akane. "Does she have any family or next of kin?"

Akane considered. There's Konatsu… but I don't know how to contact him. Same with Ukyou's parents. "None that I know how to reach quickly." She admitted.

Tofu nodded. "Would you be willing to stay until she wakes? Concussion victims need to be monitored for 24 hours after the injury, particularly if it results in unconsciousness." He brought over another wheeled table with some gauze and salve. "Her chi flows look strong, so I don't believe she's in any danger, but she is likely going to be disoriented when she wakes up, and I'm afraid Ms. Kuonji doesn't know me terribly well." He started treating the burns on her palms.

"I… of course!" Akane nodded.
He smiled. She blushed a little, echoes of her old crush on him resurfacing. "Great! I haven't had an assistant since that Shampoo girl was working here." He sighed. "I hear she's working in a restaurant now. A shame. It's a real waste of talent."

Akane blinked. "Talent?"

He nodded as he carefully applied the salve, then started to loosely wrap the hands to protect them. "Oh yes. Her knowledge of herbalist remedies and chi flows was most impressive. Moreover, she had a real knack of pressure points and acupuncture." He shook his head. "I suppose that's part of what she was taught back home, but it seems such a waste to see it used on pointless battles."

"I doubt she sees it that way. Or her Great-Grandmother." Akane muttered.

Tofu finished one hand, then moved to the other. "Yes. The Amazon Way. Shampoo told me a little of them while she was here," He shook his head. "Shortsightedness, pushing for more warriors without concern of where they will find the healers to mend them after their hunt for 'glory' leaves them broken and bleeding."

Akane cocked her head. She had never heard the normally soft-spoken doctor talk so sharply on a topic. "I think her Great-Grandmother wouldn't agree with you."

Tofu sighed. "The Full-Body Cat Tongue. I remember her." He shook his head. "Far be it for me to question an elder, but… as a physician I take issue with her methods." He finished with the bandages. "She should wake up soon, but until then we need to keep an eye out for any worsening of her condition, such as seizures or fever. I'll watch her for now if you want to go give your family a call and let them know you'll be here, and I'll set up the other cot for you to use tonight."

"Normally I'd call for an ambulance to take her to the hospital for observation, but I get the feeling that would bring up more questions than you'd be comfortable with?"

Akane blushed, remembering the rage she had felt as she had laid into Kuno… and feeling something… maybe several somethings… break inside him under her fists. "Y-yeah, that'd be best for now."

"Good, now before you make your call, let me see your hands."

"My hands…?" Akane glanced at her hands, seeing her knuckles were abraded, bruises starting to show. She self consciously tucked them behind her. "My hands are fine."

He gave her a stern look until she caved, presenting her hands like a guilty child. He took them with a gentle grip, turning them over in his own larger hands.

Akane blushed. Digging up her old feelings about Dr Tofu was not something she wanted to do right now.

"You've been training. A lot." He muttered. "Callouses on the knuckles, yet you still did this much damage." He didn't meet her eyes as she took out a bottle of antiseptic, dipping a cotton swab into it. "Will I be seeing Kuno soon?"

Anyone else would have taken that to assume he meant to treat injuries, but Akane knew he was asking if Kuno had survived. She had known what she was doing, strikes intended to do as much damage as possible. She wasn't hitting to incapacitate. "He was breathing." She said softly. "The fire department was already there because of him setting off the sprinklers."

"I see." Tofu replied, and said no more on it. He finished treating the abrasions, then pressed a few points on the back of her hands, and the palms. "There. That should promote blood flow and keep it
from bruising too badly. Try not to hit anything for a few hours. Now, go call your family."

"Look Ranma, you remember how Ukyou freaked out when Akane gave you a peck on the cheek."
Nabiki said. "You don't honestly think Shampoo won't find out about your kiss with Ukyou? The entire school saw it!"

"Yeah, but…” Ranma sighed in frustration. "Isn't there any other way?"

The old Nabiki would have leapt at the chance to profit a little from the flustered Redhead. In fact, something like this could have allowed her to keep Ranma on a leash pretty much indefinitely. She idly wondered how she had gotten from that Nabiki to the one who was following Ranma cleaning up all her 'whoopsies' like a dog owner at the dog park. "Ranma, trust me… She will be hurt, there will be consequences… but they'll be a lot less if you admit it to her yourself, rather than her finding out through the grapevine and having to confront you."

"And you'll back me up, right?" Ranma asked hopefully.

"Absolutely not." Nabiki replied. "I'm helpful. Not suicidal."

"You are so uncute…” Ranma muttered, unconsciously slipping into an old pattern.

Nabiki smirked. She caught Ranma by the shoulder, turning her, and before she could protest she firmly backed her up against the wall, stepping right into her personal space and tilting the redhead's chin up with the light pressure of her finger. She was rewarded with a sharp intake of breath, wide eyes, and a rapidly deepening blush.

She leaned in close, so that their noses almost touched, and Ranma could feel the warmth of her breath as she whispered. "You are such a terrible liar, Saotome."

She then stepped away and continued on her path as if nothing happened.

Ranma closed her eyes and shuddered. "That's… that's super not fair, Nabiki." She pushed off the wall and sullenly followed after her.

Nabiki turned, walking backward, smirking, enjoying the feeling of getting some of her own back. "What isn't fair? That I teased you?" She winked. "Or that I didn't follow through?"

"Not follow through on what, Nabiki Tendo?"

Nabiki blinked and looked up. Above her, perched on a signpost and peering down at her curiously was the lavender haired amazon, her bright reddish eyes wide with almost feline curiosity.

"Yaaaaaa!" Nabiki yelped and toppled over backwards.

Shampoo blinked, then looked up and spotted her prey. "Ranma!" She sprung from the signpost, bowling over the girl in a flying glomp.

"Ack! No, Shampoo!" Ranma wriggled and struggled, but Shampoo had long ago mastered the art of holding onto the slippery Saotome, and wasn't about to let her go, especially with no Akane in sight to ruin it by hitting her Àirén.

Nabiki grumbled, dusting herself off. I'm not dead, so I guess Shampoo didn't catch my little tease. She thought, breathing a sigh of relief. She saw Ranma struggling and sighed, walking over to
Ranma looked up to see Nabiki approaching, though she stopped a few feet away. Close enough for her to see her mouth the words 'Hug her back'

Ranma blushed. She honestly would have preferred if Nabiki had just hit her, as was the standard way to pry Shampoo off of her. Timidly, she put her arms around the excited amazon and awkwardly squeezed back.

Shampoo immediately seemed to melt in her arms. As soon as there was the security of being held in return, she relaxed, somehow fitting herself even closer to the redhead than should have been possible with them both being girls.

Ranma flushed deep red as she suddenly became aware of far too many interesting things about Shampoo's anatomy. With how her hormones had been carbonated today, she could already feel her female body responding in ways she's wasn't really ready to deal with. Oh, yeah... thanks Nabiki... this is MUCH worse...

But the discomfort had only just begun, as the contented Amazon started to make a sound that was an entirely too accurate reproduction of a purr.

Ranma immediately stiffened, the blush on her cheeks vanishing as all the blood drained from her face.

Nabiki sighed and walked the rest of the way over, squatting next to them. She poked the back of Shampoo's head gently. "Shampoo? Free advice, so take it for what it's worth, but... You probably shouldn't purr while hugging the ailurophobic."

"Mmmm?" Shampoo looked up at Nabiki, then back at Ranma, who was stiff as a board and twitching. "Ah! Mercenary Girl make good point. ｢Wǒ hěn bǎoqiàn wǒ de ài.｣ She reluctantly disentangled herself from the redhead.

"Guh... N-no... no p-problem... Shampoo..." Ranma managed, still twitching, staring ahead sightlessly.

"Àirén come to date Shampoo?"

Ranma snapped back to herself, ready to snap out her usual vehemently negative response to that, but she paused, for the moment noticing the look in the girl's eyes.

Shampoo's expression was earnest. Hopeful. How many times has she asked me that with that same expression? After I had turned her down so many times? Ranma though, feeling a big ball of guilt crawl it's way into her throat. "Umm... We'll... we'll talk about that, okay?"

"Aiyaaah!" Shampoo giggled and bounced back, like a child at Christmas. That just made the guilt worse. Ranma picked herself up and hung her head. This is going to suck. Thanks again, Nabiki.

"We actually need to talk to you and your Grandmother about some stuff going on at school Ranma could use some help with." Nabiki said. "Do you have a few minutes?"

"Is slow time in restaurant. Not yet dinner rush. Good time to talk!" Shampoo nodded. She looped her arm through Ranma's, then noticed paused, giving her a once over. "Why Ranma dressed as girl today?"
Ranma sighed. "It's... part of the problem I'm having." Ranma said. "I'll explain inside."

True to her word, the restaurant was empty at this time of day. Shampoo had been quick to summon her great grandmother, and the ancient amazon matriarch had seemed to be bemused by Ranma's current attire. After whipping Ranma up a ramen (And as an afterthought one for Nabiki, which was nice as they had missed lunch) they listened patiently as Ranma laid out the story, with interjections and additions by Nabiki.

"So... The principal has challenged son-in-law, and the prize is his very manhood itself. At least as far as school is concerned." Cologne croaked, perched on her cane as she sipped at a cup of tea. "Hardly a serious matter, but a fun distraction I suppose."

Nabiki's eyes narrowed, and she leaned forward. "With all due respect, Elder, I think the matter is more serious than you give it credit for."

"Kuno is a buffoon. He'll get distracted by a coconut soon enough and likely forget this matter." Cologne replied dismissively.

"He's not the concern. Himura Tanaka is." Nabiki insisted.

"The ambitious girl with aspirations of olympic glory? Heh..." Cologne muttered, taking another sip from her cup.

"The ambitious girl with connections to the Triad." Nabiki corrected.

She had to admit to some satisfaction to seeing Cologne choke on her tea a bit.

"... Explain." Cologne coughed lightly into a handkerchief, fixing her eyes on Nabiki.

Nabiki felt the full weight of that scrutiny come down on her. The force of Cologne's full attention was... oppressive to say the least. The woman was not to be trifled with. But... this was the arena of Nabiki's art. Even if she was facing a grand master, what sort of Tendo would she be if she backed down from a challenge? She smirked and sat back a bit, relaxing her posture consciously, radiating confidence as she crossed her legs and folded her hands in her lap. "Normally that kind of premium information would have a price tag, Honored Elder." She said, quickly holding up a hand to forestall a protest. "But I'm aware we are soliciting assistance here, and so openness is important. Wouldn't you say?"

"Yes..." Cologne grated, her eyes narrowing.

Nabiki felt that invisible pressure increase. It was... terrifying. Of course the woman was a skilled martial artist, and could snap Nabiki's neck faster than she anyone could respond to. But more than that, she had 300 years of experience in leadership, scheming and maneuvering in a society that had no tolerance for weakness. She could already tell the woman was probing her for chinks in her armor, and would inevitably find them. She wouldn't tolerate Nabiki having such an advantage for long. She would have to give the woman what she sought, but carefully. If she didn't play to Cologne's expectations of her, poisoned her information it with uncertainty or suspicion, the elder amazon would like start digging deeper than she was comfortable with. She was fending off a much stronger opponent, so her only choice was to give ground, but to do it in a controlled fashion so she didn't end up on her rear.

Outwardly she betrayed none of this as she adopted her most businesslike smile - something with a lot of teeth. "I'll be frank, my information is hearsay at best but the source is reputable, a reporter at a
local paper who owed me a few favors. But, by its very nature, if it was more than hearsay there wouldn't be a problem." She sighed. "Himura Tanaka is the granddaughter of Kazuya Tanaka, CEO and majority shareholder of Tanaka Pharmaceuticals, a company that has been shadowed by the authorities for years for suspicion of connections to Yakuza and Triad drug trafficking operations, specifically in the production and distribution of methamphetamines and other performance enhancing drugs." She crossed her arms. "After two decades, nothing has been linked, and anyone in Japan who has pursued the case has either been disgraced, transferred to other cases, or mysteriously disappeared; and there are rumors of similar happenings in any other countries they have dealings with. I am sure you can see the problems someone with connections like that can pose should they decide they want something." Nabiki closed her eyes, and focused on her breathing and heartrate as she waited for the inevitable questions.

"And what she wants is son-in-law." Cologne replied.

Nabiki opened her eyes and met Cologne's. Internally it made her shrivel; She could feel those ancient eyes searching hers, probing, judging. "She doesn't want him." Nabiki clarified. "She wants her." She flicked her eyes to Ranma in her female form. "The entire situation with the Principal I believe was just to get Ranma's paperwork altered to allow her to compete on Himura's behalf in the women's league."

"You don't believe she will honor the agreement with son-in-law." Another statement, rather than a question.

Nabiki sighed, allowing some of her nervous energy to be released as an expression of frustration. I'm leaking information like a sieve. She's just confirming what she already knows at this point. "I don't believe she will, no. She has already indicated she has sufficient material to bring real legal charges against Ranma based around the unforgiving assessment the authorities are likely to have of his misadventures, as well as his… tendency to impersonate a female to gain access to places like the girl's changeroom, women's side furo… actions that could be mistaken as… 'predatory'." Nabiki felt a twinge as she caught Ranma wincing out of the corner of her eye. The whole 'pervert' accusation was still a tender topic. Moreso now that Ranma was starting to realize it was a lot more serious accusation to make.

"I care little for Japanese laws, and less for their coddling of 'social norms'." Cologne replied haughtily. "Son-in-law will return with us to China, at which point such charges would be moot."

"Really? Ever wonder how difficult it is to get someone with an open sex offender case out of the country?" Nabiki leaned forward. Cologne's disdain for Japanese laws had given her an opening, and she intended to press the advantage. "Or how well the extradition laws between China and Japan work?" She forced herself to meet and hold those ancient eyes.

She saw something that looked almost like respect flicker through them. "You… may have a point." Cologne grudgingly agreed. "Then it would seem that the primary obstacle is this Himura."

"Shampoo can fix." The lavender haired Amazon grinned and cracked her knuckles. "Obstacles are for killing."

Nabiki glanced at her, then back to Cologne. "I presume you understand why that would be a mistake?" Nabiki promoted the elder.

"The Triad, yes." Cologne sighed. "They are… a problem. Even for us." She reached out and touched Shampoo's shoulder. "Do not act hastily, child. You will need to learn that not all problems can be solved by force."
Shampoo scowled. "Other ways to deal with. Can use Xi Fa Xiang Gao."

"That's actually probably our best bet." Nabiki agreed, remembering the memory erasing shiatsu technique that had once been used on her sister. "But until we know who might notice her memory has changed, and how they might react, we should avoid using it. We'd likely only have one opportunity to get it right before larger forces get involved."

"Then what would you have us do, child?" Cologne croaked, growing impatient.

Nabiki relaxed a bit. She had made her point and they were willing to listen for now. "For now, Ranma needs safe spaces. Unfortunately her mother has… forbidden her from observing the primary condition of the challenge, namely attending school as a girl, as that would be 'unmanly'. However, the primary edict of the Saotome School of Martial Arts requires she accept all challenges, which her mother also expects her to observe."

"That no make sense." Shampoo said, looking confused. "How Ranma take challenge without following rules of challenge?"

"Given the man she married, such logic makes perfect sense." Cologne snorted. She held up a hand to counter Ranma's protest. "Peace, son-in-law. You cannot deny your family has a tendency to place contradictory responsibilities upon your shoulders. How many fiancees has your fool of a father saddled you with?"

"Forty-seven." Ranma muttered, reluctantly forced to concede the point.

"Forty-eight, Ranma." Nabiki reminded her, earning a halfhearted glare from the redhead. "Needless to say, something has to give. So it would be helpful if Ranma could stash a change of clothes here, as well as relying on you for discretion when it comes to what is said to her parents?"

"Is that all?" Cologne smiled. "And with all this seriousness I thought you were going to ask something of actual consequence from us. Son-in-law is welcome here whenever he likes, and of course we will be discreet with his plans."

"We too-too happy to help!" Shampoo beamed.

"We… might need more help, depending on how this plays out." Nabiki cautioned. "For now, we just need more information. But I would like it if Shampoo could keep in touch with us. Say… a standing lunch order from the Nekohanten?"

"I'll see Shampoo is there with your delivery. Hot and fresh a soon as the lunch bell rings." Cologne smirked. She hopped off the table and pogo'd away. "I sense you kids have some things to discuss amongst yourselves. I'll see myself out."

Shampoo blinked, then glanced at Nabiki and Ranma.

Nabiki glanced at Ranma and sighed. Of course. Ranma would be an open book to her. She was reading him this whole time. I might as well not have bothered with my game face at all.

Ranma stood up, self-consciously brushing off her skirt. "C'mon, Shampoo. Let's go outside. I've… uhh… got some stuff to talk about." She shot a glance at Nabiki, then slunk out the door as Shampoo glomped her arm.

"A moment, Nabiki Tendo." Cologne's voice came from behind her. Nabiki froze, then turned.

The old woman was perched on her cane a few feet away, but Nabiki felt like she was nose to nose,
being scrutinized. Here it comes…

"There is something about this matter that I do not understand." She narrowed her eyes. "You."

Nabiki took a breath. She knew this question was coming. "You mean, 'what is my angle'?"

"To put it simply? Yes." Cologne replied. "You have been notable to me only in your consistency, Nabiki Tendo. Regardless of the situation, your first response has invariably been to discover how best to profit from it. This has even been at the expense of your own family, when it suited your ends. Until now."

Nabiki smirked. Too easy, Cologne. "And that's true, and I imagine my angle would be clearer had I seen fit to give you the whole story."

Cologne narrowed her eyes. "And…?"

"And… Doing so would expose my own interests, which would weaken my position. Something which I have very little incentive to do." Nabiki maintained her smirk. Oh, she could feel the menace from the woman now, but this was more familiar territory. She examined her nails disinterestedly.

"Pfeh." Cologne spat, then hopped over, producing a small envelope from her robes and handing it over. "I trust this will be sufficient incentive?"

Nabiki didn't have to fake the smirk anymore. And got you. She accepted the envelope, opening it to find a number of bills. Around 50,000 yen at first glance. She gave a theatrical sigh. "Ms. Himura hasn't just been causing problems for our dear Ranma. She's saw fit to undermine and cripple my entire operation, including using her business contacts to confiscate property I had in secure storage, records… essentially stealing everything I had built over the last few years out from under me." She scowled, and again, she didn't need to fake the ice in her stare, or her heart as she spoke of it. "Allowing the matter to stand in any form is… unacceptable."

"Ah." The pressure from Cologne immediately receded as she received an answer that satisfied her. "Now it makes sense. Revenge."

"Not just revenge. Allowed to continue, Himura would undoubtedly prove an obstacle to my future plans, as I'm obviously on her radar." Nabiki smirked. "And obstacles are for killing. In a manner of speaking." She sighed airily. "And by assisting Ranma pro bono, as well as any others who might be interested in crossing Ms. Himura, I keep their rancor nicely focused on her."

Cologne chuckled. "I see. I didn't realize you had such a vindictive streak, Nabiki Tendo."

"Oh, I don't." Nabiki replied. "I'm simply collecting my payment. She co-opted my entire operation, and regardless of what she or her cronies think, it is still mine. They're merely leasing it. The rent is not cheap, and the interest is compounding quickly." She locked eyes with Cologne. "And this time, I am making an exception to my usual policy and taking payment in flesh, rather than cash. Call it… sending a message to anyone else who thinks it's wise to deal with me so… casually."

Cologne cackled. "And there is the Nabiki Tendo I know. Though perhaps I misjudged how nuanced you can be." She shook her head. "I think I will enjoy your little caper. Just be careful. I can shield Son-in-law from repercussions should the Triad become involved… but that is all. Understand?"

"Trust me. I know enough to know when I am out of my depth." Nabiki turned. "I'll keep you posted as things develop." She headed out the door, giving the old woman a careless wave as she stepped out. "Thank you for the meal, by the way."
Nabiki managed to maintain her composure as she left, and as she walked down the sidewalk and got around the corner of the building. Then she ducked around it, leaned against the wall and clutched her chest, taking a deep breath.

She closed her eyes, taking a minute to regain her composure, quieting her breathing and regaining her center. *I don't think there's a boardroom meeting in Japan that will faze me after that.*

She opened her eyes and pushed off the wall. It was time to see how Ranma was doing. She walked along the street towards the vacant lot that the local martial artists tended to use for privacy.

She was still a block away when she heard the slap.

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Ranma lead Shampoo to the empty lot, trying to run through how she was going to explain things to the Amazon. She stole a glance at her, as she hold onto her arm, eyes closed as she allowed herself to be lead, just enjoying being with her Àirén.

*She really just… likes being around me, doesn't she?* She thought guiltily. *Why didn't I notice it?*

You did. Some small voice said to her. *You always knew. Why do you think you freaked out when that Reversal Jewel thing happened? You enjoy the attention, just like Akane said. You just never admitted it before.*

She sighed and slumped more. I retrospect a lot more of Akane's barbs were on the mark than she was really comfortable with. Self-awareness kinda sucked.

She stopped as they got to the empty lot. Shampoo gave her a quizzical look and released her arm. "What is it Àirén?"

Ranma took a deep breath. "A… lot of stuff happened at school today. I thought… it'd be better if I just told you about it rather than you hearing about it second hand." She bowed her head. "When school started today, I found Akane's lost pet pig, P-chan."

"You mean, you find stupid lost boy Ryouga in curse form." Shampoo corrected, crossing her arms and smirking.

Ranma blushed a bit. "Well, yeah, but 'Kane doesn't know that. S-so… I gave him back to her. She… uh… she thanked me…"

"Good!" Shampoo's smiled widened. "Maybe she marry Pig-idiot and stay out of Shampoo hair!"

"... And she kissed me." Ranma finished. "O-on the cheek!" She quickly corrected. She looked up to gauge the reaction.

Shampoo was glowering. She closed her eyes, then harrumphed. "Is no matter. Knowing violent girl, probably giving Kiss of Death." She cocked head. "Was at school, so was girl side, yes?"

Ranma nodded slowly. "Yeah, been a girl all day."

"Then definitely Kiss of Death." She smirked. "Maybe Akane not make such bad Amazon. Too-too much pride though."

"Yeah, well, Ukyou didn't see it the same way." Ranma continued. "She got pissed."

Shampoo stepped forward. "Spatula girl no hurt, yes?" She asked, looking genuinely concerned.
"Not understand custom. Get wrong idea."

And Akane had the RIGHT idea? Ranma didn't point this out, not wanting to give Shampoo more reasons to be mad. "Yes, well… She got mad, but she didn't hurt me…" She blushed. "She… uh…" She took a deep breath, closing her eyes. "She decided she wanted her own kiss as compensation, except it wasn’t a kiss on the cheek, and the whole school saw it." She said quickly, and braced.

Nothing happened.

Ranma waited a few more moment, aware that such things were sometimes delayed, but nothing. Tentatively, she relaxed and opened an eye. Maybe she isn't mad?

Shampoo was glowing. Literally. Her battle aura was flaring visibly around her, like pale blue flame flickering around her form. Her eyes were shadowed, but Ranma got the impression if she could see them, they'd be red and glowing.

Well, I had a good run, I guess. She thought, stiffening as the Amazon took a couple of steps closer.

"Did you kiss her back?"

Ranma took a second. It didn't sound like Shampoo talking at all. Her voice was low, tight. The usual bubbly inflection was gone.

Ranma wanted to lie. Part of her knew Shampoo wanted her to lie. It would have been so easy to lie…

"Yeah… I… yes I did." Ranma replied softly, dropping her eyes. Her posture relaxed and her shoulders slumped.

The slap snapped her head to the side. Ranma didn't resist or try and roll with it. It hurt, but part of her didn't think it had hurt enough. That ball of guilt in her gut had grown spikes, and was starting to twist.

"You love her?" Shampoo asked softly, in that same low, dangerous voice. "You with her now?"

Ranma's head drooped back into place, her eyes on the ground. She felt the sting in her cheek, the heat that indicated it was probably going to leave a mark. Her vision blurred. "I don't know." She admitted softly. "I'm more confused now." She clenched her fists. "I… I know it would be better if I could just decide, but…" Her hands relaxed and she closed her eyes again. "I'm sorry. I know that's not good enough."

She expected the next blow would hurt a lot more, but wasn't bracing for it. She refused to. She was a bit surprised when she felt gentle hands on either side of her face, coaxing her to look up.

Shampoo's eyes were wet, but she had a smile on her face. Her face was only inches from Ranma's. "'Not know' is good enough answer. Is mean Shampoo still can have hope. Is mean even kiss not enough to make Àirén forget Shampoo." She brushed her thumb across Ranma's cheek, wiping away an errant tear. "Is for Shampoo, yes?"

Ranma nodded slightly, struggling to keep more from joining it, and failing. No, hit me! She screamed internally. Hurt me! I can deal with that! Don't… don't… The ball of guilt was spinning and writhing now, twisting and churning her insides.

Shampoo seemed determined to defy Ranma's wishes, however, and instead pulled the smaller redhead into a hug. Not the usual Amazon glomp; This was gentle, reassuring, and utterly
devastating.

*Men amongst men don't cry! Men amongst men don't cry! Men... I'm not a man right now!* Ranma wrapped her arms around Shampoo. For once, she was the one clinging. She shuddered and buried her face in the amazon's shoulder. "I'm sorry... I don't... I don't know what I'm doing. I don't know what I'm *feeling*..."


The kiss wasn't sudden, or a surprise, or in any way forceful. Ranma could have backed away, or even flinched, or even just not seemed willing, and she got the feeling that this time Shampoo would have stopped.

Ranma absolutely wasn't going to do any of those things.

She surprised herself by meeting Shampoo halfway. By now this was no longer something terrifying and new. It was another way of communicating, another dimension to this martial art of communication, and she was starting to learn the katas. She opened her mouth as Shampoo's soft lips met hers, her arms sliding around her neck. She felt Shampoo's arms around her waist pulling her closer, and she didn't resist, leaning more into the kiss. Her eyes slid closed, and everything was sensations and tastes and smells and sounds. She found with some surprise that she was the one pushing the kiss, deepening it as she opened her mouth and pressed herself close to the Amazon, her fingers tangling in Shampoo's hair. She wondered how she had never noticed it was so soft, or smelled so nice.

She felt something on her thigh, but it took a moment for her hormone-addled mind to realize it was Shampoo's hand. Shampoo wasn't the first to try and cop a feel, but... Ranma shivered as she felt her hand slide up under her skirt. She was the first Ranma was going to let get away with it.

They finally broke the kiss, both of them breathless and flustered. Their lips brushed a few more times, threatening to start the kiss anew. Both were shaking a little from the intensity.

Shampoo gently pressed her forehead to Ranma's. "*Wǒ ài nǐ*"

Ranma shivered, for the first time really feeling the impact of those words. She felt dizzy, flustered. She licked her lips and nodded dumbly. Her mouth started to move of its own accord. "*W-wǒ*..."

Shampoo put a finger to her lips. "*No. Not yet.*" She said softly. "*Too easy now. Already said with lips and tongue and hands.*" She smiled. "*Say when hard to say. Then Shampoo know you made choice. Then know is ready.*" She gave her lips another gentle peck. "*Have to do deliveries now. Come back soon though, Àirén. Take Shampoo to date, yes?*

Ranma nodded dumbly once more, and only as Shampoo stepped away did she realize the Amazon had had her hand under her skirt the whole time, as that hand left her rear.

Shampoo smiled, blew a kiss, and then leapt over the wall back towards the Nekohanten.

Watching her leave, Ranma slowly sank to her knees, her expression slack as the weight of everything that had just happened caught up with her.

"I don't... I don't think I can take much more of this..."
On the other side of the wall, Nabiki looked at the ground, her arms crossed defensively over her chest.

Mine.

Stop that! She angrily told the little voice, gritting her teeth. He made up with Shampoo, we've got her on board to help us, the Cologne hurdle is cleared, we want to go home.

We want our turn.

No we don't! She insisted, though she had to admit there was a sick sensation of loss in the pit of her stomach. There had been a kind of satisfaction in having so easily gone further with Ranma than any of them had, easily slipping past his defenses against their amorous attempts. But now it seemed they had each done her one better, and that twisted something in the competitive, possessive part of her that was refusing to let go of Ranma no matter how hard she tried.

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Ryouga gingerly peeked out of the classroom door, looking left and right. The torrent of hot water from the sprinklers had cut off, but the alarm bells were still ringing. Fortunately, it seemed that the school had been emptied in record time.

He breathed a sigh of relief. It had been a near thing. He had been left behind in the sudden mad dash as Ukyou had done her level best to take Ranma's head off, something Ryouga had dearly wished he could do in that very moment.

I might have to revise my opinion of Ukyou upwards. He thought, a small smile crossing his face. She's got the Ranma-smashing down to an art. Shame I lost them, though. Would have been nice to see him... her... whatever get what's coming to 'em. He carefully crept out of the classroom. With all this hot water though, doesn't that mean Ranma lost his challenge? He paused at that. Seeing Ranma get smashed was one thing, but challenges were serious business, and challenges involving the curse were dangerous.

Ever since the business with Prince Herb and the Chiisuiton, he and Ranma had had something of an unspoken understanding when it came to business regarding the curse. That and something about this Himura person disturbed him, enough to put aside rivalries... at least in respect to her.

I'll worry about it later. For now, I just need to find some clothes, search the school for my pack, and...

"There's one!"

Ryouga whirled to see a group of firefighters at the end of the hall. They started rushing towards him.

Oh crap! Ryouga whirled to flee, but slipped on a still warm puddle on the linoleum floor, crashing onto his chin. Before he could recover they were on him.

"Is he all right?"

"He's been in here this whole time, he could be badly scalded, be careful."

"Where are his clothes?"

"Look at him, he's red as a beet, he's probably burned badly enough that they were unbearable."
"Just sit tight son, we're here to help."

"N-no, wait, I'm okay, really!" Ryouga struggled, but he didn't really want to hurt the men who were only trying to do their jobs.

"He's fighting!"

"Probably hyperthermia. We need to get him outside."

"Should we get him a blanket? The whole student body is still out there."

"No time, it's a sauna in here."

**THE WHOLE STUDENT BODY?!** Ryouga yelped and struggled harder, as hard as he dared, but these men were well trained. "No, please! It's okay! Just get me some pants or something!"

"Quickly, help me restrain him!"

"Got his arms?"

"He's strong!"

"**Ranma, this is all your fault!**"

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Outside of the school, sitting in the comfort of a limousine, Himura watched as the last straggler was extracted from the school, some unfortunate boy who had lost his clothes and was being frog-marched to the ambulance. In all the strangeness of Furinkan High, it was barely worth noting at this point, though the lower class students seemed suitably entertained.

She lifted a cell phone to her ear "Yes, the last of them has just been evacuated. Once the firefighter crews are gone, I want work crews in there to get the school cleaned up. I want the school to be ready to open in the morning. Ensure the Gymnasium floor was not damaged, that is the absolute priority." She flipped her phone closed, then glowered at the man sitting across from her. "You very nearly ruined everything."

The dark mirrored glasses flashed, reflecting the light from the window. "Ey wahine, not my fault some delinquent keki decided to go wrecking school property."

"No, but it is when said delinquent is your son." She glowered at him. "And filling all the water pipes with hot water was not part of the agreement. I need Ranma to play for my team, not fail the challenge before it even begins!"

The Principal smirked. "You not be knowin' this particular keki very well, 'den. Ranma Saotome always tryin' ta find a way around dem rules when dey not suit him. Always tryin' ta win his way. So we keep him on his toes, so he too busy tryin' ta win my game to worry about yours. Den we have de big fun, ye?"

Himura sighed and folded her arms. "Let me make something clear, **Principal Kunou.** By all means, distract Ranma and her little friends all you like. But rendering the school uninhabitable will also disrupt my plans for her, and I am not interested in regularly financing emergency work crews to repair the damage you cause."

"I can pay for me own work, wahine." Kunou snorted. "You not the only one wit' dem big kahuna
"Really?" She asked coldly. "Who do you think owns the bank all your investments are with?"

She couldn't see his expression, but from how his palm tree styled topknot drooped she knew she had his attention. She leaned forward to press her point. "With a phone call, I can have you and your family out on the street tomorrow. Your wealth is a convenience we maintain to avoid requiring more direct involvement, nothing more." She sat back, satisfied she had cowed him sufficiently. "Now… as I said, by all means, challenge our dear Ranma. Make her fight and struggle for her womanhood. I want her to learn to fear the change. I want her to erode that supermale self-image herself. And when she has wedged open her own armor for me, I will destroy the illusion of masculinity that has limited her for so long. And then, I will make her useful."

Ukyou stirred, almost immediately regretting the whole concept of consciousness. Her head ached, throbbed with a sickly jagged pulse that made her nauseous. It hurt to have her eyes closed, but as she slowly cracked open, that was worse.

As a mercy the room was dark and quiet, though each point of light was like a needle through her eyes into her brain. She groaned, turning her head slightly, as something was on her hand.

A tussle of dark hair obscured the features of who it was, but it was pretty obvious to Ukyou who it was. Akane had fallen asleep sitting next to her bed, her head pillowed on her hand. Ukyou gently extricated her hand, managing not to wake the girl and sighed. It was actually really touching that Akane was so devotedly watching her, but Akane wasn't the one she had really hoped would be there.

And as soon as I get a moment with Ranchan, it gets snatched away. She thought sadly. She brushed back Akane's hair out of her eyes without thinking about it, tucking it behind her ear. I guess it was kind of the same for you, huh Akane? Except you were fighting yourself too. She sighed. She had never really felt the rancor for Akane that Shampoo had expressed… in fact, when Ranma wasn't on the line she got along with her quite well. Akane had at least always been sympathetic to her own problems with hangers-on.

Ukyou rather liked Shampoo, too. It was nice having female friends that she had things in common with, ones who could be a bit of a template for being more feminine without being overly girly. Ukyou found herself often emulating one of the other as she tried to edge herself away from her past as masquerading as a boy.

But you still do it, even though everyone knows. She thought glumly. She glanced down at her chest, and the tightly wrapped tape that was currently serving as both a top and a brassiere. Still binding, and wearing a boy's uniform, and talking and acting like a boy… even kissed Ranma like a boy. No wonder Kuno got confused.

She smiled a bit, remembering the kiss. That she had no regrets about. Something profound had changed with Ranma. She didn't know what it was, but for once it seemed to be in her favor. Who knew she could kiss like that? I wonder if she's that good as a guy. The pleasant thoughts did much to soothe her pounding head.

"Mmmrfle…" Akane stirred next to her. Ukyou realized she had been unconsciously playing with Akane's hair while she had been thinking about her kiss with Ranma and jerked her hand back quickly, doing her best to hide a blush.
"Ukyou…?" Akane looked up blearily, then broke out into the widest smile. "Ukyou!"

Now, whatever other faults Akane had, when she gave someone the full force of her smile it was transformative in its effect, making her almost radiant. Regardless of the gender or orientation of the person it was directed at, it was compelling. There was a reason Akane had been the most sought-after girl in all of Furinkan.

The smile caught Ukyou off guard, some sort of primal response flooding her brain with endorphins, the same sort of protective, possessive urges that would surge when presented with something adorable and innocent. This was only reinforced when Akane hugged her with a force and enthusiasm that would have made an Amazon proud.

"Hey… hey… easy…" Ukyou said, a bit hoarsely. Her throat felt dry. She found her arms going around the girl and returning the hug automatically. She chuckled weakly. "I didn't know you cared, sugar."

"Of course I care!" Akane pulled back, and Ukyou could see her eyes were puffy, as if she had been crying. "This is all my fault, and I know Doctor Tofu said it was just a concussion, but it looked so bad when Kunou hit you, and when you wouldn't wake up, I…"

Ukyou put her hands on her shoulders. "Akane… easy… it's just a concussion. Happens all the time." She smiled in what she hoped was a reassuring way. "And it's not your fault. And it's not mine, nor Ranma's. Kunou has no business attacking someone just because he's delusional about the girl they kissed."

Akane nodded dumbly. Her eyes dropped. A small smile tugged at her lips. "Poor Kunou… lost both his loves to the same person on the same day."

"What do you mean?" Ukyou cocked her head. Her recollection of the events was still a bit fuzzy. She remembered the heart-to-heart with Akane, and Kunou bursting in, but it was a bit of a jumble after that.

"Well, to have the lips of both of his true loves stolen by a dashing rogue in one day!" She affected a dramatic air, giggling softly. "Ukyou, you scoundrel, you!"

Ukyou wasn't smiling, though Akane hadn't noticed. Her eyes were wide, sightless for a moment, before they dropped, flicking back and forth as she rapidly ran through her damaged memories of the event. Wait... Did I kiss Akane?!

"So... Kunou burst onto the roof... saw us..." A snippet of memory came back back to her, Akane angrily shouting, "Who I kiss is none of your business, Kuno! And for the record I'd much rather kiss Ukyou than YOU!"

Her breath hitched in her throat. WHY DID I KISS AKANE!?

Akane blushed. "He... he used that new technique. You dove for your spatula, but... it was an electrical attack, so you got hit, and it threw you into the roof shed, and you hit your head and went limp..." She shuddered.

"So how did you get away from Kunou?" Ukyou asked, putting aside the question of the kiss for now.

Akane's face fell. "I... punched him through the door."

Ukyou raised an eyebrow. "That's it? It usually takes more than that to get him to knock it off."
Akane cringed. "The… the door was closed at the time."

"Oh." Ukyou replied. Then her mind rewound a bit as she thought about the door in question, and her jaw dropped. "Oh! The roof access door? Akane, that's a fire door. It's made of steel!"

Akane nodded again. "I know."

Ukyou drew in a breath. "It… wasn't just one punch, was it?"

Akane shook her head. "I… When I saw him hurt you… when he gave me that stupid triumphant look… like I was supposed to be happy about it…!" She clenched her fists. "I just… I started hitting him. I was… I was so angry…" She shuddered. "I felt… things break inside of him after a bit, and kept hitting."

Ukyou felt a cold, sinking feeling in her stomach. "Did… did you… is he…?"

Akane shook her head. "He was breathing and making noise when the door finally hit the bottom of the stairs. B-but… I don't know how badly I hurt him. I just grabbed you and ran."

Ukyou let out a breath she hadn't realized she had been holding. But that just raised more questions. Akane had never managed to seriously hurt Kunou, even when she had been really angry. She hadn't even when he had attacked Ranma, though Kunou had never really been a threat before. Did I make THAT much of an impression with that kiss?

"Look, it's okay, Akane." Ukyou said, putting a hand on her shoulder. "It was an unprovoked assault, and after all the damage he did I don't think anyone would blame you for putting him down hard. "I… uh… appreciate it was for my sake, though."

Akane looked up, and the smile was there again, and Ukyou felt a little lurch in her chest. How has Ranchan not ended up married to her already with her flashing those at him? She smiled back weakly, then coughed.

"Sorry, sugar… could you get me a glass of water? My throat's dry."

Akane blinked, then bounded up, eager to be able to do something. "Right! One sec Ukyou!" She bounded off, and Ukyou could hear the sound of running water.

Ukyou let her head slump back to the pillow. Okay, okay… deep breaths… We were on the roof, arguing about Ranchan… Akane said something about it not being fair… she wanted a kiss too? That part is fuzzy… She was crying… I hugged her… there was a tear on her cheek I wiped away… She winced as the fuzzy memories settled into a scene that was uncomfortably romantic. And then what she said to Kunou after… Okay, okay… so I must have kissed her. And… She glanced up as Akane came back into the room with the glass of water. And she's okay with it?

Akane handed her the water with that same earnest, eager-to-please smile, and Ukyou felt a blush spreading across her cheeks. She took the water and took her time taking a slow drink to cover it. Okay… maybe MORE than okay with it. Is… is she doting on me like this because she thinks…? She coughed a bit, choking on her sip as the absurd idea hit her.

"Careful!" Akane quickly reached forward and took the glass, holding it. "Not too fast or you'll choke." She waited for Ukyou to recover, a look of concern in her eyes.

Ukyou made the mistake of meeting that gaze. Immediately the blush was back as her mind interpreted it as something else entirely, and very quickly she found something fascinating to study on the blanket. It wasn't the strangeness of the circumstance that made this so awkward for Ukyou, it
was the fact it was entirely too familiar.

Three years ago

"Ukyou-senpaiiii!"

Ukyou looked up from the manga he was reading. The bus was always late to this particular stop, so he had learned to stock up on reading materials to pass the time.

His classmate Akiko waved to him, beaming brightly as she trotted over, sitting next to him. The short haired girl had been a godsend for Ukyou, starting out at a new school and trying to fit in. His secret made things a little awkward, but Akiko being a bit of a tomboy was making it a bit easier.

"So whatcha reading today?" The brown haired girl asked, leaning over to glance at the manga. "Shokugeki no Souma? Oooh, are you going to try some of those recipes?"

Ukyou chuckled. "I doubt the effects of mine would be as dramatic, but it gives me idea for new Okonomiyaki recipes."

"You could totally be a protagonist in that book, Senpai!" She gave him a thumbs up.

Ukyou raised an eyebrow. "Oh? You've read it? I didn't realize my cooking affected you that much, Akiko-chan." He smirked, remembering that the depicted reactions to the heavenly food in the series usually involved a lot of clothes evaporating and orgasmic responses.

"E-ecchi!" She yelped and blushed, smacking him on the shoulder.

Ukyou found a little playful light flirting tended to help put customers at ease in the restaurant. His Dad was a bit notorious from engaging the older women in a bit of banter, and Ukyou found emulating it had helped him fit in a lot easier in his new school. He had also noted it had helped Akiko loosen up a bit, and she had been a lot less socially awkward lately. He thought he had even seen one of the boys in class chatting her up.

"A-actually… I was hoping I could catch you before you caught your bus." She looked down at her hands, looking uncharacteristically shy. "Umm… Toshiro asked me to go to the dance with him…"

Ukyou brightened. "That's great!" He was honestly happy for his friend, knowing how much trouble she had speaking with boys. She had made him swear to never 'get stupid ideas' around her so she wouldn't have to deal with her normal nervousness, a promise his secret made easy to keep. Though he had to admit part of him was a little sad, knowing that with a boyfriend she wouldn't be so keen to hang around with him anymore.

"I told him no."


"I do! I… I did…" She trailed off. "B-but… I… I was hoping someone else would ask me."

"Oh? Who?" Ukyou asked. "Kenta? Fujio? It's not Gentaro, is it? I mean, not to judge, but…"

Akiko huffed and gave him an annoyed look. "You are so dense sometimes Senpai!"

Ukyou held up his hands in a placating gesture. "What? I don't understand what you're upset about, Akiko-chan!"
Akiko scowled, still blushing. She took a deep breath, closed her eyes and seemed to come to some kind of decision. Then leaned in and kissed him on the lips.

Ukyou's eyes went wide, and the color drained from his face.

Akiko felt him freeze up. She drew back, and her face fell. "Nothing, huh?" She said softly, and slumped back onto the bench, her eyes downcast. "I-I kind of figured… I mean… you're one of the most handsome boys in school, even if you're kinda awkward…"

"Akiko…" Ukyou croaked, his jaw working wordlessly as he watched all of the confidence and poise his friend had built up crumble before him, like she was shrinking. *No, no, no, NO!*

Akiko pulled her legs up to her chin and hugged them. "I'm sorry…" She said softly. "It was stupid, I shouldn't have done it. I knew I shouldn't have done it. I'm… I'm not the sort of girl you would…"

Ukyou squeezed his eyes shut. His 'secret' was making his friend's self confidence self destruct right in front of him… but if he told her the truth… He took a deep breath and blurted out. "Akiko, I'm a girl!"

Akiko stopped her self-disparaging monologue, turning and looking at Ukyou with wide eyes. "What…?"

Before she could protest, Ukyou unbuttoned her shirt, opening it enough to show her the bindings. Akiko's eyes widened, and Ukyou buttoned her shirt back up again.

*Here it comes.* She thought glumly.

"Wha… *Why?!*" Akiko asked, aghast. She stared at Ukyou, her eyes filling with hurt and betrayal as the full impact of The Secret sunk in. *WHY!?"

"It's a matter of honor." Ukyou said quietly, though she knew that wasn't going to help. It never helped.

The slap was new, but the emotions behind it weren't. Ukyou cupped her stinging cheek and turned her head back to look at her friend.

Hot tears of shame and anger were running down her cheeks. "I trusted you…" She said in a trembling voice. "I told you things… And you've been lying to me all along?! What kind of pervert are you?!"

"Akiko, I'm not…!" Ukyou started, but the girl bolted up from the bunch, her hands balled into fists.

"I never want to see you again!" She snarled. "I HATE YOU!"

With that, she spun on her heel and ran, heaving with sobs as she did.

Ukyou stared dumbly after her as she receded into the distance. This wasn't the first time she had been found out, but it was the first time it was by someone who really mattered to her. She hung her head, her hand cupping her cheek as it throbbed. She didn't cry. Guys didn't cry.

The next day he transferred to an all boys school, and he never saw Akiko again.

*But Akane already knows. Everyone does. It's not a secret anymore.* She reached for the glass. "Thanks, sugar." She took another sip, trying to coax more memories from the fog, but all she
accomplished was making her migraine worse. "Nnngh… My head is killing me."

"Doc Tofu gave me some of these for you." Akane pulled out a little plate with a couple of pills on it.

Ukyou accepted them. She gave Akane a searching look, then sighed. No matter what happened on the roof, she just didn't have it in her to feel rancor towards the girl anymore. "So when are you going to take back the engagement to Ranma?"

Akane's expression dropped. "I… I tried. He… he didn't think it would be a good idea."

_Ukyou thought, then quashed that mean, if accurate, little thought._

"Of course it isn't, you two are like oil and water!" Ukyou thought, then quashed that mean, if accurate, little thought. _Surprised Ranchan grew a spine about it though. He's been acting differently since the end of summer, come to think. Not in a bad way._ "Well, maybe if you told him what you told me, he'd rethink that?"

Akane blinked. "I… maybe… but…" She cocked her head. "Why would you tell me that?" She ducked her head. "I mean… You… Ranma…"

_Why DID I tell her that?_ Ukyou crossed her arms, clearing her throat. _"Because I'm not an ogre?"_ She said sternly. "When I win Ranchan, I want it to be because I'm the best choice, not because of some stupid unresolved drama that ends up hanging over his head his whole life." She nodded her head, satisfied with her answer to herself. She continued, a little more gently. "Look… Akane… I want to be friends when this is all over, if we can. No matter what happens. Like it or not, us fiancées got a lot in common."

Akane considered. "Well… what about Shampoo?" She asked.

"Oh, she and I made peace a long time ago." Ukyou replied airily. "We have tea together a couple of times a week."

_"What?"_

Ukyou gave her a quizzical look. _"Why does that surprise you? We were both fighting an uphill battle. And after whatever the hell happened in China, she wasn't exactly interested in fighting with me over the runner up spot. So… we started meeting up to discuss tactics."_ 

"And plan how to bomb my wedding?!" Akane growled.

"Yes. and plan how to bomb your wedding." Ukyou met her gaze. "Honestly, from what we heard your parents were basically pulling a shotgun wedding on you two before you'd even had a chance to recover. We figured we were doing you two a favor."

"Most favors don't involve bombs!"

Ukyou sighed. "Alright, point, we got carried away. But honestly, can you tell me you were ready to get married right then and there?"

"I… I…" Akane deflated. "I thought so… at the time. But… After the wedding got cancelled…"

"You went right back to fighting and being stubborn and stupid." Ukyou finished for her. "Both of you." She clarified to head off Akane's hurt ego a little. "Face it, sugar, your parents make terrible decisions. Trying to force you two together without even letting you process a major event like that? Good way to putting you on the path to resenting each other the rest of your lives. That's probably why Nabiki sold out the location so cheap."
Akane winced. "I doubt any of you did it to do me any favors." She grumbled.

"No, you're right." Ukyou replied. "But… truthfully? If I was sure that you were what Ranchan wanted? If I knew that you were the one who made him happy, and it wasn't just some stupid love potion or broach or… or… PTSD talking?" She shook her head. "I'd step aside."

Akane's face fell. "Well… I'm not the one, am I? Congratulations."

"You didn't see the stupid happy goofy look she got on her face when you kissed her, Akane." Ukyou replied, unconsciously switching gender pronouns as the specific memory floated to the surface. "Why do you think I was so angry with her?"

Why am I encouraging her!? Ukyou winced a bit. She found herself warring internally. On one hand, getting Akane to just give up on Ranma would make her life a lot easier, but on the other… she didn't want to see the look of betrayal she had seen in Akiko's eyes in Akane's. Akane reminded her too much of her old friend, and she wondered if that was why she had given in to whatever impulse had driven her to kiss her.

"Y-you think?" Akane said, and the look of hope in her eyes was something Ukyou decided that she simply didn't have the heart to crush.

"Let's just call us on even footing now." She said, extending her hand. "Friends and fellow fiancées?"

Akane practically glomped her hand. "Yes! Errr…" She trailed off. "It'd sound a little less weird if we weren't engaged to the same guy, but… Okay!"

"Good." Ukyou swallowed the pills and took a swig of water. "You can come with me to Fiancée's Tea tomorrow afternoon and help keep Shampoo from killing me when I tell her what happened."

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Nabiki studied the quiet redhead as they walked. She had let Ranma take the lead since they had left the Nekohanten, and she noticed they were taking a wandering route that didn't seem to be leading back to Tofu's or the Tendo Dojo.

"You okay, Ranma?" She asked softly. She lightly touched the girl's shoulder.

Ranma started, "Huh? Uh… yeah… sure… why?" She mumbled, almost immediately sinking back into whatever thoughts had distracted her.

"Well, because we're apparently wandering Tokyo aimlessly." Nabiki remarked dryly. "Are we going anywhere?"

"Sorry. I'm just… not feeling like heading home yet." Ranma said. She wrapped her arms around herself, as if cold, even though it was still quite warm out. "You don't have to stick around."

"No, I don't." Nabiki replied, and made no move to leave her side. "So, do you want to go get some hot water?"

"Didn't bring my guy clothes." Ranma replied.

"Oh, I can fix that." Nabiki said, leaning over and waving the sheaf of bills she had recently acquired. "You could use some new clothes, anyway."
"Where did you get that?" Ranma asked, her eyes widening as she realizing the bills were 10,000 yen notes.

"My little secret. It's a windfall, and I'm feeling generous." Nabiki replied. "Beach Weekend rules, promise."

"You sure?" Ranma asked. "Seems you're doing a lot for me lately without asking for anything."

"You don't trust me?" Nabiki feigned a hurt expression.

Ranma held up her hands, frantically waving off what she had immediately taken at face value. "No, no! I trust you, honest! I just…" She sighed and deflated a little. "I feel a little guilty. I don't like being a burden."

Nabiki felt a twinge. Part of her, that old mercenary greed, wanted to take advantage of this, pointing out angrily how strained her resources were right now, and how she could milk this to earn back what she was putting out and start rebuilding her capital.

Some other part of her, that new possessive little voice that wasn't so little anymore, was grinding the mercenary into the dirt and demanding she hug the girl right now.

She trusts us.

She ended up splitting the difference. "Call it an investment, Saotome." She said, smiling a bit. "Besides, I could use a shopping spree to de-stress. And you need some extra changes of clothes."

"All right." She said, sounding a little unconvinced. "Just… no weird stuff, okay?"

Nabiki reached over and gently ruffled the redhead's hair. "No weird stuff. I promise."

The walk went a little quicker, now that they had a destination, and there was the promise of Ranma being able to return to her natural form. Nabiki opted for the large shopping center connected to the rail station, as it was outside of the usual haunts of the Nerima crew. She first had to get some male clothes for Ranma (She found it a bit amusing she knew his sizes better than Ranma did), then she played lookout at a nearby bathroom as Ranma ducked inside and changed clothes and genders.

"Uhhh… Nabiki? These pants are kind of weird." Ranma said nervously. He stepped out of the bathroom, looking around, Ryouga's pack slung over his shoulder.

She smirked. "They're jeans, Ranma. Haven't you ever worn jeans before?" She looked him over. It was just a simple button down short sleeved white shirt and a pair of blue jeans, not too far removed from his preferred chinese shirts.

"I'm used to looser pants." He turned, making a face. "I mean, these feel kind of constricting."

"They shouldn't be too bad. They were originally designed to be work pants, so they should be fairly… rugged…" She trailed off as he turned, then quickly looked away. The jeans were doing some very interesting things to Ranma's backside that she hadn't counted on. I am buying him more pairs of jeans for Christmas, and counting it as Akane's present too! She decided.

"I guess." He picked at the shirt and made a face. "Fabric feels kinda rough."

"Well, silk is expensive." Nabiki retorted. "Honestly, how did you ever manage to afford one shirt,
much less as many as you have?"

Ranma rubbed the back of his head. "Well… Pops and i usually stuck to the training dogis before the curse. After…” He shrugged. "Wasn't really an option for me. I would kinda… fall out of it if I got splashed. I needed something that actually closed in the front, you know? So I did some odd-jobs for these old monks, and they traded the clothes."

"You realize that if they weren't so well worn, those shirts would go for eight to ten thousand yen a pop?" Nabiki said. "I shudder every time you come home with one all torn up."

"Kasumi patches them up pretty nice." Ranma replied, ignoring Nabiki's renewed shudder. "Besides, what do you care?"

"Because you can look better for cheaper." Nabiki replied. "Heck, those shirts were too big for you when you came here, even for your guy side. Now i notice some of them are getting a bit snug even as a girl. You're going to need to replace them eventually." She crossed her arms. "Shopping is something I'm very good at. If we save the silk for the special stuff we can seriously improve your wardrobe."

"Guys don't think about stuff like that." Ranma muttered. He stiffened as Nabiki casually slipped her arm through his.

"Don't be silly, Ranma. You'd be shocked how much time your pals at school spend on preening. Not as much as the girls, true, but…” She shrugged.

"Nabikiwhatareyoudoing?!" Ranma squeaked, looking around nervously.

"Oh stop panicking Ranma." She hugged his arm a little tighter, almost in defiance. "There aren't any fiancees around. Besides, I can hug my boyfriend's arm if I want to." She tugged gently to get him moving.

"Boyfriend?" He replied in confusion, though he did start walking with her. "That was just for the weekend."

She shook her head and smirked up at him. "I upgraded you, remember? I also didn't stipulate a time limit on the upgrade. Besides, I like it better than 'fiance'."

"Nabiki…"

She didn't meet his gaze. "Look.. I know I'm being irrational right now, after everything I've said to you." She unconsciously hugged a little tighter. "This is… harder than I expected. I need a little reassurance, okay?"

They walked out into the mall proper, merging into the throng of the crowd.

"Are you jealous?" Ranma asked, a little incredulously.

"Honestly? Yes." Nabiki replied, surprising him. She gave him a challenging look. "I'm human, okay? Even if rationally I know going after you myself is a bad idea, I still…" She blushed a bit and looked away. "... I still like you."

"Like? Not love?" Ranma teased a bit.

"Ranma, we're still in high school. We don't know what love is." Nabiki replied. "You don't. I don't. Akane certainly doesn't. And neither does Ukyou or Shampoo. It's 90% hormones and 10% self
"You don't believe that." Ranma scoffed, though her comment did strike home. There had always been that nebulous uncertainty about what love was. He didn't even have a clear idea what it was supposed to be. So much of what life had shown him about it had been contradictory or nonsensical.

*I think Nabiki had it right. I need to figure out what I want first.* He thought after a moment as they walked silently. *It's like how you figure out a kata. When it's all together, it can be complex, tough to follow. So you break it down, right? So… if I break THIS down, then… what Nabiki told me before makes sense. I need to know what I want, then go from there. So what do I want?*

His stomach growled as if in response. "Hey, Nabiki…"

She was already smirking up at him. "I heard. Come on. You are a terrible burden on diet willpower, you know that?"

"You're on a diet?"

"No, but if I was, you'd destroy it." She guided him towards a stall that smelled absolutely heavenly. They were selling karaage, paired with leafy greens, fresh vegetables, and all wrapped up in some sort of rice flour tortilla. Again Nabiki paid without comment and handed him one.

*She's changed.* He thought, pondering her a moment as she bit into her wrap. *She hasn't gotten a cent out of any of this, not since that weekend, and she doesn't even point it out for leverage or nothin'. And as soon as she does get some money, she's blowing it on me…* He sighed, biting into his own food. It was very good, the ingredients were surprisingly fresh.

*I want to pay her back.* He thought a moment, then sighed and shook his head. *No, that's not right, is it? I mean, it's obvious, but it's just… obligation, isn't it? Just like how I want to make Ukyou an' Shampoo an' Akane happy. It's not from inside. It should be more like… like…* He glanced at the wrap in his hand. *Like food. Like… something no one had to TELL me to want.*

Nabiki slipped her arm through his casually again started walking. He was a bit amazed that no one batted an eyelash at it. But then, even the smallest thing was such a big deal back home. *Maybe this is how it normally is?* He let Nabiki guide him, and took a moment to just look around the mall. It was nothing special, the usual harsh fluorescent lights, linoleum floors, smattering of rubbery-looking plants and water fountains. Normally nothing he'd bother noticing. But this time he took the time to really pay attention to the people all around them. People going about their own business. By themselves, families, couples. Young and old. None of them were worried about honor duels, or seppuku pledges, or multiple fiancees, or foreign princes, or ancient Chinese curses.

None of them knew what it's like to jump from rooftop to rooftop either. He thought. *To feel like you're flying. Or to feel the flow of ki through your body, molding it to your will. They'll never know or understand the Art.* Part of him noted darkly.

His eyes flicked to a young boy, swinging from his parents' hands as he walked between them, giggling as they chatted with him and each other.

He stopped walking, his eyes following them a moment, feeling a cold realization in the pit of his stomach. *They don't need to. They don't NEED the Art. Not like me. Because… because their lives are full of… of other things. Of each other.*

"Ranma?" He heard the soft voice, and for a moment, he thought he imagined it. He turned to see
Nabiki looking up at him, concern on her face.

He opened his mouth, then closed it, not having any idea what to say. His thoughts were still racing as things that had never made sense to him started to click into place. *The Art is everything to me. But... I never HAD anything else! I didn't grow up with my parents, I didn't go ice skating, or play on the beach, or have a best friend at school... Anytime I started, we moved on. The only thing that was always there was Pops, and the Art. That's all I had... because that's all he WANTED me to have... He wanted it to be my whole life. But... He took a deep breath and closed his eyes, feeling a little dizzy as he edged closer to a betrayal of his father he had never contemplated before. Everything around him seemed to slow. But... do I want it to be my whole life?*

"Ranma, are you okay?" Nabiki was starting to sound worried now.

*The Art is important.* He decided, his breathing slowing as a calm clarity came over him. *It's more important than most people realize. But... it's not everything. It's not ENOUGH. There has to be more. There has to be... be...*

He opened his eyes, and the first thing he could see was Nabiki, eyes wide with concern.

"... Balance." He breathed, and the world started moving again.

"Ranma!" Nabiki gently shook him by the shoulders. "Are you still with me?"

He smiled and nodded. He had the first piece, the first motion in the enormously complex kata that he was starting to comprehend was *life*. He knew what he wanted.

"Yeah. Nabiki? I... I want to be your boyfriend."

She blinked at him, confused, then raised an eyebrow. "Did... you have some kind of 'Formula 411' moment happen there, Ranma? I just told you..."

He took her hand gently and shook his head. "No, just listen a sec. I *want* to be your boyfriend. Not because our parents said we're engaged. Not because you said to pretend because of a cover story. Not as part of some stupid scheme to try and sort out my mess of a life. I want to be your boyfriend because that's what *I* want."

It took a second for that to sink in. He was actually able to watch the realization blossom in her eyes, the pupils dilate, and the color rush to her cheeks. For a moment, there wasn't a trace of the Ice Queen there, and that glimpse was enough for him to know he was on the right track.

Before she could say anything else, he leaned in and kissed her on the lips. Gently, slowly, just long enough for her shocked reaction to fade, and for his intent to be clear. He drew back and looked into her eyes, and waited there to see what her response was.

The blush had spread, and she had a look of wide-eyed shock he had never seen on her before. It was actually quite fetching. He opened her mouth, closed it, opened it again, hiccuped, blinked rapidly, and then seemed to finally unfreeze, her eyes flicking back and forth as she frantically began to work her mental corkboard of *The Madness*. "Ranma, you can't... I can't... we can't..."

He put a finger to her lips.

"No." He said softly. "That's not how you told me it works. First step is to figure out what you want, right? Well, I just did that. I just told you. Second step is to figure out how to get there."

"But..." She shook her head. "No, no, no, Ranma, the fiancees, the rivals... The Madness! You
know what will happen if…"

He shook his head, causing her to trail off. "It's just challenges, Nabiki. That's all it is. A bunch of challenges."

"But we need the other girls to deal with Himura's…" 

"Challenges. If they're too big, break 'em down until they're small enough to tackle. But nothing is impossible. Hard, yeah. Mebbe even painful. But not impossible. You just gotta decide if you want it badly enough. And for me, this is more than just deciding who I wanna take to the movies, or go to the prom with, or get engaged to… it's about making what I want matter. About… finding a balance where it doesn't have to be a choice between giving up everything, and destroying someone I care about. So I'm all in on this. But that's me." He squeezed her hand and held her eyes with his. "What you want… what you need is different. And I get that. So… I guess now it's back in your court. Your serve, Nabiki Tendo. What do you want? And… is it worth the trouble to get it?"

She was still blushing, and Ranma decided he liked that… wanted to see it more, in fact. But as he watched, the shock and surprise was replaced as something flowed into her eyes. Not the Ice, but the confidence, the resolve, and the twinkle of that fascinating mind that he could tell was already hatching schemes he would barely be able to follow. That familiar, sly smirk curled her lip, and he could tell the Queen was back.

And then she pulled his head back down and made it very clear to him that his previous kiss was entirely insufficient, and she demanded better.

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So, another big chapter, and I merrily proceed upon the path of making Ranma's life better by making it dramatically worse.

I promise to go into the origin's of Kunou's dangerous ability. And for those who like Ryouga, don't worry I am gonna ease up on the guy.

... Well, no, that's a lie. I'm going to transition him from Rumiko-style pain and humiliation to MY brand so he can enjoy along with all the rest! (But I'm not going to single him out as a punching bag, don't worry).

And, of course, things are going to get worse from here on in because of course they will.
"All right, Akane. Try and get some sleep. Be sure to tell Ukyou she's welcome to stay with us a few
days if she at all needs it." She smiled a bit, though she sensed that there was something under
Akane's worry for her friend. Reassurance. She decided. "I'm proud of you, Akane. You've done
well. Take care and I'll see you tomorrow."

She hung up the phone and sighed. She always had a feeling all of the roughhousing was going to
lead to more serious injuries. They were all resilient, Ranma most of all, but… It was getting hard to
see them coming home battered, bruised and hurt.

"Was that my son, Kasumi?" Nodoka looked up from the table as Kasumi walked into the living
room and sat down.

Kasumi shook her head. "No, it was Akane. One of her friends got injured at school. Nothing
serious, but she's staying with them overnight."

Nodoka smiled. "Akane is always so conscientious around others." She sighed. "She has such a
gentle soul. I wish she and my son got along better."

"I think we all wish they did." Kasumi replied. "Ranma and Akane included. But they seem to
provoke the worst in each other.""I know." Nodoka sighed. "I am very fond of Akane. Even moreso after spending a week with her
in my home. I had looked forward to her calling me 'Mother'." She looked down at the cards she had
arranged in front of her. "However, I am beginning to believe that day will never come." She shook
her head. "Had my husband not… complicated the matter, I suspect it would be considerably easier,
but the damage is done. I believe it's time to take action to ease the burden on my son's shoulders."

Kasumi's focused her attention on pouring herself and Nodoka a cup of tea. "Oh? What do you
intend to do?"

"My Ranma needs… the correct wife to stand with him on his journey as a Man Amongst Men.
Such a thing is not a destination, but a constant path that must be walked vigilantly. This need
supersedes any other agreement. I had thought Akane could be that one, but…" She stopped herself.
"I fear my husband's dream of uniting the schools will need to fall to the next generation."

"What about Nabiki?" Kasumi asked, feeling a knot of worry forming at what she feared the woman
was planning to do. "... Or myself?" She added reluctantly. She had no desire to marry Ranma, but
she felt like the door on the engagement was being closed, and was more than willing to present
herself as an option to buy her sisters more time to work things out for themselves.

Nodoka shook her head. "Nabiki lacks the proper respect or formality. She is far too taken with
western ideas and lacks any appreciation for tradition." She gave Kasumi a long look. "You, my dear
Kasumi, would be very nearly ideal, but my Ranma should marry a martial artist, one who can
contribute their own school's teachings to the Saotome School." She folded her hands in front of her
on the table. "Thankfully, my son's manliness has already attracted some very strong martial artists to
his side. The matter is simply to decide who best can support my son in his future as head of this
family."

Kasumi closed her eyes, taking a moment to center herself so her voice didn't quaver. She could
already see disaster looming. "Should this not be Ranma's decision?"
"My son has had time to resolve the issue, and has not." Nodoka said coldly. "This has been a
distraction from his training for far too long. The matter needs to be put to rest."

"But… they are all so young, couldn't the matter wait…" Kasumi protested, but was cut off by a
look from Nodoka.

Nodoka closed her eyes again. "I understand your objections. And I appreciate your concern, and
that my decision may… strain relations with the Tendos." She spoke slowly, picking her words
carefully. "But my son has a destiny and a duty that is of vital importance to this family, and to the
school of Martial Arts both our families share. His future must be plotted carefully." She took a deep
breath. "I have sacrificed… far too much to leave things to chance as they have been."

Kasumi studied her tea. "And you are confident you know what Ranma wants well enough to make
a decision that will make him happy?"

Nodoka gave her a puzzled look. "I'm afraid I don't understand dear?" She smiled brightly. "What
my son wants is the Art. What he needs to be happy is the Art. Everything else is a distraction. Once
the matters of honor have been settled, he will be free to spend the rest of his life perfecting it.
Settling those matters of honor is my duty as his mother. Your sister reminded me of that."

Kasumi sighed. She had to admit, there was a certain sense to Nodoka's words. Ranma's greatest joy
in life was the Art.

Is that enough for him? A nagging little voice asked her. Even his Father is far from satisfied with
just the Art.

Nodoka noticed Kasumi's troubled expression and reached over, patting her hand. "Don't fret, dear.
A mother knows what their child needs, even better than their child does. You will understand when
you have children of your own." She finished applying the Saotome hanko to the letters, and set
about sealing them in envelopes.

"Just please don't give up on my sisters, Auntie Saotome." Kasumi said finally.

Nodoka gave her a searching look. "I… will consider it. I haven't made any decisions yet."

Ranma and Nabiki didn't get home until much later.

For Ranma the night had been downright therapeutic. They hadn't even really done much; They had
walked, talked, explored the mall a little, bought a couple of things and just blended into real life for
a bit. Nabiki had even joked about buying him a pair of glasses to help him cultivate a 'secret
identity', not that he really understood the reference. There was something nice about just being able
to be with someone, without pressures or expectations.

It was kinda like that with Akane sometimes, too. He realize. But usually one of us would screw it up,
or a fiancee or a rival would find us and screw it up. Nabiki was much better at skirting the prying
eyes or usual routes. She could slip in and out of the crowd like a ninja, and Ranma noticed she was
unconsciously suppressing her own ki when she did it, almost like a low-grade Umisenken. He
found himself doing the same.

"We should probably check if the coast is clear." Nabiki said as they got to the front door.

"Why?" Ranma asked, confused.
"Because your clothes are different than they were this morning?" Nabiki tapped his forehead. "They probably know about the sprinkler incident at school by now, but best to avoid having to explain things if we don't have to, right? Especially since we'd need to explain why we were late getting home together."

He nodded. "I guess… we should hold off on saying anything about the 'boyfriend/girlfriend' thing too, huh?"

Nabiki stepped closer to him and slipped her arms around his neck, playing with his pigtail again in that way she had a habit of doing. "I'm not sure there's much point in telling our parents. They'll just see it as the go-ahead to try and force another wedding. As for everyone else…" She gave him a half smile. "We need to defuse your lovelife a little first before we make any announcements about dating."

"Yeah, my thought too." He said, though he couldn't help a note of disappointment creeping into his voice.

"I'll give you the coast is clear from my bedroom window, okay? You can come in that way, just in case your Dad pissed off your Mom and is back to sleeping in your room."

"Y-your bedroom?" He felt heat rise to his cheeks. Granted it wasn't the first time he had used the windows to enter, not even the first time he had entered Nabiki's room that way, but things between them were different now.

Nabiki smirked. "Don't get ideas, Saotome. Well…" She leaned into him a little more, teasingly. "... Go ahead and get the ideas, but not tonight, okay? I want to talk about a few things."

Ranma needed a second to clear the fog in his head to process that. His poor hormones really weren't going to take much more abuse like this. "Wh-what sort of things?"

Nabiki smiled, and it was gentler, more genuine this time. "Nothing bad. Just… stuff that would be weird to talk about at the mall with people around. About the curse, and China and… stuff. Okay?" She cocked her head. "I've been feeling like I've been assuming too many things lately, and I want to start fixing that. Starting with you… if that's okay?"

"Y-yeah? I mean, uh… sure." Ranma managed, feeling flustered again. Somehow Nabiki being honestly and earnestly interested in him was putting him more off balance. Cynically, he could just assume she was looking for more ways to extort him, but… no, when she was being insincere the only thing in her eyes was ice, and right now there wasn't anything but warmth in them. Thinking back, it had always been like that with her. He wondered why he hadn't picked up on it before. It seemed so obvious now.

She leaned up and kissed him on the nose, then opened the door.

Ranma faded back into the bushes, unconsciously slipping into the Umisenken. The emotionless cocoon of the Umisenken did much to help him calm himself, though even then he found it hard to focus, his thoughts drifting over the events of the day. He eventually settled on some light meditation to clear his head, as he couldn't maintain the technique while mulling such emotionally charged memories. He snuck around to the dojo, stashing Ryouga's pack inside, glad to be rid of the uncomfortable heavy thing, then settled down to watch Nabiki's window.

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"I'm home!" Nabiki announced, sliding the door closed behind her as she slipped off her shoes.
"Nabiki? Welcome home." Kasumi smiled as she peeked around the corner. "You were out late!"

"Just doing a little shopping." Nabiki replied. "I already ate, so don't worry about dinner for me, okay?"

She slipped past her sister before she could protest. Which how it normally was; In a house with almost constant martial arts challenges, supernatural crises, and whatever other drama their parents could cook up, Nabiki could generally pass unchallenged.

"Nabiki, where's Ranma?"

And then Nabiki remembered that she wasn't a bystander in The Madness anymore.

"I'm not sure. There was a fight at school with Kunou. Kind of lost track of him after that." She said airily. "I'm sure he'll be home soon. Right now I really need to get out of these clothes, so… Chat later?" She gave her sister a little wave and then made for the stairs without waiting for a reply. Whatever Kasumi wanted to discuss, she didn't want to deal with it right at this moment.

Kasumi opened her mouth to call her back, then closed it, quirking an eyebrow.

I was just going to tell her about Akane, and ask if Ranma was okay. She has definitely been acting peculiar lately.

Nabiki skipped up the stairs, slipping into her room and closing her door behind her with a opened her closet, grabbing an old, comfortable pair of jeans and her heart print sweatshirt. Briefly she had a naughty thought of calling Ranma to her window and then changing.

Better not. She thought. With how… CHARGED things have been lately, that might go further than is strictly healthy for either of us right now.

She filed it away for sometime in the future, however. She hung up her school uniform, slipped into the familiar, comfortable clothes, then opened her window.

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Things were quiet for a few minutes as Ranma watched the house, until he saw Nabiki's window open. He hopped up onto the roof, dropping his stealth and flipping around upside down to look inside.

He nearly lost his grip when Nabiki grabbed the back of his head and pulled him in for a kiss. He managed to catch himself. She's always finding new ways to get me off balance! He thought, though he wasn't sure if he was annoyed by that, or admired it.

She released him after a minute, winking at him. "Saw that in an American movie. Been tempted to do that every time your head pops up upside down in the window for the longest time."

"What, even when you were still extorting money out of me?" He teased back.

She just grinned. "Well, you are very pretty, Ranma."

He nearly lost his grip again and flubbed his swing into her room, landing awkwardly on her bed and smacking the back of his head on the windowsill.

"Ow… That's not fair, Nabiki!"

She smirked as she sat in her desk chair. "You make it way too easy, Ranma." After a second, she closed her eyes and took a breath, and the smirk softened again as the mercenary attitude dropped.
"You're right, it's not fair though. It's… not a nice thing to do to my… my boyfriend." She felt uncharacteristically shy about using that word now, since Ranma had loaded it with meaning.

She opened her eyes to see his face inches from hers, a smirk of his own on his face. "I wouldn't say that, Nabiki. I like it when you tease me. Just do it when I'm less likely to fall two stories onto my skull, okay?" He darted in and kissed her nose in a mirror of the peck she had given him earlier, then sat back on the bed.

She blinked owlishly for a moment. Then she started giggling.

After a minute he joined her, and the two of them were shortly laughing helplessly. It wasn't really that funny, but after all they had been through, the tension and stress needed a release, and the outlet was welcome.

Nabiki wiped the corners of her eyes as she gradually recovered her composure. "Okay, okay, I'll be more thoughtful of your circumstances when I mess with you." She smiled at him, another of those rare, genuine smiles as silence settled in the room. She studied him for a long moment before talking again. "Actually… I was hoping to ask some… personal questions."

Ranma cocked his head curiously. "Like what?"

Nabiki took a deep breath. "What is the curse like?" She asked, leaning forward a bit. "I mean… really what is it like? I know what happens on the outside, but… what goes on in your head? What does it feel like when you change? To be in… in a completely different body all of a sudden? Does it hurt?"

Ranma's gaze dropped as he thought about that for a few minutes, trying to find the right words to describe the experience. "It doesn't hurt. Physically I guess… it's just like a muscle cramping for a second, maybe? But that's not really what you notice about it. It's… Well… You know that shock you get when something wakes you up suddenly? That… confused feeling? That's part of it." He rubbed his arm as he rewound the memories of all his changes. "But… it's more than that. The instant the water touches me… it feels… wrong. When I'm a guy, and cold water hits, or I'm a girl and hot water hits. As soon as I feel it on my skin, it's wrong, until the change happens. Then…"

Nabiki leaned forward and put a hand on his arm. She was honestly a little shocked at how hard this seemed for him. "Why did I never ask before?"

He gave her a grateful look, then continued. "The change doesn't end with my body. It… whether I'm a guy or a girl, my body feels natural. It feels… I dunno, right. Even if I know it's not, the curse makes it feel normal. Like my brain gets switched too. But when the change hits… There's this moment where stuff doesn't line up. Where everything feels wrong. My body is the wrong shape, my arms and legs are the wrong length, I'm the wrong height, and… and more than that, it just feels wrong. Like this inherent sense of being in the wrong skin. And then… snap, the feeling goes away and everything is normal again. Except… except I changed. But it feels like I've always been that way."

"It's like that every time?" Nabiki said softly, eyes wide. "You don't… I don't know, get used to it?"

"You learn to deal with it, yeah, but you never get used to it." He smiled weakly. "It might be worse for the ones who turn into animals, I don't know. But… it messes with you, because it feels just as wrong when you change back. I mean… I know I'm a guy. I'm proud of being a guy. But… for that split second when the hot water hits… it feels so wrong. Being in a male body, I mean. And it messes with me, you know?"
"It doesn't just change your physical body." Nabiki said softly, finally getting a glimmer of why Ranma was so desperate to cure the curse for so long.

"That's why I end up staying in whatever form I happen to be in most of the time." Ranma said finally. "The change *sucks.*"

"That's… worse than I thought" Nabiki said softly. "It keeps forcing you to relive that moment you first fall in the pool, every time you change."

"It's a curse." Ranma replied. "It's not supposed to be fun, or some kind of superpower or something."

Nabiki nodded. "Okay… so you said it changes your… perception of yourself I guess you could say. Does anything else change?"

Ranma considered. "It's… hard to tell. You know how when you're having a dream, and you can't tell it's a dream, even if it's really weird and twisted, until you wake up? It's like that… except I never wake up. I just… switch dreams." He crossed his arms. "One time… One time I sat up for a whole morning on the roof, watching the sun rise with a kettle and a jug of water, and kept switching back and forth trying to figure out what was changing. I figured out some stuff, but, outside of that it's just… normal and *normal.* It's hard to tell."

Nabiki cocked her head. "Oh? What did you find out?"

"Colors are… I don't know, *more* when I'm a girl. But stuff is… flatter?" He shook his head. "It's hard, I can only really tell there's a difference for a split second, and there really aren't words for it." He looked at his hands. "I think I'm better at math as a girl, though."

"Wait, *what?I*

"I know, it doesn't make much sense," He held up his hands, "And I don't know if it's actually that way or not, but… I dunno, the numbers stuff just seems easier as a girl. But it's hard to be sure. You know how you're trying to figure out a puzzle, and it doesn't make any sense… until it does? It's like, when I do math… The 'when it does' part comes a little quicker. I've still got it figured out either way after that, so it's not like I can really test it with the same problem. And fractions and stuff just come quicker, so that's why I always cook as a girl."

"You cook as a girl… because of *math?!"* Nabiki stated incredulously.

"Y-yeah? Isn't that why girls are good at cooking?" Ranma said, confused. "I mean, except Akane, which never made a lot of sense to me because she's better at math than I am either way."

Nabiki decided to save tackling *that* bizarre notion for another day to avoid getting off track. For right now, she had a much more interesting topic. "So… Is there anything else different? Does one side prefer certain things?"

"I… dunno?" Ranma admitted.

Nabiki smirked and leaned forward. "You've been kissed as a guy and a girl quite a bit. Feel any different?"

Ranma blushed. "It doesn't work like that, Nabiki. I wouldn't be able to tell unless we did that Sunset trick with hot and cold water to keep switching me back and forth so I could tell the difference."

Nabiki seemed to consider a moment, which deepened his blush. "Later for that." She smiled.
"But… you liked being kissed by girls as a girl, right?"

Ranma sighed. "Yes. A lot. I'm still *me* you know!" He rubbed the back of his head. "Actually… actually it was kind of a relief, you know?"

Nabiki rocked back in her chair a little. "You… weren't sure?"

"It's a curse, okay? And it's hard to tell how much it changes stuff, and… and…" He sighed. "That stuff with Sanzenin scared me, okay? So I just kind of blocked it all out, male or female."

"Ranma…" Nabiki was wide-eyed. "Did… did you *like* being kissed by Mikado?"

"NO!" Ranma shouted, leaping to his feet and clenching his fists, causing Nabiki to frantically gesture for him to be quiet. "No, okay? No…" He sat back down and dropped his hands into his lap. "I still have nightmares about it, okay? That and Kuno telling me he loved me. But the worst part of them both was… wasn't that it was disgusting. But I remember feeling… I dunno… cheated of something. Like… like the scene was something I wanted, just with the wrong players. When I'm a guy and I think about it I wanna throw up, but when I was a girl I… I was mad because I wanted it back. Like something was taken." He sighed. "I dunno if that makes any sense."

Nabiki dropped her eyes, then glanced over to her desk where she kept a glass of water. She picked it up and offered it to him. "Maybe try again, as a girl?" She offered the glass. "Maybe you can't sort out what's different in your own head, but if you tell me what you're thinking and feeling, I can help you sort it out, without needing to swap back and forth?"

He considered a moment, then nodded, taking the glass and dumping it over his own head. Nabiki watched the change, amazed that the process Ranma described was happening in such a brief span.

Ranma adjusted her belt to tighten her jeans and tucked her oversized shirt in further to take up the slack, then sighed and closed her eyes, thinking back to those two pivotal moments. The moment Mikado Sanzenin had literally swept her off her feet, dipped her, and pressed his lips to hers, and the moment Kuno had tossed her the bouquet, and with earnest intensity and surety had declared his love to her, then walked away.

There wasn't nausea or disgust, as much as there was a sense of violation, of *theft*. "They both took something from me." She said softly, her brow furrowing as she concentrated. "Something that was supposed to be special. Special firsts." She opened her eyes. "Like… both things were something I wanted to happen, but… not with them."

Nabiki decided to ask the question that had been pickling the back of her mind ever since she found out about the changes the curse wrought. "Ranma? Are you attracted to guys?"

"No!" Ranma said, though she modulated her vehemence this time. "I like girls! I… I just made out with three girls today!"

Nabiki held up a hand. "Ranma, I don't doubt that. That's not what I'm asking." She got up and sat down on the bed next to the redhead. "Ukyou likes boys. Shampoo likes boys. I like boys." She said, and then she leaned in and gave Ranma a gentle kiss on the lips.

To be fair, she had never actually kissed Ranma as a girl before. But if she was being honest, she had wanted to. She was curious, and if Ukyou and Shampoo were any indication, she suspected it would be worthwhile.

Ranma made a soft whimpering noise as their lips touched. Nabiki slipped an arm around her and gently pulled her closer, her other hand cupping her cheek as she gently deepened the kiss. She
immediately noticed Ranma was letting her take the lead, submitting and letting her take the
dominant role. It was very different from kissing her male side. Not better or worse, really. Different.
And rather nice.

She broke the kiss before she was tempted to take things further, leaving her hand cupping Ranma's
cheek. Ranma's eyes remained closed a moment, slowly opening as she came back to herself.

"Ummm… That was… that was nice… really really nice, but… you don't have to you know…"
Ranma finally said, blushing as her eyes dropped.

Nabiki smiled. "See, that's the thing, Ranma. I want to." She waited until Ranma's eyes were on hers
again before continuing. "As long as I've known you, you've always been both. To me, this is as
much 'Ranma' as your guy side. This is how I first met you." She leaned in and softly whispered.
"And if you remember, I thought you were cute."

She was rewarded with a deep blush from the redhead. She smirked, feeling like she was getting a
bit of her own back from Ranma's declaration in the mall. "Attraction isn't an exact thing, Ranma. It's
not 'nice butt plus defined abs plus strong jaw equals attraction'. I prefer males, but I'm attracted to
you either way. It's probably safe to say Ukyou and Shampoo are the same way to some degree.
They've certainly never been shy about showering your girl side with affection. So if you're thinking
I'm going to judge you…" She sighed. "I'm just curious. I just want to know how the curse affects
you so I can help."

Ranma glanced back down at her hands, fidgeting for a bit. "I'm… I'm not sure." She admitted
finally, blushing deeply. "It… I don't like being groped or manhandled by guys, but… that's probably the same for anyone, right?" She sighed. "The guys in my life are all massive jerks… And that's fine with me. I kinda didn't want to know, you know? With everything else that the curse does…" She shook her head. "… Maybe I just don't wanna go there, okay?"

"Okay," Nabiki said gently. "Look, I'm sorry I pushed it." She hugged the girl. "Thank you for sharing all this with me, though."

"No… it's okay." Ranma took a breath. "Pretending it's different won't change it, right? Part of
martial arts is knowing yourself. The curse kinda complicates that, but it doesn't mean I can slack off
about it."

There was a polite knock at the door. There was a brief movement of air to Nabiki's left, and by the
time the person knocking actually spoke, Nabiki was alone in her room.

"Nabiki? May I come in?" Kasumi said softly.

"Uh, sure sis." Nabiki reached back and closed the window, a little nonplussed with how quickly
and silently Ranma had vanished despite how many times she had seen her do it.

Kasumi opened the door and stepped inside. She closed the door behind her and smiled at her
younger sister. "You can tell Ranma to come down from the roof, please. I want to talk to the both of
you."

A little sheepishly, Nabiki opened the window again. Ranma's head popped into view, and then she
quickly and efficiently swung herself into the room and onto the bed next to Nabiki, looking suitably
subdued.

"Ranma, Ranma, Ranma…" Kasumi sighed and shook her head. "There are perfectly
good doors for that sort of thing."
"We were… trying to avoid being seen coming home late together." Nabiki defended her. "To avoid people getting the wrong idea."

"And do you suppose Ranma sneaking into your window would give them the right idea?" Kasumi asked softly, earning a blush and silence from her younger sister. She walked into the room, pulling Nabiki's chair out from her desk, turning it to face the bed and sitting, smoothing out her skirt and taking the time to gather her thoughts. "It's not the wrong idea, is it though?"

"This isn't about the engagement." Ranma said defiantly. "This isn't… it's not because of some stupid promise our parents made, or family honor, or any of the stupid fiancee crap. It's… it's…" She trailed off as words failed her.

"We're dating." Nabiki stepped in, her posture straightening. "That's it. It's not about the engagement. We're not having an affair. We're not planning to elope. We're just dating. We're doing this our own way, and seeing where it goes, because how they want to do things doesn't work."

"I see." Kasumi said softly. "Who are 'they'?"

"I…" Nabiki was caught off guard a moment, then cleared her throat. "Father. The Saotomes. Cologne. The other fiancees. Basically, everyone who has a stake in who Ranma ends up with except Ranma."

"And you." Kasumi pointed out, her deep brown eyes pinning Nabiki's.

"I decided this." Ranma cut in, taking back Kasumi's searching gaze. Ranma's blue eyes were clear and looked back at the eldest Tendo daughter unwaveringly. "I want to be Nabiki's boyfriend. I want to date, and make stupid mistakes, and just be with someone because I like being with them, without it having to be destiny, or have their lives pivot on it, or have my entire future defined by it."

"I see." Kasumi replied, still keeping her voice and expression neutral. "And your other fiancees? And Akane?"

"We're… trying to figure that out." Nabiki replied. "We have been trying to figure that out, so that no one has to get destroyed by this."

"We… I only just decided this today." Ranma added. "And I know it's maybe not the smartest route. It's definitely not the easiest, but…" She gave Kasumi an earnest look. "I want to be Nabiki's boyfriend."

"Or girlfriend, depending on the forecast." Nabiki added, smirking.

Ranma blushed and looked at the floor. Nabiki took pity on her and slipped a possessive arm around her shoulders, which only caused her to blush harder.

"I see." Kasumi said. The closed her eyes, took a deep breath, then exhaled, smiling. She opened her eyes, and the smile was there, making them twinkle. "You have no idea how relieved I am to hear this."

"Wait, what?!" Nabiki and Ranma said in unison.

Kasumi held up a hand. "There is very little that goes on in this house that I'm not aware of. I've been aware of the tension that has settled over this house like a blanket, and to have found a reasonable and mature solution such as this is… Well…" She looked them both over. "I'm proud of you."

"You're… okay with this?" Nabiki asked, honestly a little surprised.
Kasumi looked down at her hands, folded in her lap. "I always felt the engagement was too sudden. That Ranma and Akane were too young, and not ready for such a thing. And though I tried my best to honor father's wishes… I was proven right. I had to spend the last two years watching what could have been a beautiful, promising relationship tear itself apart because our parents insisted on imposing their wishes and needs upon it." She clenched her hands briefly. "And I am complicit, because allowing it to continue… clinging to the hope it could somehow work despite all the forces against it… freed me from that same obligation." She looked at Nabiki. "And then I watched my sister's heart break. And the mark being moved to you, and I feared the worst. Especially after it became clear you and Ranma had feelings for each other."

"Wait, when did that become clear?" Ranma asked, eyes widening as she paled.

"I know my sister, Ranma. And I hear things." Kasumi replied. She smirked. "That dojo isn't soundproofed, you know."

The two of them blushed and bowed their heads.

"Even Auntie Saotome noticed. Though… I am afraid she does not approve of the idea of you being together."

"What? Why?" Ranma's brow furrowed. "This is exactly what pops and Mr Tendo want!"

"But not what your mother wants, apparently." Kasumi said softly. "She believes you should marry a martial artist to, and I quote, 'Support your journey along the path of being a Man amongst Men'. She feels that this supersedes the pledge to unite the families."

Kasumi glanced at both of them. She could see Nabiki's expression darken immediately. Ranma's expression concerned her though. The girl looked… stricken.

"That's absurd!" Nabiki exclaimed. "Even putting aside both agreements are completely insane, the agreement to unite the schools was made before any of us were born! She doesn't have the right to cherry pick which facets of honor she's going to adhere to because some don't suit her tastes!"

"I agree with you, Nabiki, but… I think this is beyond honor for her. She believes she is doing her duty as Ranma's mother, and doing what is best for him." She focused her gaze on Ranma, growing more concerned as Ranma seemed to draw into herself.

"You can't possibly…!" Nabiki started, then noticed Ranma next to her, turning to the redhead. "...Ranma?"

"It… it wasn't enough." Ranma said softly. She coughed up a bitter laugh. "I killed a god, and it's still not enough for her to believe in me."

Kasumi cringed inwardly. "Ranma, I'm… I'm sure she's only doing this because she feels it will help you." Kasumi could see her words of attempted comfort having the opposite effect, the redhead seeming to shrink with each syllable, but she couldn't stop herself. "Maybe… maybe if you talk with her? Explain the situation. I'm sure if we could just make her understand..."

"Kasumi, shut up." Nabiki said sharply, startling her older sister.

"N-Nabiki…!"

Nabiki fixed her older sister with a hard glare. A look she had never given to Kasumi before. Others had felt the full brunt of it's cold scorn, and shakily opened their wallets to ward it away.
The Ice Queen of Furinkan was back.

"Shut up, and get out." Nabiki repeated. There was no anger in her voice. It was simply a command, but delivered with such force that Kasumi found herself standing before she even realized she was complying. She reluctantly backed out of the room, closing the door with a quiet click.

As soon as the door was closed, Nabiki's expression softened, and she took the redhead's shoulders, turning her to look in her eyes. She could see that bright flicker of optimism, of joy that had danced in them when Ranma had declared himself her boyfriend dying in them now. No, NO! Damn you Nodoka Saotome!

"Ranma, listen to me…"

"It's okay, Nabiki." Ranma forced a smile. "I… it was silly of me to think I could just put aside my obligations like that. I'm… I'm sorry…"

"Don't you dare, Ranma Saotome!"

She blinked, noticing there were tears in Nabiki's eyes—real, honest tears. Her own eyes widened.

"Don't you dare give up on me now!" Nabiki growled, the forcefulness in her voice a contrast to the moisture on her cheeks. "I promised you we would win this; That you'd come out of this with your life as your own."

"Nabiki, I can't go against my own mother…" Ranma said softly.

"I can!" She snarled back, surprising the redhead with her vehemence.

Nabiki took a breath to steady herself. She closed her eyes, taking a moment to find her center. "I know you need to respect her wishes. I know you don't feel you can oppose her. I'm not asking you to." She opened her eyes again, and gripped Ranma's shoulders tighter. "But I promised. And it's just like you said; It's just challenges. And some challenges only you can win. And some challenges only I can win, and this is one of them." She leaned in a little closer. "All those times you needed Akane to trust that you would come for her? That you would save her, no matter what? Well I need you to trust me now, okay?"

"I… okay… Okay." Ranma searched Nabiki's eyes for a moment, then seemed to find something. Nabiki could see that horrible blank resignation fade, replaced with that hopeful light again, fragile and precious.

Nabiki smiled and leaned forward, touching her forehead to Ranma's. She had no idea how she was going to fulfill her promise, but ideas were already flicking through her mind. There was an idea forming, something that could fend off Himura, Nodoka, whatever. It wasn't clear yet, not a real, crystalline thought, but something told her Ranma's trust was part of it. That it was the core of it.

"I would really kill for a demon or a Chinese prince or something right now. Anything that can be dealt with by punching it." Ranma said softly, earning a chuckle from the middle Tendo.

They stayed like that a few more moments before reluctantly Ranma moved away. She reached for the windowsill. "I'm gonna go sleep in the dojo tonight, I think. I… don't want to disturb my parents." That was a lie, of course. Right now Ranma was terrified of dealing with her mother. To see the disappointment in her eyes again, and know that she had fallen short in her eyes again.

Nabiki reached up and slid the window closed.
Ranma gave her a shocked look, which rapidly became a deepening bush as Nabiki slid her arms around her neck and leaned in against her.

"Just for tonight." Nabiki whispered softly.

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The knock on the door the next morning was unwelcome. Nabiki was warm, and enjoying a rather pleasant dream involving being tangled up in bed with someone. Her mind reluctantly crawled to the surface of consciousness, and she waited for the pleasant feeling of having someone in her arms to fade.

It didn't. She cracked one eye open, and saw a tousle of red hair tucked under her chin, as the memories of reality replaced the dream she had been enjoying a moment before.

"Nabiki?" Kasumi's voice came through the door.

Nabiki quickly pulled the comforter up to her chin. She closed her eyes again, feigning grogginess as her elder sister opened the door.

"You should get up soon." Kasumi said softly. "I know how much you hate having to rush to get to school."

"Mnnn… thanks Kasumi." Nabiki cracked an eye open, the comforter pulled up to her nose to conceal the person she was sharing the bed with. She met her sister's gaze a moment, then looked down guiltily. "Kasumi, I'm sorry for last night. For… ordering you around like that."

Kasumi paused in closing the door. She seemed to think a moment, then smiled at her sister. "No. You were right. I wasn't helping Ranma, as much as I wanted to." She cocked her head. "Did you talk it out with her after that? Will she be okay?"

Nabiki felt a slight movement under the blanket and had to suppress her reaction.

"I think so. She just needed a bit of a pep talk."

"That's good." Kasumi smiled. "Now, remind her not to leave her clothes piled up on your floor in the future? It would save time ironing if she would hang them up after taking them off." She stepped out and closed the door behind her.

Nabiki closed her eyes in a slow wince. I am going to need a LOT of coffee this morning.

"Mmmnh…" Nabiki heard Ranma stir, and she peeled back the covers to reveal the redhead snuggled in against her chest, nuzzled in between her breasts, one arm wrapped around her.

Nabiki smiled in spite of herself, lightly running her fingers through Ranma's hair. "Hentai…" She said softly.

That was the wrong word to say.

Something triggered in Ranma before she was even awake, flinging her out of the bed and to the other side of the room. "I'm sorry I'm sorry I don't even know why I'm here!" She scrabbled backwards frantically at the door, fumbling for the handle.

"Ranma!"

Ranma froze, panting, hand trembling as it gripped the doorknob. The fog of sleep and the panic of
an adrenaline-fueled survival response slowly parting. She trembled a bit, still expecting the mallet to hit any moment.

Nabiki came up behind the redhead, slipping her arms around her from behind and hugging her fiercely. "It's okay, Ranma. It's okay, you're safe. You didn't do anything wrong. You're supposed to be here."

Ranma's breathing slowed, and she seemed to slump a little, her hand leaving the doorknob. "S-sorry… It's just…"

"I understand." Nabiki replied, hugging a little tighter.

"Nabiki…?" Ranma was still shaking slightly. "You're… you're not wearing a bra."

Nabiki smirked. "No, I'm not wearing a bra" She intentionally pressed a little tighter to Ranma's bare back, pressing her assets against her. She could feel Ranma's temperature rise. "It got uncomfortable around midnight last night, so I took it off."

As much as she had been tempted to pin the redhead to her bed and have her way with her last night, she knew that was really not what Ranma needed at the time. The poor girl was incredibly skittish, and it had taking some doing to coax her to share the bed with her rather than the floor, much less strip to her underwear while Nabiki did the same. She was rather proud she had negotiated that much. But Nabiki felt the redhead needed the reassurance and commitment more than modesty at that point.

That didn't mean she wasn't going to push the boundaries just a little.

"You're not wearing one either." Nabiki pointed out. She rested her chin on the girl's shoulder.

"That… that doesn't help, Nabiki." Ranma complained. Her face was bright red.

Nabiki kissed her cheek. "I'm sorry. I know you're working through a lot of stuff around this sort of thing. I promise we'll go slow with this, okay? But you are allowed to look at me, Ranma." She released the girl and stepped back a couple of paces and stood in the middle of the room, waiting.

Ranma turned timidly to look and, to her credit, resisted the urge to slap her hand over her eyes. She fumbled with her hands, not sure what to do with them, finally awkwardly clasping them behind her as she let her gaze fall on the middle Tendo.

Nabiki smiled in a way that she hoped was reassuring. Silently, she was plotting a little revenge on her little sister and the other fiancees for traumatizing the poor sometimes-girl so badly. She took an unnecessarily deep breath as she noticed Ranma's eyes dip down to her chest, which caused a definite deepening of the blush. Nabiki's smirk grew a little. Maybe not as big as Shampoo, but more than enough to turn some heads, eh Ranma?

"You're beautiful…" Ranma said softly, her deep blue eyes locking with Nabiki's.

There was a note of awe, almost wonder in her voice and a sincerity in her eyes that hit Nabiki like a sledgehammer. Nabiki found a blush rising to her own cheeks as Ranma once again accidentally slipped past all her defences. Not cute. Not pretty. Beautiful. Her smile softened again. "Thank you." She stepped forward towards the girl and slid her arms around her neck again, losing herself a little in that deep, deep blue. "You are too."

"Nabiki! Ranma! Breakfast is ready!" Kasumi's call from downstairs broke the spell.
Nabiki inhaled sharply, as did Ranma… which given their position was probably not the best way to cut the tension as their bare chests did interesting things when pressed together.

"We… we should…" Nabiki murmured.

"Clothes." Ranma nodded. "And… umm…"

"Breakfast!" Nabiki replied quickly.

"Right! And then school!" Ranma nodded.

There was a moment of silence where neither of them moved, waiting for the other to break the embrace.

"... Screw it." Nabiki suddenly leaned in and captured Ranma's lips with her own, tightening her arms around the girl as Ranma made a muffled sound of surprise.

Not that Ranma protested very long or hard. Her arms tightened around the taller girl as she enthusiastically returned the kiss, whimpering softly. The past few days had been arousing and confusing and frustrating, and Nabiki was warm and soft, and smelled good, and right now she didn't give a damn about consequences.

Nabiki finally broke the kiss, both of them panting for air. Nabiki's hair was even more mussed, and it was currently a little difficult to tell where one of them ended and the other began.

"Much better." Nabiki said brightly, then released Ranma and quickly turned to start scooping clothes off the ground.

Ranma's brain was still fizzing and popping as her shirt hit her in the face.

"Better go change to your regular clothes and switch back to a guy before coming down for breakfast." Nabiki said, already zipping up the back of her uniform, having dressed in record time.

Ranma slid down against the door. "Buh…"

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Nabiki was already sipping her coffee by the time Ranma managed to get himself in a presentable state (Since his mother was here, that meant male and in his chinese clothes to avoid answering any potentially awkward questions about his change of fashion). Nodoka was seated across from Nabiki. Soun and Genma were nowhere to be seen, nor was Akane.

He shot Nabiki a dirty look, which she at least had the modesty to look slightly guilty at. That in and of itself was an indicator of how much their relationship (And Nabiki herself) had changed.

He sat down next to her. "Morning Mom. Where's Pops and Mr Tendo? And where's Akane?"

"Your father and Soun have already had their breakfast." Nodoka said. "I mentioned I had some work for them back at the house, and they suddenly declared they needed to go on an emergency training trip."

"Naturally." Ranma muttered dryly. He thanked Kasumi as she set down a bowl of miso soup in front of him, as well as a tray with rice and pickled vegetables.

"Actually, I am glad to have the chance to talk with you without them present." Nodoka said. "I have been considering your engagement problems, and how I might help you resolve them."
"Oh." Ranma paused, holding his chopsticks. He already had a pretty good idea what was going to happen thanks to Kasumi, but he couldn't exactly let on that Kasumi hadn't been keeping his mother's confidence.

Nodoka smiled brightly. "I know that this whole situation has been a terrible distraction for you from more important matters, so I have decided I will take it upon myself to resolve it. But, firstly I will need to meet these young women formally and evaluate them." She produced a number of sealed envelopes, each with a name on them, and handed them to Ranma.

"What are these?" Ranma asked, turning one over in his hand. Nabiki leaned in to look them over with him. He started sorting through them, finding the names of his fiancées written on each.

"They're invitations to my home. There is one there for you, Nabiki, and one for Akane as well, if you wish to attend." She smiled. "I am afraid I don't know how to contact most of these young women, so I fear I must impose upon you to deliver them for me."

"Mom…" Ranma turned white as he got to the last one. "... Why is there one here for Kodachi Kuno?"

Nodoka folded her hands on the table and sighed. "I am aware that you have your… preferences my son…" Her eyes flicked over to Nabiki. "But it is important to be as impartial and fair about this matter as possible, given how many matters of honor are tied up in it. While I agree Kodachi's claim does not seem valid, it is a claim, and it is entitled to be evaluated same as the others, no matter how much of a formality that evaluation will be."

"I…" Ranma squeezed his eyes shut, not relishing the idea of visiting the Kuno Manor, especially with the issues with her brother currently. Maybe I'll run into their Ninja retainer and get him to deliver it... Nah, ol' Sasuke would screw it up.

"All right." He sighed and tucked the letters into his schoolbag.

"So where is Akane?" Nabiki added. "Did she leave with Daddy and Mr. Saotome?"

"Oh no." Kasumi said, settling down at the table with her own cup of tea. "I meant to tell you both last night, but…" She glanced at Nodoka. "... It slipped my mind. Akane stayed the night at Dr. Tofu's clinic. Seems she was staying with Ms. Kuonji after she took a nasty bump to the head."

"What?!" Ranma and Nabiki said in unison.

"How bad was it?!" Ranma demanded, standing up and leaning over the table. "Is Akane okay? Are they still there?"

"It wasn't serious, just a mild concussion, though Akane sounded very guilty about it." Kasumi said. "They're still there as far as I know."

"Good!" Ranma grabbed Nabiki's wrist and practically dragged her out of the house. Nabiki yelped and made a wild grab for her schoolbag before being hauled along behind Ranma to the door. She had a moment's reprieve to get her shoes on, Ranma already throwing open the front door.

"Ranma, you'd better not…!" Nabiki began, but was cut off as Ranma swept her into his arms, bridal carry style. She yelped, tried to gather another breath to protest, and lost it as he coiled and leapt, leaving her stomach and very nearly her breakfast behind.

"WhoooooooooRanmaThisIsABadIdeaaaaaaaa!" She finally managed, but they were already speeding over the rooftops at a terrifying pace. She flung her arms around his neck and hung on for dear life. This was far more terrifying than that one time she had fallen off the balcony and he had
caught her.

The walk to Dr. Tofu's clinic usually took almost fifteen minutes. Ten if they were running. They arrived in less than five. Ranma landed lightly outside the clinic doors and paused, giving Nabiki a moment to recover.

She had her hands balled up in his shirt, and her eyes shut tight. "Ranma, I swear to any deity that cares to listen if you drop me…!"

"We're here, it's okay." He said gently. "And I'd never drop you." He gently set her down, and then gave her an impish smile. "Even when you weren't my girlfriend."

She blushed a little, taking a moment to convince her fingers to unclench. She considered a moment, then looked at him with a determined look in her eyes. "After school. I want you to do that again… with warning, okay?"

He blinked. "Sure. Why, though?"

"I want to understand it." She replied, reluctantly releasing him and stepping back. "I don't want to be afraid of it." She gave him a crooked smile. "And I want to be able to do it myself someday."

She made a shooing motion. "Now go on, you've got two more fiancées in there who could probably use a friendly face and some reassurance."

He returned her smile, and then ducked inside the clinic.

Nabiki hugged herself and turned to look out across the street. Why am I just letting him go to the other girls like this? She thought, feeling a pang of jealousy and possessiveness. She had already decided to fight for him… he had chosen her, hadn't he?

Because one of them is your little sister, who needs him right now as the person who is always there to save her. A little voice reminded her. And the other is the girl who just yesterday he kissed in public in front of the whole school. And BOTH of them could snap you like a twig. He needs to let them down easy WHEN the time is right, or you will NEVER be able to be together openly.

She sighed. A twelve step program for dealing with Ranma addiction. The first step to recovery is admitting you have a problem. She sighed and glanced back at the clinic, a small smile touching her lips. My name is Nabiki, and I am in love with Ranma Saotome. Nice to meet you all.

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"Doc! Akane and Ukyou?" Ranma darted into the clinic, only barely resisting the urge to grab the startled doctor by the shoulders.

"In the room in the back."

Tofu pointed with his pencil. He was spun around in his chair for his trouble as Ranma bolted for the back room door.

He burst through the door, stopping dead when the two girls inside gave him a startled look. It was only then that he realized he probably should have knocked, and they could be changing, or having a private conversation, or simply take offense to him barging in. He clapped his hand over his eyes reflexively. "Ukyou! Akane! Are you guys okay? I didn't see anything, I swear!"

There was a pause. Dead silence. Ranma winced, remembering the slap he had gotten from Shampoo the last time there had been dead silence. He gingerly peeked through his fingers.

Ukyou was sitting up in bed. She was wearing a green hospital gown, and her hair was unbound and
messy-looking, but otherwise she seemed fine. Akane was seated in the chair next to her, her uniform rumpled and her hair a mess, but otherwise seemingly unharmed.

Naturally, both of them were gawking at him like he was a crazy person.

"Ranchan, are you okay?" Ukyou said, quirking an eyebrow. "Did you… hit your head, or chug some weird potion?"

"Or eat some weird mushrooms, or inhale any weird incense…" Akane continued.

"... Or come across any magic mirrors?" Ukyou added.

Akane turned to her and nodded. "Yeah, the mirrors are probably the worst."

Ranma dropped his hand. "No! No, I…" He exhaled heavily. "Are you two okay? Kasumi didn't tell me until this morning."

He walked over to them, eyes searching them both for hidden signs of injury, even though he knew that was a little pointless with them in Tofu's care.

"We're fine, Ranchan." Ukyou continued, cocking her head as the pigtailed boy still seemed agitated. "Doc Tofu just wanted to keep me overnight to make sure. I've just got a bit of a headache, nothing serious. In fact, Akane was just going to escort me home."

"Kuno came after us. He was convinced Ukyou was a guy, despite evidence to the contrary, and that she was seducing your girl side and me." Akane said, "Ukyou went for her weapon, but Kuno used his lightning move and knocked her into a wall."

"Right. I'll be right back, I need to go put Kuno in a hospital." Ranma said tightly, but Ukyou caught his arm.

"Someone beat you to it, sugar." She glanced at Akane, who ducked her head and fidgeted.

"What… wait, like really?" Ranma's eyes went wide. "I powerbombed his head into the concrete around the school pool and it only took him out of action for a few minutes. How did you manage that?"

"I punched him." Akane mumbled. "A lot."

Ranma immediately sense something wrong. Normally, accomplishing something that Ranma hadn't done would have Akane crowing. "Are you okay?"

Akane sheepishly brought her hands out from behind her back, revealing the bandages he had missed before. "A little bruised…"

Ranma sucked in a breath. One of Akane's favorite pastimes, even when she wasn't training, was smashing concrete cinder blocks. She could shatter them with her bare hands with as much difficulty as most people snapped twigs. To have actually bruised up her hands enough to require attention from Doc Tofu meant she had to have been hitting hard.

His face fell. "I'm sorry." He said softly.

"Why?" Ukyou asked, curiously.
"I wasn't there. I should have been the one fighting Kuno, not you!"

"Hey, I was dealing with Kuno long before you even showed up in Nerima!" Akane protested, putting her hands on her hips.

"Yeah, this isn't the first time I've taken a few bumps, Ranma." Ukyou added.

"That doesn't make it right!" Ranma protested. "Kuno got dangerous and Ukyou got hurt!"

"What makes you think you would do any better?" Ukyou demanded, feeling her pride pricked. Being treated as a damsel in distress was not something she was tolerant of, even if it was borne of Ranma's concern for her well-being.

"That doesn't matter!" Ranma growled back. "I wasn't there at all! And if... if something had happened... " He started shaking.

Akane's eyes widened. She quickly touched Ukyou's hand to cut off her retort, shaking her head at the chef's confused look. Her eyes then went to Ranma. "Ranma, this isn't Jusendo." She said softly.

"It could be!" He shot back. His eyes went from Ukyou to Akane, an odd, uncharacteristic desperation in them. They finally settled on Akane. "I can't... I can't do that again, Akane. Not with you, or Ucchan, or... or anyone I care about!"

Ukyou's eyes widened as she watched the exchange, understanding sinking in. She had only heard bits and pieces from Shampoo about what had happened, but she knew that Akane had almost died, and it had nearly broken Ranma. She stepped forward and put her hand on his shoulder, wincing as he flinched at the touch. "Would it be any better if it was you that got hurt, Ranchan?" She asked softly.

"Yes!" Ranma said, an almost maniacal look in his eyes now. "I can take it! I can handle getting hit, or shocked, or burned, or cut. But... but I can't..."

"We know." Akane replied softly, moving to his other side. "It's the same for us, Ranma. It's the exact same." She put her hand on his other shoulder. "When I was stuck watching Saffron... torture you..." She stepped in and slipped her arms around his waist and hugged him fiercely, burying her face in his shoulder. "Don't wish that on yourself ever again. Not even for us."

"Especially not for us." Ukyou stepped in and hugged him from the other side, hooking her chin over his other shoulder. "We take care of each other, okay? We do that, and we don't freak out about the lumps and bruises, because if we watch each other's backs that's the worst it'll be, okay?" She squeezed.

"But... I wasn't there this time..." Ranma replied, stiff as a board as they hugged him.

"Akane was." Ukyou said softly. "And next time Akane is in trouble, I'll have her back. And the next time you're in trouble, we'll have yours. Okay?"

"Okay, Ranma?" Akane echoed her, a little muffled against Ranma's shoulder.

He sighed and wrapped his arms around them, finally relaxing and closing his eyes.

What did we just agree to? Ukyou wondered, feeling Akane next to her. She considered what had happened on the roof... and what might have happened. Tentatively she slipped her other arm around Akane's waist, finishing the circle. I guess... we'll see, won't we?
Ranma just held them both for a few minutes before he finally spoke. "Heh… some 'Man among men', huh? I come here and gotta be comforted by the girls who got hurt, because I can't deal with Kuno of all people."

"You hardly need to prove that anymore." Akane said, smiling up at him as she finally released him. "You could spend the rest of your life in a bra and panties and still be manlier than any of the rest of the jerks here."

Ranma made a face. "Speaking of which…” He sighed and disengaged from the two girls. He pulled his bag off his back, opening it to retrieve his girl's uniform. He paused, seeing the envelopes. "Oh… right… that."

"What is it, Ranchan?" Ukyou asked, leaning in to get a look at what was in his bag.

Ranma fished out the two envelopes that were addressed to Akane and Ukyou. "My mother has decided to step in on the fiancee issue. She wants to meet all of you formally." He handed over the envelopes. "So… uh… she can start figuring out which engagement to keep."

"Which one to keep?!" Ukyou scowled. "That's not her call!"

"She kinda thinks it is." Ranma said quietly. "And she thinks I should be with a martial artist, so… she's not real happy with the current state of the Tendo engagement. Look, I know this isn't fair to you… either of you, but… Me'n Nabiki are trying to defuse this whole mess, so… It'd be a big help if you played along with her for now? I'm not… I'm not ready to confront her over this yet."

Akane nodded. "I spent some time with Auntie Saotome. I think I know what to expect. I was going to walk Ukyou home and take the day off to… well… " She looked down at herself and wrinkled her nose. "Shower, for one. I can talk her through it."

"I… Well, thanks, sugar." Ukyou said, honestly surprised at Akane's willingness to dispense with an obvious advantage.

"Well, it's about keeping things balanced and calm for now, right?" Akane sighed. "I suppose that means we'll need to explain it to Shampoo as well, right?"

Ranma held up another envelope with Shampoo's name written on it. "Me'n Nabiki already talked to her and the old crone about Mom's… standards, and Himura's little game. They're on board to help, so hopefully they'll play nice with this too."

Akane took it from him. "We should take it, then. A peace offering." She studied the envelope for a minute, then glanced at Ukyou. "You don't think they'd try anything, would you? Brainwash spice in the tea or anything?"

Ukyou shook her head. "And screw up a chance to get Ranma's Mom officially supporting their claim? Shampoo isn't that dumb. Doesn't mean she won't mess with us, but if we can all get to this meeting in one piece, I think she'll behave."

"Yeah, well, let her know someone else is gonna be there." Ranma held up the final envelope, with Kodachi's name on it.

"What!?" Both girls exclaimed in disbelief.

"I had to promise to Mom I'd deliver it, too." He tucked it back into his bag. "So you can bet she'll be there. You guys wanna mess with someone? Mess with her. Last thing I need right now is more Kunos in my life."
"Why Ranma, are you choosing us over her?" Akane asked coyly. Though a small part of her was wondering when it had become an 'us' thing with the other fiancées.

"I'd choose Cologne over her." Ranma snorted. "Look, I should get changed for school. I can't miss a day with this challenge hanging over my head, even if the school is a wreck."

Akane glanced at Ukyou, then at Ranma. "I'll... wait outside. I should talk with my sister before we go our separate ways." She slipped past Ranma before either of them could say anything, slipping out of the room.

"Uh..." Ranma scratched at the nervous itch on the back of his head. "So... uhhh..."

Ukyou blushed, studying the floor. "Yeah..."

Ranma took a deep breath. *What do I say? I mean, we kissed, but after everything that happened with Nabiki...*

"Ranchan... Ranma..." Ukyou said softly. She looked up at him, taking a tentative step forward. "I know... I know how things went yesterday... I don't think it was how either of us pictured it happening, but... I just... I just want to make sure... That kiss meant... more than you can possibly know to me, and... and..." She closed her eyes, fidgeting. "I just want to make sure that I wasn't imagining things. That... That what I felt from you was... was real. That it meant something for you too?"

Ranma squeezed his eyes shut. He took a breath, and then relaxed. "Yeah... yeah it did Ucchan." He said softly.

"Ranma...!" Her expression brightened and she took another step forward, but he winced again and held up a hand. She stopped, a look of confusion and hurt in her eyes.

"Ucchan... Look..." He opened his eyes and look into hers, stepping forward himself and taking her by the shoulders. "These past few weeks, I've been wrestling with something. A question. And everything leads back to it. The Fiancée problem, Himura's games, the failed wedding. And I gotta sort it out before I can move forward. Everything in my life is out of order. I'm supposed to already have my future all figured out before I've even finished school. I'm supposed to know who I want to marry before I really even had my first kiss. I supposed to create a legacy for the next generation before I even understand what legacy I'm inheriting. And it doesn't work doing it that way, no matter what my parents say." He licked his lips, his mouth feeling dry. "I don't want to decide who to marry today, or tomorrow. Or next week. Regular people have this figured out. They... they date, they... they get to know each other. They break each others hearts, and they get over it. They start off with their decisions not really mattering and work their way up to the decisions that will decide their whole lives, they don't start there."

"We aren't regular people, Ranma." Ukyou said.

"I know, but..." He trailed off, his argument crumbling. *How would it even work, anyway? Anything I do with any of them is me making a choice!*

"... But you want something more to help you decide." She said softly. "People date to get to know each other, learn how to be around each other, right? Spend time together, without it having to be more than that?"

"I..." He looked at Ukyou, a little confused as she started to pick up his fumbled thoughts and run with them.
Ukyou was pondering the situation. Ranma wants time to decide. But... he still wants to spend time with us... get to know us, so when the time comes he sure of his decision. She had an idea tickling in the back of her mind. And I want to give him that. I... I want to be able to just be with him without it having to be more than that. A date... a kiss... A smile tugged her lips as she remembered the last one. But to do it that way, the only way would be if everyone agreed. She shivered a bit, realizing where her line of thinking was going. Would I be okay with that? With... with Shampoo and Akane doing those same things with him? Especially now, when I'm finally AHEAD, and not just chasing Akane's coattails? I could win this if I just pushed a little more!

She looked into his eyes a moment, searching. Then a small smile crossed her lips, a quiet resolution. A bit sad, but it carried with it the certainty of being the right thing. It wouldn't be winning, though. I don't want to be Ranma's wife by forcing him to concede, to always be wondering if he made the right choice. I want him to pick me because HE knows I'm the right one.

She reached up and pulled his head down and kissed him. He stiffened, but only a moment this time. She sought that same warmth as before, that feeling of belonging, and she found it, washing away her doubts. This was the right way forward.

"U-Ukyou..." Ranma finally managed as the kiss ended. He was flushed, breathing hard. For the moment he had forgotten that there were two young ladies just outside who would probably murder him if they saw what had just happened.

"I love you, Ranma." Ukyou said. "I don't care if you're a man amongst men, or the greatest martial artist in the world. I don't care if you never cure your curse, or you cure it tomorrow, or you end up locked as a woman forever. I love you, and I've never been more sure of anything in my life. And I want you to be just as sure about me. So I'm going make sure you get all the time you need with everyone you care about so that you can know what the right answer is for you." Her eyes clouded a little. "Because it's more important to me that you find the answer that makes you happiest than it is for the answer to be me."

Ranma's eyes widened. He searched her face for a moment, trying to parse what she was saying to him. "What do you mean? What are you planning?"

Ukyou held up a finger. "Don't get too excited, Ranchan. I'm pretty sure I can call a truce between the fiancees... but you're going to have to agree to make it worth our while. Which means you're going to have to spend a lot of time with each of us. You're going to have to give each of us a fair chance, okay?" She cocked her head. "Deal?"

He blinked, lost in thought for a moment, the implications filtering through. This is what Nabiki was trying to set up! A truce, and some time to figure things out! He broke out in a huge grin, pulling Ukyou in close and kissing her fiercely before he really realized what he was doing.

Ukyou's eyes widened a moment in surprise, but she quickly recovered, wrapping her arms around him tightly, fitting herself in against him, determined to take her time this time. I don't know what changed with Ranma... but I like it. I want more, too.

What had been a passionate kiss settled into something slower, deeper... the urgency to try and cram a lifetime of emotions into a single moment eased by the promise that this wouldn't be the last. Frantic need gave way to simple feeling. Finally they parted. Ranma stared at her, like he was seeing her for the first time.

Yes. That's how I always want you to look at me, Ranchan. She thought. She felt him cup her cheek, and she closed her eyes and leans against it. This was a thousand million times better than any of her lonely dreams.
"I'm sorry." He said, brushing his thumb over her cheekbone. "I'm sorry I didn't... I didn't do this sooner. I'm sorry I didn't see this. I'm... I'm sorry I didn't stop that stupid cart all those years ago."

Ukyou chuckled. She opened her eyes again and looked into his. "It would have made things a lot simpler now." She placed her hand over his. "It's all right. You're doing it now. Better late than not at all." She closed her eyes again. "This moment right now makes it all worth it. No matter what happens next."

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Akane peeked out of of the clinic, quickly spotting her sister leaning against the wall, staring across the road at nothing in particular. She stepped out and took a few steps closer. "Nabiki?"

Nabiki seemed to come out of some reverie, shaking her head a bit, then smiling as she saw her sister. "Hey Akane. You look like you slept on your face."

"I kinda did..." Akane self consciously ran her fingers through the tangled mass of her hair. "Did you and Ranma get away okay?"

"Ranma got hit with the sprinklers, but we made it to a shed to hide without getting caught." Nabiki replied. "I heard you had a bit more trouble than us."

"Yeah..." Akane leaned against the wall next to her sister. "Kuno caught up to us on the roof."

"We saw the ambulance take him away." Nabiki smirked. "You really must have done a number on him. Didn't stop him spouting nonsense on the way out though."

Akane smiled weakly. "That's... actually kinda reassuring. I lost it when Ukyou got hurt. I was worried..."

"Hey... He attacked you. With a weapon." Nabiki replied, "That's self defense any day of the week, even if it had been worse."

"That's not the point, Nabiki." Akane huffed. She crossed her arms. "I... lost control. I mean... that's not really new for me, I know, but..." She uncrossed her arms and looked at her hands. "With all the training I've been doing... that's dangerous. What if it had been someone who couldn't take a hit like Kuno can? What if it was Ranma?" She shuddered and hugged herself. "Anytime I get stronger... That battlesuit, those soba noodles... I get dangerous. Except there's no antidote this time, it's just me."

"So? Work on control, then." Nabiki put a comforting hand on her shoulder. "I don't know much about martial arts, but I do know it's not about giving up when you find a gap in your training."

"Do... do you think Ranma would help me with that?" Akane asked shyly.

Nabiki smiled and ruffled her hair. "Just give him The Smile and he'll be putty."

"Why do you keep talking about 'The Smile' like it's some sort of superpower?" Akane ducked out from the hair tousling. "There's nothing special about my smile."

"Tell that to my customers." Nabiki muttered.

"Nabiki?" Akane twiddled her fingers nervously. "Would you be okay with Ranma training me?"

"What do you mean?" Nabiki raised an eyebrow.
"Nabiki…" Akane gave her an exasperated look. "I know I can be oblivious sometimes, but I'm not stupid! You went away for a weekend alone with Ranma, and when you both came back, you were like different people! I see how you look at him. I see how he looks at you. I know you keep saying you're not serious, but…” She put a hand on her arm. "Just be honest for once?"

Nabiki glanced at the door to the clinic nervously. "Being honest is liable to get me a sharpened spatula to the skull." She glanced back to Akane, and saw that her sister had that stubborn set to her jaw that told her she wasn't going to let it go. "Fine! I'm… I'm in the race. I'm the Dark Horse."

"You're not though, are you?" Akane asked. "The truth, Nabiki!"

Nabiki reflexively backed away a step. "A-Akane…"

Akane realized she had clenched her fists. She jammed her hands under her arms and turned back to lean against the side of the building, frustrated. "I'm not going to hit my own sister!" She said. "I just want the truth!"

Nabiki took a deep breath, and forced herself to step back and take a spot on the wall next to Akane. "All right. Yeah… There's something there. I'm not… I'm not going to say I'm ready to marry him. And he's not ready for anything like that either. So right now we're just trying to defuse his life enough so that we can actually get enough breathing room to figure that out."

"Have you kissed him?" Akane asked softly. Her eyes were fixed on the road.

"Yeah. I have." Nabiki replied softly. She felt an awful cold grip on her heart. That was one advantage the Ice Queen had; She never paid guilt much mind.

"Has he kissed you?" Akane asked again.

Nabiki could have quibbled that, but she knew what Akane meant. Ranma had been kissed plenty of times, but those he had kissed back were few and far between.

*Or at least they WERE,* a jealous little voice noted.

"Yeah. He has." Nabiki said softly.

Akane continued to stare silently at the road.

"I'm not going to give up on him." Akane said finally.

"I know you won't, Akane." Nabiki replied softly. "You wouldn't be you if you gave up that easily."

Another stretch of silence.

"Do you love him?" Akane broke the silence again.

Nabiki scowled. "We don't know what love is, Akane. This is all hormones and fantasy, and… and…"

Akane was silent.

For some reason Nabiki trailed off. What had seemed so reasonable, so easy, sounded hollow and naive even to her own ears. She laughed softly as even her own cynicism betrayed her. "... Yeah. I do." She finally said.

"Good." Akane said softly.
Nabiki shook her head. "I knew better than to fall for him, but I did anyway."

"So did I," Akane replied. She finally looked at her sister. "We should keep him away from Kasumi."

The tension broke all at once, and Nabiki was overcome with a giggling fit. After a moment Akane joined in, then two of them leaning against each other.

"I… I think if he was going to get Kasumi it would have happened by now." Nabiki snickered, then smiled at her sister.

"You never know! You held out a long time!" Akane protested.

"Point." Nabiki considered. "Maybe we can find a tropical island to quarantine us all on to keep it from spreading?"

"He'd still find a way to get engaged to a mermaid or something," Akane crossed her arms and scowled. "The baka…"

Nabiki smirked. "Or you'd get kidnapped by some amorous Prince of Atlantis."

"... I still get letters from Touma." Akane blushed and scuffed her foot on the ground.

Nabiki sighed and rolled her head back, closing her eyes. "I was such a fool for thinking I could get out of this place and just have a normal life. Like it was as simple as taking off a coat."

"Why would you want a normal life?" Akane asked. "You turn weird situations to your advantage faster than anyone I've ever met!"

Nabiki gave her sister a startled look.

"I mean, nothing rattles you, sis. I always kind of envied that." Akane admitted. "You're the one who's always in control."

"Not lately." Nabiki said, shaking her head. "I got complacent, and Himura yanked the rug out from under me."

"You got bored. You need challenges, just like the rest of us." Akane grinned.

"A girl from a Yakuza family is a bit more than a challenge, 'Kane." Nabiki said dryly.

"Bet you 5,000 yen she makes it to the end of the school year before you take her down." Akane replied.

"Akane, I don't think…"

Akane reached into her bag and pulled out a 5,000 yen note, holding it between two fingers as she waved it in front of her. "Is it a bet, or isn't it?"

Nabiki paused, then smirked and took the bill. "Fine. But only because you're family."

The door to the clinic opened. Ranma stepped out, wearing her Furinkan uniform, hair still a little damp from the change. Ukyou followed her, wearing Ranma's red silk chinese shirt, which caused a double helping of raised eyebrows from the Tendo sisters.

"Ranchan was nice enough to loan it to me for the trip home." Ukyou adjusted it on her shoulders a
Doc Tofu followed them out, hands clasped behind his back, disarming smile on his face. "Now, take it easy for a few days, all right Ukyou? Repeat concussions are a serious danger, so no fighting. Your balance is going to be a bit off for the next few days, so take it easy on the martial arts in general."

Ukyou fumbled with her hair, trying to get it tied back in a ponytail. "I know. I had to take basic first aid to get my restaurant license." She smiled at the doctor. "I'll be careful, I promise."

"Here, Ukyou, let me help with that." Akane hurried over to help Ukyou manage her hair as Ranma walked over to Nabiki. From her subdued manner, and the slight remnant of a blush, Nabiki already had a pretty good idea what had happened.

"So… did you get lost in the bathroom or something?" Nabiki asked, not quite ready to let Ranma off the hook.

"Actually… Ukyou thinks she might be able to help. Y'know, with the whole 'Fiancée Truce' thing." Ranma replied. "Apparently she and Shampoo meet up fairly often, and are on better terms than we'd expect."

"Than you'd expect." Nabiki sniffed. "They always ended up pooling their money when they dealt with me." She glanced at her watch. "Come on, we'd better get going."

"Wait, Ranma!" Akane ran over to them as she saw them about to leave. She stopped in front of the redhead, both of them fidgeting a bit awkwardly.

"Ranma, can… can we talk?" Akane asked. "Not now, I mean, but… at home. Later."

"Uh… sure Akane. I mean…" Ranma scratched the back of her head.

Akane took hold of the shorter girl by the shoulders. "I'm serious, Ranma. Please don't blow me off. I need your help, okay?" She smiled weakly. "This is a martial arts problem, not… y'know."

"Oh! Oh… oh!" Ranma went through several different realizations, then backtracked a bit on the last one. She quirked a brow questioningly at Akane. "... Oh?"

"Oh." Akane clarified.

"Oh." Ranma restated.

"There are these wonderful inventions called words, you two." Nabiki muttered. "You should try them. They might even be to your liking."

"Words and those two never really got along well, Sugar." Ukyou chimed in, walking over to stand next to Nabiki, crossing her arms.

"Mmmm, point." Nabiki conceded.

Akane and Ranma turned on the two of them, and in perfect unison and with perfectly mirrored expressions, put their hands on their hips, leaned towards them and scowled. "OHI!?"

The four of them managed to maintain that for approximately two seconds before dissolving into a fit of giggling.

"Okay, okay, we should get going." Nabiki said, walking up and snagging the redhead's arm. "We'll
bring you home any homework that gets assigned, assuming it's not carpentry work to fix the Principal's little remodeling error."

"All right. See you at home later!" Akane waved and walked off with Ukyou.

Nabiki glanced over at Ranma, noticing a goofy smile on her face that endured as they resumed their walk. "So, was the kiss that good?"

Nabiki felt a bit of mean satisfaction as Ranma tripped and hit the pavement face first.

Nabiki crouched next to the twitching redhead. She knew that this sort of thing was still going to happen. Only an idiot would expect to jump in this late in the game and expect after all that had been happening for things with the other girls to come to a halt cold-turkey, especially since there was no real way to do that without calling down the vengeance of three or four very powerful women scorned. It still needlel her in that possessive little spot that had decided to claim Ranma against all reason, though, so a little petty revenge helped salve her jealous impulses.

Ranma sat up, and immediately Nabiki regretted it, though. That scared, whipped puppy look was back in her eyes, shot through with guilt and a healthy dollop of panic. "I'm sorry! I… I…"

Nabiki sighed and pressed a finger to her lips. "Shhh… Not mad. A little jealous, but that's not your fault. I knew this was going to happen. Just…" She closed her eyes and shuddered. "Turn down the kicked puppy eyes before I hug you in public, okay?"

"Ranma took a deep breath. "I… are you sure?"

Nabiki frowned. "I'm giving you a 'Get out Of Angry Girlfriend Free' card here, Saotome. Don't question it." She offered a hand to Ranma to help her up.

"It… That wasn't the reason I had the goofy grin." Ranma said softly as she stood up.

"Oh?" Nabiki asked, curious now.

"It was… that thing before we all left. Where we were all joking and teasing each other and… no one was really mad or anything, and I wasn't walking on eggshells to keep from pissing someone off, it was… just being myself with everyone and everyone being happy." Ranma brushed herself off. "It was… It was just nice, y'know?"

"So… you didn't kiss Ukyou?" Nabiki asked, wondering if she had missed the mark.

Ranma smirked, seeing an opportunity to get some of her own back. "Oh, no, I kissed the hell out of her."

Nabiki's grip on her hand got uncomfortably tight. "You…!" She blew out the breath and then chuckled. "You are getting far too accustomed to my 'nice' side, Saotome. Maybe I should start your tab back up, hmmm?"

Ranma blanched a little. "Please don't."

Nabiki relaxed her grip a little. "Better. Come on, let's see what farce in the guise of education waits for us today."

Ranma settled into step with her. Rather than letting go, she felt Ranma's fingers weave into hers as she walked beside her. Nabiki felt like she should tell her not to, that the two of them holding hands openly was a bad idea… but she couldn't bring herself to do it. Feeling that delicate-seeming hand in
hers stirred something within her.

As they approached the gates, they could already hear the sounds of students milling about in the yard. They slowed and peeked through to see what was going on.

There was a hastily erected stage set up in front of the school main doors, and Principal Kuno was there, as well as a few of the faculty, the school nurse, and Himura Tanaka. Behind them construction crews were working in and around the school, wheeling out the large industrial heater fans that had been running all night to dry the school out.

"Okay, this is new." Nabiki led Ranma into the crowd, aiming for a decent vantage.

"Senpai!"

They both turned to see Rin waving for them. She, Sayuri and the rest of the team had staked out a spot slightly off to the side. They pushed through the crowd to join them.

"What's going on?" Ranma asked. "The Head Pineapple about to announce a new round of mandatory hairstyles?"

"Nobody knows." Sayuri said, "They won't let us into the school. I guess Kuno wrecked it worse than it seemed?"

"This school has had worse than a little water." Ranma snorted.

"Ey ev'rybody!" The Principal's voice came clear over the loudspeaker. "Your Headmaster is happy to see so many smiling faces! We be havin' the big fun, ye?"

"Woo." Someone half-heartedly said from the crowd. The rest shuffled, a few coughs and a sea of bland, bored expressions.

"Yeah!" Principal Kuno cheered as if he had just got a roaring ovation. "So, we be havin' a few of dem bumps in de road yesterday, ye? Ye. So because yer Headmaster be thinkin' o' nothing but the welfare o' his keki's and wahines, while yer school is bein' fixed, we be havin' dem nurses in from de big hospital to check to make sure all of my students are healthy!"

"Do we gotta get shots? I hate needles!"

"You know, I heard the water sits in those pipes for decades. Who knows what kind of stuff was growing in 'em?"

"Can I just get a note from my parents saying I'm okay?"

"Well, I have had this rash…"

"An' here to let you know about the big fun planned for you all today, here is Acting Student Council President, Himura Tanaka!"

"Acting Student Council President?!" Sayuri snarled incredulously, "When did this happen?!"

"Remember when Kuno baby said that anyone who wanted to run for Student Council had to fight him in a kendo match first so he could 'test their mettle'?" Nabiki said, "No one has run for student council since he became president. He's been having the sports team captains fill in for the positions. Hinata was Treasurer, which is next in line since there was no VP."

"Democracy in action." Yuka muttered.
Himura walked up to the podium, smiling brightly. "Good morning Furinkan! I am overjoyed to see you all here this morning, dutifully coming in despite the calamity that was yesterday. Trust me when I say that your diligence has been noticed, and is appreciated."

"Woo." Came the same halfhearted cheer from the crowd.

Himura simply smiled. "I understand that words are cheap. Fortunately, we have a rather underutilized student events purse left over from last year. With Principal Kuno's blessing, as well as a few contacts of my own, I have arranged for some of the local catering businesses to come provide an outdoor barbecue lunch, as thanks for your patience."

This time, there was a genuine cheer from the collected students.

Himura’s smile grew. She soaked in the adulation a few moments before holding up her hand. "And... AND... The volleyball team will be making an exciting announcement regarding the coming season! The other club leaders also worked hard to get booths set up, so those of you who don't yet have a club, or are thinking of changing to a different one, today is your day!"

There was another cheer from the crowd.

"And lastly, today will be a half day, so once you've gotten your checkup, gotten fed, and checked out our many excellent clubs and sports teams, the rest of your day is yours to do with as you wish!" Himura called out.

The final roar from the students was deafening.

Nabiki narrowed her eyes.

"Well, she went all out, didn't she?" Sayuri sniffed.

"Aren't we technically part of the volleyball team now?" Yuka added. "Why are we only finding out about this now?"

"I think you all should stick close. Meet back up at the lunch tree after you get your checkups."

Nabiki said, her eyes never leaving Himura. "And if you see Hiroshi and Daisuke, tell them I'm looking for them."

"Why do you want those two jokers?" Yuka asked, raising an eyebrow.

A smirk started to form on Nabiki’s lips, her eyes twinkling with the beginnings of a scheme. "Because if Himura is going to do what I think she's going to do... I'm going to need some minions."

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The throng of students was ushered around to the back of the school grounds to the exterior gym doors where lines were formed. True to her word, a large number of outdoor cooking stations had been set up, with delicious smells already wafting from the various stalls. There was another stage set up on the soccer field, with a full array of lights and a control booth up in the bleachers.

Riko whistled. "They really went all out for this."

"Yeah. I have a bad feeling about this." Ranma muttered, rubbing her arms as if she were cold.

"No volleyball court, though." Sayuri noted. "At least she isn't going to demand an immediate match."
"This is to drum up the crowds." Nabiki commented. Her eyes passed over every detail of the scene, filing away objects of importance, flagging people of note. "She wants to make this competition of hers a big public spectacle."

"Great." Ranma muttered. "Don't get enough of those normally."

"To be fair? By now everyone just assumes if you're involved it's gonna be something worth watching, Ranma." Sayuri said, patting the redhead on the back.

"And potentially life threatening." Yuka muttered.

"That just makes it more exciting!" Riko replied.

Yuka scowled. "Have you forgotten that this time we're the event?"

"It'll make it all the sweeter when we knock her and her overdone roots off her throne." Sayuri said, with an expression that could best be described as vengeful anticipation.

Nabiki noted that as well. She glanced up at the sound booth, taking note of the two students who were doing the sound checks. She reached into her bag, brought out a little black book and flipped through it. She nodded, then tucked the book away again, all without breaking stride.

"I suppose we should get in line…" Riko indicated the long, snaking line leading from the door to the gym. "... ugh."

"There you are!"

They all glanced to the side to see Hana approaching, flanked by Megumi and another girl. Hana was smiling brightly, brand new high-end digital camera hanging from a strap around her neck.

"What are you doing here?" Sayuri growled.

"Don't tell me no one told you?" Hana put her hands on her hips, exaggerated scowl appearing on her face. "You're on the Volleyball team! Sports teams get to skip the line! Just go up to the door and tell them you're here, they've been expecting you!" She glanced at Nabiki. "Ooooh… sorry Ms. Tendo. 'Fraid it's sports team members only. Fan club members have to wait in line like everyone else."

Nabiki simply smirked. "Of course."

Hana's expression darkened for a moment. "You know 'Boss', you've been awful quiet lately." She smiled brightly. "I wasn't really expecting you to just quietly accept all of this like I suggested! I guess maybe you were more ready for retirement than I thought, huh?"

"I'm sure you're right." Nabiki continued to smile, showing entirely too many teeth.

Hana opened her mouth as if to say more, but then glanced at the others watching her curiously. She cleared her throat, recovering her composure. She turned to them and clapped her hands. "Well, we should get you taken care of so you can get first crack at all this lovely food, right? This way please." She smiled and gestured towards the door.

They walked past, giving her wary looks. As Sayuri passed, she paused and hooked the camera strap with one finger. "Nice collar." She said softly. "Must have cost Himura a mint. Hope it doesn't get too tight when she tugs on the leash." She released it and continued on.
"Heh..." Hana twitched a bit, took a breath, then followed after them. Megumi and the other girls followed, though Megumi spared Nabiki a curious look.

Nabiki watched them go. *Good. Hana is accounted for. Now I just have to find Hiroshi and Daisuke...* She scanned the line and spotted them about halfway to the first bend in the line, near the back. She briskly walked over to them both and clapped them on the shoulders. "You. This way. Now." She said in her best authoritative voice.

Both of them stiffened, though they didn't resist as she frog marched them out of the line; well-honed submissive instincts kicking in from many years of being on the bottom of the Furinkan food chain. She walked them a safe distance away then released them and casually walked in front of them.
"Come on, you two. We have work to do."

"Wha... *Nabiki!*" Hiroshi yelped, looking back at the line where their spots had already been filled in. "You made us lose our place!"

"Ugh, and the line is going for another bend!" Daisuke wailed.

They both were about to confront Nabiki, but she had already moved between them, throwing an arm around each of their necks and pulling them down to her level.
"Listen, you two. Right now, I'm going to give you a choice. Do you want to stuff your faces with barbecue? Or do you want in on a caper?"

They paused.

"Real-deal Nabiki Tendo caper?" Daisuke asked carefully.

"Uh huh. Foot in the door time." She flashed him a smile.

"Who's the mark?" Hiroshi added.

"Himura Tanaka." Nabiki replied. "And grifting all of the 'extra-curricular' proceeds for this event she's going to announce." She winked. "As well as a couple of openings to be my eyes and ears on the street in Furinkan. Assuming you can be discreet."

"We're the picture of discretion." Daisuke replied.

"Except when we're wearing the tutus." Hiroshi added.

"Then we're even *more* discreet." Daisuke finished.

Nabiki grinned. "Actually... We'll need the tutus for this. And if the barbecue is all gone by the time we're done, I'll throw in lunch from the Nekohanten on me." She tightened her grip a little. "Do we have a working arrangement?"

"Might I confer with my... uh... *associate*?" Daisuke asked.

"Discreetly, of course." Hiroshi added.

Nabiki nodded and released them.

They turned and walked a couple of paces away to put their heads together.

"What do you think?" Hiroshi asked.
"Minion work for Nabiki Tendo. Long hours, low pay, demeaning work taking naughty pics, and association with the most notoriously heartless mercenary in Nerima." Daisuke muttered.

"I know, but we shouldn't just list the positives." Hiroshi warned him. "Do you think we can fit this into our busy schedules as cheerleading detectives?"

"You mean in between our daily routine of looking for things to investigate and being told to buzz off?" Daisuke asked.

"Well… okay, point." Hiroshi admitted.

"Also, Nabiki hangs around Ranma, and cute girls hang around Ranma, and lately not all of them have been engaged and/or legally married to him already." Daisuke drove his point home.

"Including Yuka."

Daisuke winced. "Okay… fair point, but it's still better than what we have going on now. Which is nothing."

Hiroshi pondered. "Do we dare become Cheerleading Detective Henchmen?"

"Do we dare not?"

They were silent a moment, then nodded to each other, and in unison turned and walked back to Nabiki.

"For the record, we're henchmen, not minions." Daisuke stated clearly.

Nabiki smirked. "Deal. Now, you two ran the sound board for the school play last year, right? And have either of you got an MP3 player with you? And keep those tutus ready!"

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The school gymnasium was cordoned off with a mass of wheeled dividers, with portable examination tables and wheeled instrument carts in each, each one a little nurse's office. Orderlies shuttled back and forth, ushering students to where they needed to go.

"Oh god, are we going to have to strip for this?" Rin squeaked, hiding behind Ranma. "I can barely handle that at a regular nurse's office! I-in front of all of these people…?!"

"It's not like they're going to have you strip out in the open, Rin." Riko replied, patting her on the shoulder. "Besides, it's just a checkup. Probably just eyes, ears, nose and throat stuff to make sure we didn't pick up some horrible infection from the 60's or however old those pipes are."

"Besides, not like you've got anything to be ashamed of." Ranma said over her shoulder.

Rin blinked. "R-really, senpai?"

Ranma shrugged. "Sure, I-ow ow ow OW OW OW OW!" Ranma was cut off as a finger and thumb grabbed her earlobe and pulled sharply.

"I'm sure one of your fiancees is going to thank me for this." Sayuri muttered, finally releasing the girl.

"Girls Volleyball Team, second string?" One of the orderlies ran up, checking his clipboard.
"Second string!?" Sayuri snarled, advancing on the orderly. She was quickly restrained by Yuka and Riko.

"I-I'm sorry, miss, that's just what it says on the clipboard." He bowed in apology. "If you'll just come with me, there are nurses to see each of you."

He lead them into a corridor made of the portable walls, directing each of them to a cubicle. "The nurses will be with you in a moment." He ushered each of them into a separate one, and closed the curtain.

Ranma sat on the examination table and sighed. "Well, this is fun." She muttered.

The curtain parted, and a dark haired woman with glasses and a nurse's uniform stepped inside. "Ranma Saotome?" She asked.

Ranma nodded, uncertain what to expect. She hadn't had much experience with medical visits outside of Dr Tofu. In fact, Dr Tofu was the closest she had ever gotten to modern medicine.

The nurse smiled. "I'm Nurse Ninomiya, pleased to meet you." She stepped inside and settled onto the stool next to the bed. She looked at the chart on her clipboard. "It... looks like it's been a while since you've been to the doctor's office? We don't have much detail on file for you."

"I've been travelling with my father. Uh... a lot." Ranma replied weakly.

"Well, that's no problem, we can fill in those blanks today. As a member of the Volleyball team, we'll need a little bloodwork... height, weight, basic physical." She checked off a few things on her chart. "Could I get you to take your clothes off, please?"

_Oh boy..._ Ranma thought nervously.

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The physical wasn't as bad as Ranma had feared. The Nurse's professional demeanor had helped a lot, though the needles still hadn't been a lot of fun. Ranma rubbed her arm and wondered if there was any blood left in it at all. No diseases from the scummy old sprinkler water (thankfully) and all the rest of her vitals had been, as the nurse put it, 'amazing'.

She walked out of the corridor of cubicles to see the other members of the volleyball team waiting for her. Rin waved as she approached.

"Wow... They kept you for the full treatment, huh?" Riko said. "I thought I'd be last, since I didn't have an up to date physical."

"Physical and bloodwork." Ranma replied, showing off the bits of cotton taped to her arm. "I kept hearing stuff about doctors being vampires, and I never understood what they meant until today."

Riko winced and patted her shoulder sympathetically. "Well, at least it's over for a while, huh? So..." She glanced about conspiratorially, then leaned in. "... What about your weight?"

"What about it?" Ranma asked, confused.

"Over, under, what?" Riko poked her side. "Come on, I know I'm not the only sweet tooth in this group! _Please_ tell me there's some justice in the universe!"

"Ummm..." Ranma fidgeted nervously.
"Give it up, Riko." Yuka put a hand on her shoulder. "Ranma burns more calories brushing her teeth than we do in an entire week. She's either on the mark or under." She peered around the girl to glance at Ranma. "Right?"

"B-but she's short and curvy, so I thought…" Riko gave her a teary-eyed look.

"I… don't remember?" Ranma blushed. She actually hadn't paid much attention to that part of the exam. Who cared how much she weighed?

"Isn't being underweight bad too, though?" Rin said sheepishly. "The nurse always gives me a hard time about that…"

"You're all traitors." Riko sniffed, crossing her arms and huffing.

"I suppose now is a bad time to ask if we're going to go get some barbecue?" Sayuri asked.

"I… wouldn't say that…" Riko's demeanor abruptly changed. She grabbed Rin by the arm. "Come on underweight, let's get you fattened up!"

Yuka and Sayuri exchanged a bemused look with Ranma and followed after.

"So… why did yours take so long?" Yuka asked.

Ranma shrugged. "The nurse said my records were really empty, so she needed some bloodwork, basic medical history, that sort of stuff." Ranma said. "Me and pops didn't see many doctors on our training journey, and most of the time they were village healers or at best free clinics that didn't need too much documentation."

"You didn't try and explain the curse, did you?" Sayuri asked.

Ranma snorted. "If I had, I'd still be there. Nah, I mean… Doc Tofu knows all about it, and he's the guy I go to if I need help, so… who cares what the school's records say? They're all gonna get fixed once we beat Himura anyway."

"True, I guess." Sayuri replied.

They stepped out into the sunlight, squinting a little at the brightness. Most of the students were still lined up, though a few were milling about. The air was starting to fill with the smells of cooking food.

"Oooh, this isn't fair!" Riko whimpered. Yuka gave her another comforting pat.

"Look at it this way," Ranma replied. "You're going to be burning a lot of calories playing volleyball from now on, right? So… you can probably afford to indulge."

Riko's eyes widened. "You're right! Thank you Ranma!" She gave the redhead a sudden hug, which caused Ranma to immediately go stiff as a board.

"Oh… sorry… Not a hugger?" Riko backed away sheepishly. "Sometimes I forget you're not one of the girls."

"It's just that getting hugged by a girl tends to have nasty consequences for Ranma." Sayuri said.

"Just don't try and marry her, and you'll be good." Yuka added.

"Oh, I'm not into gi…" Riko started, then blinked. "Now Rin has me doing it!"
"Doing what?" Rin asked, cocking her head.

Ranma sighed heavily. *And the old manhood takes another couple of blows below the belt.*

"We should make sure to get some for Nabiki too." Rin said as they walked among the various stalls. They seemed to be setting up a buffet-style arrangement, with each table offering a different dish, the cooks working behind the tables to crank out a number of plates. "Ranma, what does she like?"

Ranma considered. "She likes sweets, especially cakes. She also tends to like sweeter sauces… oh! And she likes the Karaage in the Transit mall. She's not on a diet… but she's not a big eater, and she complained I was a bad influence on her eating, so probably something with sweet sauce with a side salad or something lighter?"

Ranma paused as the four girls stared at her. "What?"

"Oh my god they're actually dating." Sayuri said, completely deadpan.

Ranma froze, eyes widening in horror, mind racing as she wondered frantically how they had figured it out, and what kind of damage that would do, given they had all seen her kissing Ukyou the day before. If they told Ukyou before she and Nabiki had defused things... !

They all broke up laughing, derailing her train of thought.

"Oh my god Ranma, your face!" Sayuri giggled.

"Don't worry, Ranma. We all know Nabiki knows better." Yuka said. "But you have to admit, the only other person I've ever heard you actually know anything about was Akane. If we didn't know any better…"

"I'm sorry, Senpai, but it is pretty ridiculous." Rin managed, still giggling.

Ranma scowled. "I'm liking all of you a lot less right now." She stuck her nose in the air and stalked off to the food tables.

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Ranma had gotten over her sulk by the time they had eaten. Sampling some of the best grilled food in Nerima certainly helped her mood.

"You know, if Himura wasn't actively trying to screw up the lives of a bunch of my friends, I'd think she was pretty cool. This is amazing." Riko said, biting into a kebab of delicately spiced, lightly charred meat.

"That's the point." Sayuri said. "That's how she works. At first you think she's the best thing ever." She pushed the food around on her paper plate disinterestedly. "When I first joined the volleyball team, she was all about us having equal time on the court, promising us she could make us Olympic level players if we just followed her lead and put in the effort." She speared a chunk of roasted red pepper with her fork, examining it. "Bought us coffee every day for the first week. Made us feel like we could really play. Then, once she had picked out her favorites, she just… neglected to schedule us."

She popped the pepper into her mouth. "When we asked her why, she started telling us we weren't hustling, we were taking her for granted. Started demanding longer practise hours. Started coming down on us for small mistakes. It was never as a group either. Every day she'd single someone out. Start off by pointing out they looked a little flabby, or make fun of their practise shoes, or something
inconsequential. She liked to call me 'thunder thighs'."

"But…" Ranma looked confused. She glanced at Sayuri's legs. "... You don't…"

Sayuri shot the redhead and dirty look, blushing. "I know, Ranma. That wasn't the point. The girl who's shoes she made fun of? Two other girls wore the same shoes and she didn't say a word. See, the girls who picked up her abuse and carried it? They got put on the schedule. Not much, a game here or there. But better than nothing. That was the point. If you subscribed to her version of reality, you got fed. It was only scraps by this point, but when you're starving…" She shook her head, sighed, and dumped her plate in a trash bin. "I actually started to believe I did have thunder thighs after a while. That's when it was time to quit."

Ranma stared at her plate. *Thunder thighs*. She had used that one against Akane. A lot. As well as a lot of other stuff that simply wasn't true. She glanced at her plate queasily, then dumped it in the trash as well.

"**ATTENTION STUDENTS! PLEASE GATHER AT THE MAIN STAGE!**"

"Looks like it's showtime." Sayuri said.

"Not quite yet."

They all turned to see Nabiki standing behind them. She was smirking, that confident shark-like grin that signalled a caper was underway. She walked up and joined the group, putting a hand on Sayuri's shoulder. "Sayuri… how would you like to reject Himura's reality and substitute your own?"

The game was afoot.

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Himura smiled as the throngs of students gathered in front of the stage. There was something satisfying about putting on a show, though doing so with the nearly daily spectacle put on by the martial artists had been almost impossible.

*Just like stray cats. They'll ignore you, but if you wave a few scraps under their nose suddenly you're the center of their universe.* She nodded and waved to random people in the crowd, doing her best idol impression. *Keep it up, and in no time they're domesticated. All except a few ferals, but at that point they're easy to single out.* She tapped the mic to check it was on.

"Hello Furinkan!" She said, "Is everyone enjoying the barbecue?"

There was a roar of approval from the crowd.

*Already purring.* She smirked. "Great! I just wanted to thank you all for your cooperation. I know that visits to the Nurse's Office are no fun at all, and I've just sent the entire school there!"

There were some mock boos from the crowd, people she had tapped to do so. The critical notes were hollow and empty… as they should be.

She bowed deeply in apology. "I am so sorry! I hope that the lunch helps start to make up for it, but I know myself and the Student Council have a long way to go."

There were sympathetic noises from the crowd, and one student even shouted out "*We love you, Himura-chan!*"
She grinned. That hadn't even been staged. "So, this year we're going to make things right. Starting by stepping things up a little as far as making Furinkan a school you can be proud of. Starting with your sports teams!" She stepped aside and gestured as the music started up. Something suitable generic and stirring as the the various sports teams were ushered out - In their uniforms of course. Pulling them aside for the little clinic had made it easy to get them all up to speed and into their uniforms.

Obediently they marched up onto the stage. The hulking boy's soccer team was first, followed by the girls, then the basketball teams, and finally the boy's volleyball team.

"Now, they're an impressive group, aren't they? Aren't they?" She motioned to the crowd, and they cheered, like the good pets they already were. "Yeah! They make us all proud. But, I have to admit some bias here. There's one team I left for last. The team that went all the way to the Finals last year, and is ready to do it again this year, and bring home the cup! I present to you your Girl's Championship Volleyball Team!"

There was a cheer from the crowd as the girl's team trotted onto the stage. Himura had sprung for new jumpsuits for all the girls, emblazoned with Furinkan's logo.

"Mineko Kimura and Omi Sakoda, our blockers!" She announced as the two girls stepped forward. Mineko was a taller girl. She had short hair, with a lock dyed with a stripe of color matching the Olympic logo. She grinned and spun a volleyball on her finger before tossing it out into the crowd. Omi was shorter, cute and bouncy with long hair tied off to the side in a ponytail. She stood next to Mineko, doing a couple of idol poses and waving to the crowd, blowing kisses.

The crowd went nuts.

"Sanae Araki and Umeko Miyashita, our mid-field!" Himura cried out, gesturing for the other two girls to step forward. Sanae had long light colored hair and was curvy in all the right places, and Himura had intentionally had her suit tailored a little on the small side to show it off. It helped that Sanae had unzipped the top enough to show a decent amount of cleavage. She sauntered up onto the stage with a strut that would have made a model proud, and gave the crowd a sultry pose, which set off a cacophony of wolf whistles. Umeko was the trained martial artist. Not at the level of the insanity at the school, but that hardly mattered. She had her headband tied around her head, and she bowed to the crowd as she would in a match, then went into a flurry of kicks and spins, earning another roar from the crowd.

Perfect. Himura thought. "And, of course, myself, the humble server and Captain!" She grabbed the front of her school uniform and tore it away.

It had been quite a trick to get a uniform tailored that would look normal on stage, but she could cleanly and dramatically rip off with one hand. Underneath she wore the bloomer shorts and t-shirt of the team, with a metallic 'C' on the left breast side. She flung her dummy uniform aside and thrust her fist into the air, and was greeted by the loudest cheers of all.

She soaked that in a moment. It was so meaningless, so minor, these people and this place, such petty and small things, but it felt good nonetheless. A taste of what she would accomplish in the real world, once she was free of this prison of adolescence.

"Now, JUST having a winning team isn't good enough! Not for Furinkan!" Himura cried out. "The greatness of this school is born in competition! And who here is more competitive than Ranma Saotome?"

Murmurs ran through the crowd. Ranma had a well-earned reputation for causing chaos, after all.
There was also the matter of him being male, but thanks to the curse this wouldn't be the first female team she had competed as part of.

"Of course Ranma isn't just going to play for the girl's volleyball team!" Himura chuckled. "Not without a little competition of our own! So Ranma has challenged us to prove ourselves, by defeating her in a volleyball rally!"

"Ooooooh!" She crowd was interested now.

"Our team will play five our our school's matches, and Ranma's team will play the other five of the first ten of the season. If we win and prove our team up to the challenge, Ranma Saotome will play for our Championship team for the rest of the season!"

The crowd cheered, immediately seeing the benefit of having the martial artist playing for Furinkan at a competitive level.

Himura again enjoyed the roar of the crowd, letting it die down. "I know, right? But even better, if we tie—and I expect we will—There will be a final face-off between Ranma's team and ours! What a spectacle that'll be, right!"

Again the crowd cheered.

Himura grinned. "Come on up, Ranma! I see you there in the crowd! Let everyone know how the Saotome School of Anything Goes Martial Arts never turns down a challenge!" She beckoned to the redhead, not bothering to mention the rest of the team.

Such a shame no one had let them know to come up in uniform. Or provided them with one.

As expected they came upon stage, single file. Next to the other sports teams they looked out of place in their regular school uniforms. Next to the glamorous Volleyball team, they looked positively ragtag.

"Oh, and your friends came too. Everyone give a hand to the girls who are filling the other spots on Ranma's team! Aren't they good sports?" Himura said, clapping and smirking as they filed up onto the stage. "Well, Ranma? Got anything to say?"

Ranma's face was blank, unreadable. Even cold. But then a broad smile spread across her lips as she stepped forward, right into Himura's personal space. "Actually…" She said, "you should ask that of our team captain." And with that she casually bapped the microphone from below, popping it out of Himura's grasp and sending it over her head, arcing behind her, right into Sayuri's grasp.

At that moment Himura's carefully planned lighting and sound went into chaos as the spotlights focused on Sayuri, and the speakers kicked into the opening strains of Saikyo Yuusha Robo Gundam.

"I think what we've got to say is this deal seems a little unfair to us!" Sayuri said. She lifted her hand up in the air and snapped her fingers.

Ranma blurred. The girls weren't wearing tearaway Furinkan uniforms, but with Ranma's Amaguriken speed (And the absence of fiancees who might seek to destroy her for it), it was only an eyeblink to snatch the uniforms off each of the girls and herself.

Underneath they were wearing what looked like a modified red leotard, with a white and red half shirt overtop. Something very similar to the girl's uniforms from Gunbuster (Because it was) but it was also serving as a sufficiently eyecatching team uniform to make Himura's flashy tracksuits look a
"This ISN'T martial arts, Himura, and expecting Ranma to just play a challenge by your rules is a bit naive. What say we spice this up a bit, huh?" Sayuri pointed at Himura. Her eyes were flashing, and the music boomed and ebbed around her, a little wind stirring her hair though the day had been dead still a moment before. The image she was cutting was absolutely striking, and the crowd was going nuts. "5 games. 5 wins each and we have a final face off. And if you win, you get Ranma for the year. But if you lose… well, that just shows you're not fit to be team captain, because you've been outplayed." She smirked. "Which you should probably start getting used to NOW."

Himura clenched her fists, her eyes widening with rage. She opened her mouth, then glanced at the crowd and closed it.

"Oh, or did you have some way you wanted to coerce Ranma to play your game?" Sayuri cocked her head and touched her chin with her finger. "But that would be both unladylike AND unsportsmanlike, wouldn't it?"

"You should be careful what you say, Kamei-san."

Sayuri flicked the switch on the mic off and winked at Himura. "Oh, I'm done being careful. Or being afraid of you." She flicked it back on and turned to the crowd. "Let's hear what the students say, huh? Winner takes Ranma, the Volleyball team, AND the Captain's position! WHAT SAY YOU?"

The roar from the crowd was the only answer needed. Himura had already ignited them, making Sayuri's over the top proclamations vastly more effective. The student body wouldn't be satisfied with anything less than a grudge match now.

Himura ground her teeth, glaring hatred at the ponytailed girl. She took a breath and regained her composure. "All of these theatrics are…"

"What was that?" Sayuri grinned and held the mic out to her, though it was too far away to easily pick her up.

Himura trembled with rage, struggling mightily to keep her anger in check. "Very well." She said tightly.

"THERE YOU HAVE IT!" Sayuri crowed, to a renewed roar from the crowd. "And just to show we're not just relying on Ranma here…" A volleyball was tossed up from the crowd, which Sayuri tossed into the air.

Rin leapt up, and all the lights focused on her as she smashed the ball. There was a retort like a gunshot, and the volleyball was propelled at tremendous velocity over the crowd's heads and off into the distance.

"And, if that's not enough to make things interesting… well, you know who to talk to." Suddenly the lights flicked off on the stage, and a spotlight flicked on, trained on one student standing in the crowd.

Nabiki Tendo.

Himura's eyes narrowed.

The spotlight snapped off, the lights returning to the stage. Sayuri and the others were gone.
Himura gripped the podium, eyes staring sightlessly forward as she trembled with rage. Her gaze flicked up to the control booth… where two boys wearing tutus over their Furinkan uniforms waved back. Her eyes then flicked down to Nabiki Tendo. She was in the middle of a throng, already taking bets.

The Middle Tendo looked up, smirked and winked at her, then went back to tallying odds for the anxious gambling addicts of Furinkan High.

Leaving Himura on stage, exposed yet ignored.

Himura tried to say something but realized that Sayuri had taken the mic with her, leaving her voiceless in a situation that had completely escaped her control. She shuddered once more and stalked angrily off the stage.

To her chagrin, the spotlights followed her until she was out of sight.

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(Wow, this was a big one!

Big thanks to Jaime for helping me get this one edited. I know it was a huge amount of work, and Jaime is very thorough.

There’s a little that will be made more clear in the next chapter, such as ‘Where the hell did Nabiki get Gunbuster uniforms on zero notice?’, but this one was already going long. I just wanted to make sure that I fit in the bit where Himura takes her first real broadside in all this.

So, I eagerly await judgement, scorn, hatemail, and hopefully constructive criticism!

And if you happened to like it, feel free to say that too ^^)
Nabiki sighed happily as she flipped through the tickets she had taken, jotting them down in her betting ledger. It had been far too long.

It wasn't just the money, though seeing something positive in the cash flow ledger certainly felt good. It was the feeling of regaining some control, like she had been a ship without a rudder, and she had finally jury-rigged something to allow her to steer.

"Is the coast clear?"

Nabiki squeaked a little as the ghostly voice came from somewhere directly behind her. She let out a breath, reminding herself that this was the plan. "Yes, Ranma. Himura has gone off to sulk."

The star-patterned furoshiki whipped away, revealing Ranma and the rest of the volleyball team. "Good. It was getting tiring keeping that up." Ranma said, wiping her brow. "Hiding four other people is hard." She glanced at the other girls. "You all okay?"

"You know, as if we needed another reminder that if you were actually the pervert you have the rep for we would all be in a lot of trouble…" Yuka brushed off her sleeves.

"Yuka, I'd never…" Ranma started, but Sayuri put a hand on her shoulder.

"I think Yuka's trying to say that you wouldn't… and we all know it Ranma." Sayuri said, giving the redhead a crooked smile. "She's just bad at dropping the snark." She glanced over her shoulder. "... I'd say more, but I think Rin is going to explode."

They turned to see the diminutive striker trembling, fists clenched, and eyes full of stars as she looked at Ranma with a truly terrifying level of hero worship. "That…"

"Coast is clear, no fiancées in sight." Riko said, looking out across the field.

"... Was…"

"Roof is clear." Yuka added, looking up.

"...So…"

Sayuri patted Ranma once more on the shoulder and got out of the way. And back a few paces.

"COOL!"

Ranma yelped as Rin glomped her with enough force to make an Amazon proud.

Rin released her quickly, though she held onto her hands, bouncing excitedly. "ThatWasSoCoolWeWereInvisibleAndNoOneCouldSeeUsAndItWasAll'Whoosh!'AndSuddenlyWeWereVisibleAgainAndHOWDIDYOUODT!

"Ack…! It's… It's a martial arts technique…" Ranma looked around nervously, looking for help that wasn't forthcoming. "I… aheh… I'm actually not supposed to use it. It's sorta forbidd… en?" She felt a bit of cold sweat down the back of her neck as she saw Rin start to vibrate.

"OMGFORBIDDENMARTIALARTSTECHNIQUES!EEEEEEEEEEEEEE!"
"No more sugar for her." Yuka muttered.

"Nabiki? Help…" Ranma whimpered, giving her girlfriend an imploring look.

Nabiki tucked away her ledger and walked over, gently taking Rin by the shoulders and backing her off a few steps. "This is nothing. By the end of this you'll be seeing ki blasts and pressure points making things explode… but you gotta be cool about it."

"Okay… okay…" Rin sucked in deep breaths. She gave Nabiki a sheepish look, and then much more subdued squeaked out. "Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!"

"We'll work on it." Nabiki smirked.

"Actually, you were the amazing one, Nabiki." Sayuri said. "How did you set all this up? There's no way you knew about this beforehand…" She looked a bit uncertain. "... Did you?"

Nabiki crossed her arms. For a moment she was tempted to cultivate the notion of her omniscience in the group, but that would just lead to unrealistic expectations. As long as Himura was convinced Nabiki was several steps ahead, that was good enough. "Anything Goes School is all about improvisation." She said smugly. "I might not be a trained martial artist, but I am the daughter of the Master of the Tendo school."

"But… where did you get these costumes?" Riko asked, turning and giving her outfit a good look. "These are actually really good."

Nabiki held up a finger. "Being prepared isn't about having everything on hand, it's about knowing where and how to source materials and resources. And Furinkan is nothing if not an absolute treasure trove of everything you could possibly want, cranked out by the fevered brains of the obsessive-compulsive crazies that we share the school with. I happen to know several of the drama club members are avid cosplayers, and have been using school supplies and equipment."

"Isn't that against the drama club rules though?" Rin asked, cocking her head.

"That's why she knows about it." Yuka replied dryly.

"We… had an arrangement." Nabiki replied. "So I knew about the costumes. I also knew they had put them in garment bags to hide them from prying eyes."

"Like yours?" Yuka asked, quirking an eyebrow.

"I was the one who suggested the garment bags." Nabiki chuckled. "For a consulting fee, of course. Thankfully, garment bags like the ones they used…"

"... Are waterproof." Sayuri snorted. "So you knew they'd be there, and would be okay after the sprinklers."

"The club never ended up using them. They never found any girls to wear them. The anime convention they were meant for came and went." Nabiki shrugged. "They got pulled outside on the same racks as all the waterlogged stuff, and were probably going to get tossed without even being checked. I had a few other options, but these were by far the best one. I got lucky."

"I hope they don't mind…" Rin said, poking her fingers together.

"I'll check with them later and get their blessing." Nabiki said after a moment's thought. Not a bad idea, can't have Himura or Hana using uniforms of questionable ownership against me. And if I can
get them on board, might be able to swing free tailoring for them.

"But who did you get to run the booth?" Riko asked.

Nabiki looked around, spotted the appropriate parties, and motioned them to come over. They glanced around before skulking their way in a way that suggested they were trying to not be obvious, and doing a miserable job of it.

"Are you sure we should be meeting in the open like this, chief?" Hiroshi asked, glancing around nervously.

"What, are you afraid of repercussions?" Nabiki asked.

"Nah, Himura doesn't like us anyway." Daisuke answered. "But we thought you might want to keep our 'connection' on the down and down. On the speakeasy. On easy street, you know?"

Nabiki blinked at him. "No… No actually I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Neither does he," Hiroshi replied. "He's just been watching gangster movies again."

Nabiki rolled her eyes. "If you mean you think we should hide our association… there's not much point. Himura isn't stupid. But the Tutus give a level of plausible deniability to anyone official. You were acting as cheerleaders."

"Don't think that's going to save you, 'Boss'!"

They all looked over to see Hana stalking towards them. She was wearing a fake smile, her eye twitching as she struggled to maintain her composure. "Do you honestly think you can just sweep in here and make Himura and the rest of us look like idiots?"

"Truth hurts?" Yuka asked sweetly.

Hana ignored her, her gaze fixed on Nabiki. "I want that betting ledger, Nabiki. And the betting proceeds. Now."

"Or?" Nabiki asked, pulling it out and waving the book back and forth nonchalantly.

Hana's smile became a little more real, and a lot meaner. "Have you forgotten what I've got on you, 'Boss'? What'll happen if certain pictures get into certain wrong hands?"

Nabiki coolly regarded the girl a moment, then she turned her gaze to Daisuke, ignoring Hana pointedly. "Did you guys manage to get any lunch in the middle of all this?"

Daisuke shook his head, his tummy grumbling as if on cue. "No, it was all cleaned out by the time we were done."

"H-hey!" Hana stamped her foot.

"Not to worry." Nabiki looked at her wristwatch. "Your lunch should be here any minute. She's very punctual."

"Who's very punctual?" Hiroshi asked, leaning in to look at Nabiki's wristwatch. Just at that moment, the school's lunch bell rang.

Hana took a step forward. "Don't you ignore me, Nabiki Ten-"
She didn't get to finish as a bike crashed onto the ground inches from her nose, ridden by a lavender-haired delivery girl bearing a large metal delivery box.

"Nihao!" Shampoo said cheerfully. "Shampoo here as promised!"

"-YEEEEIP!" Hana threw herself backwards and ended up tumbling onto her rear.

"Perfect timing, Shampoo." Nabiki replied, smiling and accepting the two steaming bowls of ramen from the Amazon. She immediately handed them over to Hiroshi and Daisuke. "As per our agreement."

Their eyes widened as they accepted their promised, but unexpected reward.

"Hey, this is the super deluxe Ramen bowl!" Hiroshi exclaimed with delight.

"I'll take this over leftover barbecue buffet any day!" Daisuke continued, digging into the noodles with the provided chopsticks.

"Shampoo thought Ranma and Mercenary girl eat?" Shampoo cocked her head. She spotted Ranma and smiled. "Speaking of which…" She leapt off the bike and glomped the redhead fiercely. "Ranma!"

Ranma yelped and swayed a bit, but managed to stay upright. Shampoo's hug was making her ribs creak. She blushed a bit as she glanced around, knowing there were only two real ways to break the glomp, and Akane and her mallet were nowhere to be seen. She sighed and hugged Shampoo back, knowing it was going to result in some questions.

Just like before, as soon as the gesture of affection was returned, the deathgrip loosened, and Shampoo seemed to melt against her. The Amazon sighed happily and relaxed. "Shampoo missed you." She murmured in Ranma's ear.

Ranma's mind slipped back to the intensity of the last time she had seen Shampoo, and all those confusing and intense feelings started bubbling up again. She closed her eyes, mindful that they weren't alone in an empty lot this time. "Yeah… Good to see you Shampoo."

Surprisingly, Shampoo was the first to release the hug. She smiled at the redhead. "Hard to hug Airen for long without purr." She admitted sheepishly.

Ranma shivered a little. "I… appreciate it."

Shampoo winked. "Maybe help Airen get over fear eventually, ne?"

Ranma shuddered again. "Remind me to explain it to you sometime, Shampoo." She said. She looked up and cringed inwardly, as everyone was staring at her. And then there was a flash.

"Very cute." Hana said, lowering her camera. "Half dozen shots, girl on girl, 25,000 yen a pop for sure… Don't suppose you're going to kiss this one too? No?" She shrugged. "I'll get the shot eventually, no matter."

Shampoo blinked, turning. "Who you?"

Hana opened her mouth, but Nabiki was faster. "Shampoo, this is Hana, the girl who takes lewd pictures of your Airen without her permission. Hana, this is Shampoo, the girl who finds kicking in walls is easier and quicker than using doors."
Shampoo's eyes narrowed.

"Hey, not my fault you're doing this stuff out in public." Hana smirked, one hand on her hip in a cocky pose.

"And the pics of Ranma undressing for her physical?" Nabiki asked sweetly.

Hana blanched. "How did you…? I mean…" She gave Shampoo a nervous look. "I don't know what you're talking about!"

"Shampoo, why don't you check her camera and see if she's telling the truth?" Nabiki suggested.

Hana stepped back, holding the camera protectively. "Now hold on! You can't just…!"

And then she noticed she wasn't holding anything.

Shampoo held the camera up, taking a moment to figure out the unfamiliar controls. Very quickly she was able to get into the recently taken pictures. She was silent a moment as she browsed the camera's memory.

"Err… if you want copies I could work out a discount for you…" Hana said nervously.

Shampoo looked up at Hana, her expression cold. Almost casually, she pulverized the camera between her hands.

Hana started backing up slowly. "I… We can negotiate…!"

"You I kill." Shampoo said flatly, and started advancing on the girl.

"L-look, your precious 'Airen' was kissing Ukyou Kuonji just yesterday!" Hana said, trying to regain her composure. She shot Nabiki a nasty smirk as Shampoo paused.

"Shampoo know." Shampoo said. "Airen does not keep secrets from Shampoo. Did camera girl take pictures of that, too? Maybe next you try and convince Shampoo Airen kissed mercenary girl? Girl who tell lies go to not nice place." She cracked her knuckles.

"Y-you can't hurt me! I'm not a martial artist!" Hana started backing away more quickly, eyes wide as she faced the possibility that all of her trump cards were now worthless.

"That Japan thing. True, camera girl is not martial artist, not worth Kiss of Death." Shampoo bared her teeth in a wide, evil smile. "Want to know what Joketsuzoku do to those who meddle who not worth our time?"

Hana shrieked, her nerve breaking as she turned and fled.

Shampoo dusted her hands and turned back. She glanced at Nabiki. "How much for home address?"

Nabiki's smile was full-mercenary. "For you Shampoo baby? Free."

"Good. Will visit camera girl later." Shampoo stretched, cracked her neck, then bounced back over to Ranma, claiming her arm and leaning against her. "Am busy now."

"How did you know she was taking creeper shots in the clinic?" Sayuri asked, recovering from the little scene.

"It was a guess." Nabiki admitted. "But after I learned she was taking changing room pics, it made
"sense." She sighed. "She'll probably keep trying, too."

Yuka shivered. "Ugh. Almost as bad as that old lech who keeps panty raiding us."

"I think I'm just going to wear my gym clothes under my school uniform from now on." Rin said quietly.

"If I see her carrying another camera I'm going to make her eat it." Sayuri growled.

"I'll see what I can do to keep tabs on her." Nabiki sighed. "For now... be careful what you say and do on school grounds. After today, Himura will be fishing for blackmail material for sure, and I'm already scraping the bottom of my emergency blackmail kit."

"Emergency blackmail kit." Yuka stated incredulously.

"It's how I got the two Himura had running the booth to bug off. Most of my good dirt Hana skipped out with, but I always keep a bit of reserve." Nabiki tucked away her ledger and pulled out another little black book. "Started up this when the Hentai Horde started looking into drugging my little sister so they could beat her and 'win' a date." She scowled. "God I hate this school sometimes."

Ranma was a little surprised at the vehemence with which Nabiki said that, and from their expressions the other girls were too. Nabiki had never expressed anything but cool cynicism when discussing the school before.

Ranma remembered Nabiki's story about 'Tachi'. There were all these pieces that were starting to fit together, like a puzzle that was making a picture of understanding. Not just Nabiki, but Akane, and even Kasumi.

The Tendo's had had it rough.

Akan fought back with her fists. The Ice Queen was how Nabiki fought back. Ranma thought. And Kasumi tried to make peace and keep everyone from cracking by taking care of them.

And then me an' Pops came along and piled OUR crap on top of it. Ranma hung her head.

"What wrong, Airen?" Shampoo slipped her arm through Ranma's again, studying her face.

"Probably experiencing a pang of guilt for being a total Casanova?" Yuka said darkly.

Ranma winced and shrank a little more at the criticism. And they don't even know the half of it!

"To be fair... and I can't believe I'm coming to Ranma's defense on this... Ukyou kissed her." Sayuri replied.

"If she always kisses like that, I'd let her kiss me." Riko said softly.

"I thought Kuonji-san was a boy?" Rin said, confused.

Yuka rubbed her temples. "Of course you did."

"Hey, if the boys can fantasize about Ranma as a girl, Rin and I can daydream about Ukyou as a boy!" Riko protested.

"Ranma is a girl!" Yuka shot back, then winced and started rubbing her forehead again. "I can't believe I just said that..."
"What does Ranma being a girl have to do with this?" Rin replied, still confused.

"You think the curse is more significant than living your life as a boy for most of your life?" Riko asked, putting her hands on her hips.

"Yes! Because she's actually, physically a girl!"

"That's just Nature vs Nurture!"

"Nature vs Nurture has nothing to do with this! We're talking about Ranma being with more than one person at once!"


"Polyamory is wrong!"

"Grumpy girl correct." Shampoo stepped in. She closed her eyes and raised a finger. "Should never combine Greek and Latin roots to make word."

"Thank you!" Yuka gestured at Shampoo. "Finally someone with some sense!" She blinked and looked at Shampoo. "You speak english?"

Shampoo shook her head. "No. Speak Greek and Latin. 'Amazons' originated in Greece, philosophy brought all over world."

"What's happening?" Ranma asked in a small voice, terribly confused.

"Last week's argument in English class, I think." Sayuri replied. "If I remember correctly Ms. Hinako actually drained Yuka over it."

Yuka cocked her head and the Amazon. "Then… Why is your Japanese so bad?"

"Japanese terrible language. Borrows words from English, which worst language." Shampoo tapped her chest. "Only worth time getting good at civilized languages."

"On that we agree completely!"

Ranma shook her head. "How did we get from me being a Cassanova to criticism of language?"

Sayuri patted her shoulder. "By way of a detour through a brief flyby of gender identity issues, of course. Don't you listen to the conversations we have in the classroom? This happens all the time!"

"I'm… mostly doodling in my math textbook." Ranma admitted sheepishly.

Sayuri rolled her eyes. "You are such a boy."

Nabiki observed the exchange with some bemusement. She took a moment to do inventory. *Hana's shot herself in the foot with Shampoo. Even if she went to her with pics of the weekend, Shampoo would just make good on her threats. Still leaves Ukyou though. Shecocked her head and regarded the Amazon animatedly talking with Yuka and Riko, still holding possessively onto Ranma's left arm as the redhead's eyes glazed over. And who'd have thought Shampoo would be zoning Ranma out by having an intellectual conversation? I might have to re-evaluate the girl. She looked out across the field to the parking lot, spotting a white limousine. I imagine Himura's not happy. She glanced over at Hiroshi and Daisuke, who were busily stuffing their faces with ramen. I'll need more help keeping her attention divided. Maybe Ukyou and Akane? Keep them distracted from getting jealous over Ranma. Shame Shampoo isn't a student, she'd keep Hana in line nicely.*
She considered that a moment. Alone, any of the fiancees were volatile. Two or more together was like tossing raw sodium in water. All three of them? *But if I could keep track of them all at once... manage them... Maybe I could defuse the three of them? Teach them to work together?* It was so *very* risky, and it would basically mean she'd have to spend almost all of her free time babysitting. But they were the very *core* of The Madness, and she was always going to have to defuse that somehow. It would take regular contact over a long term, and having them all at the school mean there were circuit breakers like Ms. Hinako to shut them down if they threatened to go volcanic in class. And with Himura providing a convenient common enemy...

*I'm an idiot. This is dumb. I can't believe I'm doing this.* "Hey, Shampoo?"

Shampoo blinked, turning from her conversation, which had shifted to Shampoo expressing the opinion that the Roman military had been vastly overrated. "Yes Nabiki?"

"Have you ever considered enrolling at Furinkan?" Nabiki crossed her arms. "It would let you be closer to Ranma all day."

Ranma shot Nabiki a worried look, but she gave her a reassuring wave and mouthed 'Trust me'.

Shampoo sighed. "Great-Granmother suggest. But school sound *so boring.*"

"It is." Ranma replied. "Well... *Not lately,* but that's because of all the extra-curricular crazy. Schoolwork still sucks."

"You and Ranma could suffer together. Misery shared is halved, after all." Nabiki said. "Besides, you could help Yuka in her campaign to have English outlawed."

"And I bet having you around would keep Hana from being a creeper." Riko added.

"Great-Granmother need help at Nekohanten..." Shampoo looked tremendously tempted at the notion though.

"Ukyou manages. She'd just need you for the lunch and dinner rushes, right?" Nabiki pressed a bit.

"Good point. Maybe ask Spatula girl about." Shampoo tapped her chin. "Is good idea though. Shampoo talk about to Great-Granmother." She gave Nabiki a sideways glance. "How much this cost?"

Nabiki waved her off. "Just don't murder my little sister, okay?"

"Hmph. Shampoo not have problem with Akane if she not always be crazy-jealous." She crossed her arms. "Needs learn to share."

"Share?!" Yuka choked.

Shampoo gave her a quizzical look. "Is not what 'polyamory' mean? Akane and Ukyou strong fighters. Stronger than most Amazons. Ranma strongest fighter. Have right to concubine or two."

"And you're okay with that?!" Yuka demanded.

"Great-Granmother have several husbands in her day. Is only make sense," Shampoo shrugged. "Airen strongest, attract strong mates. Have many children. Is how Amazons endure." She smiled at Ranma and took her arm again, looking into her eyes. "As long as Airen love Shampoo, not need anything else."
"But… If Ukyou is a girl, how will you have children?" Rin asked, cocking her head.

"Ranma would father them, Rin." Sayuri replied.

Rin furrowed her brow. "But… senpai is a girl."

"I'm starting to seriously think you're mentally blocked about this." Yuka muttered.

Riko put her hands on Rin's shoulders. "Rin? 'It's magic'. That's all you've got to remember."

Rin sighed. "I hate magic."

"You and me both, Rin." Ranma chimed in.

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Himura pushed past the bodyguard who opened the door for her, stepping into the limo and slamming the door behind her. She was trembling, breathing heavily and struggling to maintain her composure.

"Your big luau not go the way you planned, wahine?" A pair of dark glasses flashed in the dark of the limo across from her.

She glared at him, her normally cool expression full of rage. "I want Nabiki Tendo expelled. Now."

"That's not how the game is played, wahine." Principal Kuno smirked. "I tried to tell you."

"No, I decide how the game is played, and I am telling you if you value your estate, your position, and what is left of your reputation, she will be gone by tomorrow!" She snarled at him.

She expected to see him shrink back in fear. Most people did. Even adults in positions of power cowered before her.

He didn't. His smile… his infuriating, smug smile just widened. He folded his hands and sat back in his seat.

"Maybe you should be speakin' to yer grandpappy then, wahine." He said. He then pressed a button on the cell phone he had resting on the center island of the seat he was sitting on.

"Hello Granddaughter." The voice came through clearly.

Himura was not afraid of adults. She wasn't afraid of police, criminals, drug dealers, human traffickers, murderers, or martial artists. She had never encountered gods or demons, but it was doubtful she'd give them much more consideration.

She was afraid of that voice.

"I'm disappointed, Himura." Her Grandfather continued. "I had expected better from you."

"Grandfather…" She choked as her throat closed up. She swallowed and continued. "I'm taking care of it! If… if you could tell this buffoon to do his job…"

"SILENCE."

Himura's mouth shut with a click of her teeth.
"He HAS done his job. He has kept me apprised of the situation, and has counselled you on how to
best proceed. Advice I understand you ignored, and returned with contempt and blatant threats. And
as a result, your little self-serving pageant has been utterly upended by a peasant you scorned and
then ignored. Now you have lost control of the situation, and you are demanding he remove the only
significant opposition you've faced thus far. Which, allow me to be clear, he is NOT going to do, nor
will anyone else in the Organization. Nabiki Tendo has complete immunity."

"What?! Why!?!" Himura demanded, briefly forgetting her fear.

"BECAUSE YOU FAILED TO DEAL WITH HER WHEN YOU HAD THE CHANCE." He roared,
cowing her again. "You outclassed her in resources, in authority, and you had caught her completely
by surprise. In the space of a WEEK she completely reversed the situation, with no resources, no
authority, and limited contacts. If the insult to the Tanaka family was not so intolerable, I would be
RECRUITING her as we speak! I may still; that will depend entirely upon you."

Himura shuddered. She knew better than to protest again. "What must I do?" She asked quietly.

"You are intelligent, capable, and confident, Granddaughter. All qualities your father lacked. All
qualities which mark you as my best hope for an heir. But as this most recent indulgence has proven,
you have grown complacent. You have grown accustomed to unchallenged power, and that is NOT
how the world operates. Your obsession with this Ranma Saotome was tolerated because I was
curious how you would leverage the assets at your disposal, and I remain curious. Therefore this
little game of yours will become your test, and your opponent will be Nabiki Tendo. You have long
languished for a rival, and I pray her resourcefulness will evoke similar ingenuity from you. I know
you are capable of it." He paused. "Nabiki Tendo now has immunity from direct reprisal. The
Organization will not act against her on your behalf, nor provide further support to you beyond your
bodyguards, servants, and your monthly stipend. You may bluff with them all you wish, but know
that she will be notified of the rules of this little engagement. You may not use any existing
obligations to draw in outside resources, though you are welcome to negotiate new alliances on
your own recognizance, with the understanding that you will be held responsible for any and all
agreements that you make. With what resources you have already collected, you are to recruit
Ranma Saotome to the Organization, and you are to neutralize Nabiki Tendo as an obstacle. How
you accomplish either of these tasks is entirely up to you, and Ranma will be yours to do with as you
wish afterwards. All that I require is you succeed."

"Yes, Grandfather." Himura replied meekly. Her hands balled into fists.

"Tatsuyuki-san, please forgive my foolish granddaughter any insult she may have lain at your feet.
As always, you may operate as you see fit, be it to aid or hinder either party at your discretion. The
school is yours, as it has always been."

"No offense taken, Nobu-san. Mebbe we can get drinks like de old days, eh?"

"Heh heh... I think my old liver has recovered from the last time. I'd like that very much. Are you
free tonight?"

"Of course! I just need to make a visit to de hospital first."

"Yes, your son. My condolences."

"Eh, mebbe he learn dis time. Talk to you soon." Principal Kuno hit the end call button, then sat
back, folding his hands again.

Himura glared at him. "Is there anything else I can do for you, Principal Kuno?"
He smirked. "No worries dere, wahine. I let you do as you like. Been fun so far. Just remember… I be a part o' the Organization before you evah born. Mebbe I'm a joke now… but dey keep me around for a reason, ye?" He leaned forward, glasses flashing. "In de future, when ye kick a dog, be sure he don't got no teeth left."

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Akane stretched her arms over her head. She was still stiff from sleeping in a chair next to Ukyou's bed. She wanted nothing more than to hop up on the fence and sprint to work out the kinks, but that was a poor idea while wearing a dress.

"You know, I think I have a better idea what my hung-over morning patrons mean by 'Accusing sun'" Ukyou shielded her eyes and winced.

"The medicine isn't helping?" Akane asked.

"It takes the edge off, but I'm still pretty fuzzed." Ukyou replied. "Getting better, though. I'll be okay after a hot shower."

They reached Ucchan's Okonomiyaki. Ukyou fumbled with the door lock, but before she could get it open, the door slid aside, revealing what appeared to be a very pretty young girl in a waitressing kimono.

"Ukyou-sama!"

Ukyou yelped as she was glomped by the waitress. "Konatsu?!"

"Oh, forgive me!" The pretty kunoichi immediately released her and covered his mouth. "But when you didn't come home yesterday for the dinner rush, I was so worried! I tried looking for you, and there were ambulances at the school, but they didn't have your name at the hospital, and…"

"Easy, easy, sugar!" Ukyou put her hands on Konatsu's shoulders to steady him. "I'm okay. I just got a bump to the head." She indicated Akane with an incline of her head. "Akane got me to Doctor Tofu's, and stayed with me overnight to make sure I was okay."

Konatsu's eyes practically shone as he looked at Akane. He immediately dropped to his hands and knees, prostrating himself. "I am forever in your debt, Ms. Tendo!"

"Aheh, that's okay, Konatsu. I'm just glad Ukyou is okay." Akane waved off the feminine boy, embarrassed by the display.

"Come on, get up Konatsu." Ukyou nudged his side with her foot. "We need to prep for the lunch rush, and Akane and I desperately need a shower."

Konatsu stood up quickly. "Of course Ukyou-sama." He glanced at Akane, then back at Ukyou, then bowed at the waist. "Do you require me to 'make myself scarce' again?"

Ukyou blinked, then bopped him on the head with her fist. "We're not showering TOGETHER, you hentai!"

Konatsu whimpered and covered his head. "I-I'm sorry Ukyou-sama, I didn't mean any offense! Please forgive me! It's just after…"

"Konatsu?" Ukyou said tightly. "Stop talking."
Konatsu snapped his mouth shut. "Yes, Ukyou-sama."

"Go prep the grill, please." Ukyou said, massaging her temples as she felt her migraine flaring.

"Yes, Ukyou-sama." The kunoichi waitress scurried off quickly.

"What was that about?" Akane asked, confused and oblivious.

"Nothing! Nothing at all! Konatsu just has some bizarre ideas about how to save money on the hot water bill." Ukyou said quickly, ushering Akane inside before her embarrassing situation got any more public.

"Oh! That makes sense." Akane replied. "My sisters and I share the furo sometimes. Though I guess it'd be different with a shower, wouldn't it? It would be a little cramped." She shrugged. "I don't use western-style showers much, so I don't know."

Ukyou tried to massage away the throbbing pain behind her eyes. "Tell you what, you go first, I'll see if I've got anything you can wear."

"Actually…" Akane looked a little sheepish. "I… was wondering if I could help out with the lunch rush?"

Ukyou stared at her. She almost, but not quite managed to stifle the whimper.

Akane's hopeful look turned into a scowl. "Okay, fine! I won't try and cook anything, okay? But I can help! Like we did when you had a cold!"

Ukyou whimpered louder and closed her eyes, wincing.

Akane sighed. "I'll put on the kimono and go attract customers."

Ukyou cracked open one eye. "Bunny suit."

"Not a chance!" Akane scowled. "It's the kimono or nothing!"

Ukyou took a moment to size up the determined set of her jaw, looked almost like she was going to press the matter, then shrugged. "It was worth a shot. Alright, waitressing kimono it is."

Ukyou suddenly had a mental flash, an image of Akane wearing that bunny uniform. The dark haired girl leaned in close with a sultry look on her face and murmured *I'll wear it in private later, just for you Ukyou…*

"What?" Ukyou blinked and the vision was gone.

"What?" Akane asked, cocking her head. "Are you feeling okay Ukyou?"

"Wha…? Yeah! Yeah… just a little dizzy…" Ukyou covered her eyes and sighed. *Ugh… This concussion is messing with my mind."

Akane's brow knit with concern. "Are you sure you're okay to open?"

"Already missed a day of business, sugar." Ukyou sighed. "You don't get paid sick days when you're self employed. If I don't open, I don't make money, and if I don't make money, I don't pay rent."

"Are you sure? I mean, you could go rest, and Konatsu and I could…"
Ukyou winced as her migraine flared. "NO!" She noticed Akane had recoiled and took a breath, modulating. "No… Look, no offense Akane. I appreciate the offer, but my customers don't come here for okonomiyaki. They come here for my okonomiyaki. I've been perfecting it for ten years, and my family has been doing it since before I was born. It'd take me a year to teach you how to make even my basic recipes."

Akane was silent a moment. She studied the floor, lost in thought. Finally, she looked up, eyes full of determination. "All right. Deal."

"Wait, what?" Ukyou said again dumbly, wondering if she had blanked out part of the conversation again.

"I'll work here for free for a year, and you teach me how to make okonomiyaki." Akane said, nodding.

The migraine wasn't going anywhere. It was getting married and starting a family behind her eyeballs now. Ukyou groaned and leaned back against the wall. "Akane…"

"Look, everyone tiptoes around my cooking except you and Shampoo. Even Ranma! They say 'nice try', or pretend they like it, or they try and avoid it, but no one tells me what I'm doing wrong!"

Ukyou narrowed her eyes. "Akane, you've been beyond nice to me for the past day, and so I really don't wanna say this, but… to be blunt? Yes they do tell you. You just don't want to hear it."

Ukyou crossed her arms. "The problem is when you cook, you go into this… 'altered state'. It's like you're trying to cook the same way you smash cinder blocks. You get so focused on beating whatever is in front of you to a pulp you aren't even aware of what ingredients you're grabbing and adding."

"I…" Akane's face fell. She rubbed her arm and looked away. "… You're right. Mr. Saotome said the same thing about my martial arts, and I'm finally getting better with that, but this is different…"

"No it's not." Ukyou shook her head. "Not the way I do it." She sighed, feeling very tired suddenly. "Look… I'll do this, but there are some ground rules, and if you break them, the deal is off, clear?"

Akane gave her a hopeful look.

"Rule One? You do what I say. No whining. No arguing. No questioning, and no getting mad. If you can't keep your temper I can't teach you. If I tell you to freeze while you're cooking, you stop moving. Rule Two? No cooking without my supervision. Ever. I don't want you making toast without me there making sure you butter it to my standards. Rule Three? You're here to work, and you'll do work, and if you miss a day and it's not a damn good reason, you get fired. Rule Four? You raise a fist over someone not liking something you cooked ever again, and we're done. Rule Five? When you screw up… and you will screw up… there will be consequences. I can't toss you in a koi pond, but I'll come up with something. You'll take your punishment like a martial artist, and if you refuse, that's the end of this. Got it?" Ukyou glared at her, hoping that she would scoff and balk at the rules.

Instead the hopeful twinkle in Akane's eyes intensified.

"Oh crap… Ukyou opened her mouth to forestall the glomp, but she was too late as the dark haired girl embraced her fiercely. Ukyou wheezed as the air was driven from her lungs. There is definitely some Amazon in the Tendo family tree!

"I'm going to make you proud, Ukyou, I swear it!" Akane insisted.
"Okay, sugar, but…" Ukyou eased her off of her and looked into her eyes. "It isn't your cooking that
will make me proud. It's how well you listen to and respect me as a teacher. You do that, and I can
teach you anything."

Akane nodded, taking a deep breath as she released Ukyou. "I promise."

"Alright, go hit the showers before I come to my senses. Put on one of my spare chef uniforms, not
the yukata, though." She watched as Akane bolted up the stairs. "Someone must have hit me in the
head…" She muttered. "... Oh wait, someone did. At least I can decide this is all Kuno's fault once
this goes horribly."

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The hot shower worked miracles for clearing Ukyou's head, and while her headache wasn't gone, it
had at least receded to a minor annoyance.

She carefully laid out Ranma's red silk shirt on her bed to avoid wrinkles, lovingly smoothing it out.
It was roadworn and a little threadbare in places, but that was just evidence of him, and that made it
precious to her.

I think I'll wear it to Fiancée's Tea. Rub Shampoo's face in it a little. She smirked. She got her spare
bandolier and giant spatula from her closet, as well as a chef's outfit. When she had first arrived in
Nerima, she had been carrying a family heirloom, which had gotten sliced in half fairly early on.
Since then she had managed to find a metalworker willing to work with unusual requests. It took
time, but she had saved up enough to get a couple forged from spring steel. The blacksmith
expressed interest in trying to make something out of more exotic materials, but Ukyou simply did
have the funds for something like that.

She opted for a regular bra this time. Waking up in her bindings was NOT fun, and she wasn't
planning on doing much jumping or running today anyway. She brushed out her hair, retying her
ribbon and checking herself in the mirror. It was important to look presentable to her customers, after
all.

Satisfied she looked at least neat and professional, she grabbed a notebook and pencil and headed
down the stairs. Konatsu was getting the sign ready, and Akane was in one of Ukyou's spare
Okonomiyaki uniforms, and Ukyou was pleased to note it didn't look like she had touched anything,
though she was fidgeting.

Ukyou handed Akane the book and pencil. "All right Akane. No cooking for today. What you're
going to do is watch what I do, from start to finish, and take notes."

"That's it?" Akane asked, cocking her head.

"That's it." Ukyou nodded. "At the end of the rush, we're going to have a little quiz to see if you
were paying attention. If you pass, we go on to some basic prep work. If you fail, we do this again
tomorrow… but you'll be wearing the bunnygirl outfit."

"What?!" Akane yelped, taking a step back. "I can't…!"

"Oh yes you can! You can and you will, or I'm not teaching you squat, got it sugar?" Ukyou smirked
and put a hand on her hip. Just give up, Akane. It'd be a lot easier on both of us.

Akane looked thoughtful a moment, then nodded, that same determined look in her eyes again.
"Okay. The Anything Goes School is all about accepting challenges!"
The lunch rush thankfully went smoothly. Most of her regulars were sympathetic to her injury and kept things simple for her, which worked out well for her attempts to instruct Akane. In fact, the familiar tasks and light banter with her customers was better than any painkiller, soothing her headache and clearing the mental fog. By the end of the rush she was starting to feel like her old self again.

"I think that's the last of them for now, Ukyou-sama. Shall I bring in the sign?" Konatsu asked, peeking in from outside.

Ukyou wiped her brow and nodded. She had already scraped down the grill, and was nearly done putting away the leftover ingredients anyway. "Thank you, sugar. Sweep out front for now, then get the stuff in the back room sorted for the dinner rush." Ukyou straightened, then turned to Akane. "All right, Akane. Quiz time."

"I'm ready!" Akane said, eager to do something rather than stand around and take notes. Besides, tests she could do!

"All right, first question: What temperature did I set the grill to to start?" Ukyou asked, crossing her arms.

Akane blinked. She opened her book and flipped through the notes, suddenly uncertain. "Ummm… All the way?" She said in a small, uncertain voice.

Ukyou sighed. This was not going to end well. "200 degrees centigrade. Now, what was the next thing I did?"

"You poured the batter on the grill." Akane answered quickly, her confidence returning.

"Wrong." Ukyou said, holding up a finger. "I put oil on the grill first."

Akane winced and shrank a bit, opening her book and starting to panic as she realized her notes were not helping her.

"When I poured the batter, how did I do it?"

"I…You… just poured it?" Akane said weakly.

"No. Did I put the pork belly strips on before or after I flipped the Okonomiyaki?"

"I… After?"

"Before. How long did I cook each side?"

"I… don't know…"

Ukyou folded her arms and shook her head. "All right. Then you fail the test for today."

"Ukyou, if you'd just let me…" Akane reached for the pitcher of batter. Sure she couldn't say what she had seen, but she was certain if Ukyou would just let her do it…
Ukyou smacked the back of her hand with a minispatula. "No cooking. Not until you earn it."

Akane yelped and pulled back her hand. She sighed and hung her head. "What… what do I have to do?"

Ukyou shrugged. "Quit." She turned, then said over her shoulder. "Or, you show up here tomorrow in that bunnygirl costume, and we do this again. Up to you. Now, if you'll excuse me, I got grease on my shirt, so I'm gonna go change it out."

Ukyou tromped up the stairs, her annoyance showing in heavy footfalls. Akane was watching her intently the whole time, she had checked, and yet somehow, bafflingly, absolutely none of that information had penetrated her skull.

She stopped at the top, leaned against the wall and sighed. Partly, she was annoyed at herself for giving the girl hope; Akane was a lost cause and everyone except Akane knew this.

Well, you agreed to teach her, sugar. She reminded herself. Until she breaks one of your rules, it's a matter of honor.

She shuddered. Ukyou wasn't a cruel person by nature and the thought of having to tear someone down like that every day didn't appeal to her in the slightest. Especially not to someone she actually liked.

She continued into her room, stripping off her bandolier and tossing it on the bed. She then pulled off her shirt and tossed it into the laundry basket. She smiled a little as she picked up Ranma's shirt, hugging it to herself a moment before she put it on, taking her time with it. I think I see why Ranma prefers these so much. Silk is so nice! I just wish I could afford a few for myself…

She buttoned up the shirt, grabbed her bandolier and megaspatula off the bed, and trotted down the stairs feeling a little better about things.

She half expected Akane to have slunk off to nurse her bruised ego, but Akane was still standing there, looking subdued, still wearing the Okonomiyaki chef's uniform.

Ukyou had an impulsive thought and walked over to her. She slipped the bandolier over Akane's head, startling her.

"Ukyou, wha…?" She looked down at the bandolier of minispats.

"I'm not going to be doing any fighting today anyway, so if you're going to dress the part, we might as well go for the full look, right?" Ukyou smiled and handed her the megaspatula. "Just be careful of the edge, I just sharpened it."

Ukyou felt another lurch in her chest as Akane turned on the full megawatt smile, almost hugging the giant spatula before she arranged the bandolier properly and slotted the oversized implement into the rack on the back. "Thank you, Ukyou!"

Ugh… If I could just be MEAN to her, she'd give up, and we'd both be a lot less stressed in the long run. Ukyou thought wistfully. Ranchan, how ARE you such a callous jerk sometimes? I'm starting to think it might be a useful skill. "All right, all right, let's get going. Shampoo gets cross if she has to wait too long."

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Akane mulled over her failure as they walked, running through everything Ukyou had been doing. It
had *seemed* obvious while Ukyou had been doing it, but as soon as she tried to replay it in any sort of sequence everything got jumbled and confused.

*She makes it look so easy. So does Kasumi... heck, even RANMA doesn't seem to have trouble... why is it so hard to follow the steps?* She looked down and picked at the blue shirt she was wearing. She liked it; blue had always been a good color for her. It had always looked so good on Ukyou, and it *meant* something.

*I want to earn this.* She thought. *And I don't want it to be a gimme prize because I tried and failed so many times. I don't want to get it to protect my feelings. I really do want to make good food.* She glanced at Ukyou. *So... whatever it takes, right? Just like in martial arts.*

That twinged something in the back of her mind, but the idea fled before she could grasp it. She shrugged, deciding if it was important it would come to her again. She kept looking at Ukyou and smiled. *Even knowing how much trouble it'll be... Ukyou's still helping me. She really IS my friend.* She cocked her head, momentarily visualizing Ukyou in the red chinese shirt with a long pigtail. *Hmm... actually wouldn't look too bad.* She shook her head wondering where that little daydream had come from.

"So... Why this particular tea shop?" Akane asked, falling in step beside Ukyou.

"It's neutral ground. Plus the owner is really nice." Ukyou smiled. "*Might* take a bit for you to get used to." She led Akane to the unusual little shop, smiling as she heard the cheerful sounds of the seemingly random assortment of charms, wind chimes, and whirligigs adorning the place.

"'Clara's Leaf Tea Shop'" Akane read out loud. "You said the owner's name is Jiro, though?"

"Yeah. We asked about who Clara was. We could never get a straight answer, but we did find out that the leaf..." She pointed at the preserved red ovate leaf just below the name. "... Is supposedly the most important leaf in the universe. Now retired."

"That's... *different.*" Akane said. Her skeptical look to Ukyou was just returned with bemusement.

"Trust me, Akane." Ukyou opened the sliding doors and stepped inside.

Or would have, if a lavender-haired bullet dressed in a pink cheongsam hadn't struck her squarely in the chest with a cry of "*Wode Airen!*" and tackled her to the ground.

Akane managed to sidestep as Ukyou and her assailant skidded along the ground a few feet from the impact, Ukyou flat on her back with her attacker on top.

Ukyou grunted, rubbing the back of her head. "Come *on*, I just got over the *last* bump to the head..." She paused as she noticed something firmly attached to her chest, and looked down to see a vast amount of soft lavender hair belonging to someone doing an admirable job of wrapping themselves around her. "Shampoo?!"

"Hmm?" Shampoo paused. Her hand when to Ukyou's chest and groped. "Too tall for girl-side. Breasts different too. But *familiar.*" She looked up, and finally realized she had mistakenly jumped the wrong target. "Spatula girl?"

Akane took three big steps back as she prepared to dodge the inevitable eruption of violence.

Which turned out to be less inevitable than she thought. She fully expected both girls to freak out, and get into a hair-pulling tussle as they had in the past. She did *not* expect Shampoo's grin to widen, and for her to glomp even more intensely as Ukyou tried to squirm free.
"If Spatula girl want same attention Shampoo give Airen, no need to dress up and pretend. Shampoo happy to oblige!" She purred, sliding her arms around Ukyou's neck.

Ukyou's struggles became more frantic as she alternated between trying to pull the Amazon off or to scoot herself away along the ground. "Shampoo, I thought we agreed! Not in front of Akane!"

Akane's eyes widened at the scene. At the mention of her name, her left eye began to twitch.

Shampoo glanced at Akane, and then undeterred resumed her attempts to phase through Ukyou's clothing by way of intense proximity. "Akane can wait turn."

"*What on earth do you two think you're doing?!*" Akane roared, stomping over to the entangled girls. She didn't know why she was outraged, exactly, but it seemed the appropriate emotion at the moment.

"Akane, I *swear* this isn't what it looks like!" Ukyou waved her hands frantically then returned to her futile efforts to push Shampoo off.

Shampoo seemed unconcerned, though she looked at Akane curiously. "Violent Girl and Spatula Girl dating now or something?"

"*NO!*" They both cried vehemently.

Akane clenched her fists and stomped "Why would I want to date a… a…" She trailed off as she realized she was just about to launch into her usual *cross-dressing freak* tirade about Ranma. "… What are we doing?"

"*I'm concussed, what's your excuse?!*" Ukyou growled and pushed on Shampoo's shoulders. "Shampoo…! *It was one time, okay?! We were drunk! Let it, and me go!*"

Shampoo gave her a sultry, half-lidded look. "Not *that* drunk."

Ukyou sighed and gave up trying to pry the girl off. "You are *such* a jackass!"

Shampoo smirked. "You love Shampoo. Shampoo get you to admit it one day." She kissed Ukyou on the cheek and got off of her, offering a hand to help her up. Ukyou, seemingly unperturbed by the kiss, accepted the hand and let the Amazon haul her to her feet.

Akane was feeling distinctly uncomfortable. There were things going on that she was *profoundly* unaware of it seemed. "So… Are you two going to explain just what *that* was?"

Shampoo blinked at her, remembering she was there. "Can answer be 'no'?"

Akane crossed her arms and tapped her foot, expression darkening.

"Come on. I need *something* if I've gotta explain all of this. Maybe Jiro will be nice and spike my tea with something stronger than cream and sugar."

Akane followed them into the tea shop. The lighting was subdued, but it was not dark. The far ends of the shop seemed to vanish into a soft haze, making it difficult to determine exactly how large the place really was. The wall on one side was dominated by a long wooden counter that featured an array of teapots and burners. The back wall was a solid mass of shelves crammed with clay pots containing various types of teas. The smell of the place was amazing. Like all of the best smells, it was a subtle blend of aromas, and yet somehow, each individual scent was still distinct despite being so faint. There was a balance - a harmony between where no one conflicted with or overpowered
any of the others.

Shampoo sat down at the table where she had apparently been waiting, a teapot already set up at its center. Akane sat across from her, and Ukyou took the spot midway between them.

"Should let Jiro know is new customer. Jiro?" She called out into the shop.

A tall man wearing a woman's kimono and a head scarf was suddenly standing on her other side. Akane blinked, certain she would have remembered seeing such an odd man, but unable to shake the sense that he had always been standing there. "Yes, Xian Pu dear? Oh!" He look at Akane and clapped his hands together. He beamed, his perfectly white teeth bright in the low light. "I do believe you've brought me a first timer! Welcome dear!" He was already setting a plain white teacup in front of her. "Welcome to my humble shop. My name is Jiro. Just Jiro, no honorifics or titles or messy, troublesome last names." he extended a hand towards her, palm down.

Akane timidly accepted the hand. "Uhh.. Nice to meet you? I'm Akane Tendo."

"Oh? The Akane Tendo?" He arched one bushy eyebrow. He glanced at Shampoo and Ukyou and smiled. "Well, then this is a special occasion!"

"Oh. Been talking about me, have they?" Akane muttered flatly, withdrawing her hand.

"Oh, not like that!" Jiro reassured her. "Well, perhaps a little like that, but you would be surprised. These two seem a little intimidated by you most of the time."

"Jiro should keep mouth shut about things spoken of in confidence." Shampoo said sharply.

Jiro smirked and rolled his eyes dramatically for Akane. "Yes, of course Xian Pu dear. Now, Akane, I have something of a ritual I insist upon for all new customers." He started to pour tea into the cup in front of her. "The first cup of tea is on the house, but you have to let me try and guess what variety best meets your tastes."

"It's actually pretty amazing." Ukyou replied, sipping from her own cup, a delicately painted cup depicting a scene of rolling hills, and a figure pulling some kind of cart. "I hadn't ever even heard of Pu-erh tea before coming here."

Shampoo smiled and raised her cup. "Jiro pick Silver Tip Jasmine for Shampoo. Tea of Emperor. Best choice, yes?"

"Well, ego-wise…" Ukyou gave her a lopsided grin.

Akane glanced down at her cup and the pale yellow liquid inside. She sniffed it, eyes widening a bit at the delicate fruity aroma. She glanced at Jiro who nodded at her, and took a sip.

The tea immediately reminded her of the kind she had drunk on Togenkyo Island. The flavor of tropical fruits was subtle, not overpowering, with notes of mango, papaya and pineapple. She closed her eyes and could almost hear the seabirds as her mind drifted back to that trip. It had always been a special memory for her, even with all the fighting that had gone on.

"I think that's another hit, Jiro." Ukyou noted wryly.

"My record stands then." Jiro said softly. He smiled and straightened, heading back to the counter.

Akane blinked. "Wait… weren't all of our cups poured from the same kettle?"
Shampoo shook her head. "Silly Akane. That no possible."

"Jiro's just one of those sorts who's elevated service to a martial art all its own." Ukyou replied. "Everything is so perfectly executed that anything that isn't you or your cup of tea just doesn't register. Konatsu keeps begging Jiro to train him."

"You're not interested?" Akane asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Nah. I like to put on a show for my customers. Okonomiyaki isn't exactly 'sit quietly and contemplate your life choices' food." Ukyou sipped her tea. "Not that I don't aspire to be as good as Jiro in my own way."

"Jiro always say this place safe haven for people making important decisions." Shampoo said. "Reminds Shampoo of story Great-grandmother once told of when she considered running away from village to be with love. Hid from Elders in tea shop. Safe place to come to decision."

"It's why we picked this as neutral ground. No fighting allowed, and I don't think Shampoo or I would dare to break that rule, no matter how mad we got. Jiro's just the sort you don't want to disappoint like that." She sighed. "Speaking of 'no fighting'...

Shampoo held up a hand. "If you mean kiss, no need worry. Airen already tell Shampoo. Give kiss as apology to Shampoo. Even now."

"What!?" Ukyou put her cup down and slammed her hands on the table. "You're lying!"

Shampoo smirked. "Ask Airen."

"I can't believe him!" Ukyou growled, draining her cup in one swallow. "That two-timing… no good…"

Shampoo leaned in closer to the okonomiyaki chef, batting her eyelashes. "Can take kiss back from Shampoo's lips if want, Qinai de."

Ukyou glared at her. "Don't start with me, Shampoo!"

"So Ukyou does remember words Shampoo teach that night. Remember others too maybe, Laopo?"

Ukyou visibly blushed. "I learned more Mandarin than I was really comfortable with that night, actually."

"Would be happy to teach more."

"You just don't quit, do you?"

"Why would? This too-too fun solution to problem, yes?" Shampoo's voice was a low, almost seductive purr now.

Akane cleared her throat. "Should I… leave you two alone for a while?"

"Akane feeling left out?" Shampoo turned her head slightly, smirking at her. "Should learn to share. Much more fun."

Ukyou snapped out the light trance Shampoo had drawn her into, realizing she was leaning in towards the Amazon, and had completely forgotten about Akane's presence. Oh crap! After what happened on the roof… if I DID kiss Akane… She groaned and hung her head. It's the shirt. It must be cursed. If I live through this I have to warn Ranchan…
"And you wonder why you have a reputation as a bimbo?" Akane scoffed. "It's bad enough when you're all over Ranma."

"Shampoo think Akane jealous."

"What!?"

"Saw look on face when give Kiss of Death first time. Cute blush."

"I was NOT blushing!"

Ukyou felt her headache flaring up again. Yes, that's it Shampoo, poke the girl's insecurity about her sexuality some more. Get us kicked out of the only decent place to get any privacy in Nerima. She pulled the envelope out of her pocket, stuck two fingers in her mouth, and whistled. "Okay, time out guys! We have bigger problems than innuendo right now!"

Shampoo cocked her head as Ukyou handed her the envelope. "What this?"

"Ranma's mother has decided to step in to decide the engagement issue." Ukyou said. "She wants to meet all of us to evaluate us and decide who will be the best fiancee for Ranma going forward."

"Is… not Ranma's decision?" Shampoo asked, curious, though she could immediately see the sense of a matriarch stepping in if a silly male relative was having trouble with something. But then again, this wasn't just any male, this was Ranma.

"It should be, in my opinion. Especially given how his father had messed it all up." Ukyou said sourly.

"But that's not how Auntie Saotome sees it." Akane continued. "She's decided to do this to 'help' Ranma. And there's a good chance if she demands it, Ranma will bow to her wishes." She sighed. "She's… also gotten this all mixed up with the manliness question, which means there's the threat of the seppuku pledge hovering over all this."

"Still!?" Ukyou exclaimed, outraged. "So that's where that crack he made against himself not being a 'Man amongst men' came from!"

"Shampoo not understand you Japanese. Act like girl side bad thing. Weakness. For Amazons, is other way around." Shampoo crossed her arms. "Besides, opinion of mother, even as honored elder, not matter. Law is clear."

"She won't see it that way, Shampoo." Akane shook her head. "I don't think she really understands the power she has to hurt him right now. She's so caught up in what she thinks is right for some idealized version of him she can't even see him anymore. Ranma says he and Nabiki are trying to find a way around it, but for now we should play along." She took a deep breath. "So… I'm here to help make sure everyone lives up to Auntie Saotome's expectations, since I know her best."

"Why you help Shampoo and Spatula Girl?" Shampoo asked, suspiciously.

"Because there's another envelope. For Kodachi." Ukyou said.

"And Kodachi is better at the traditional Japanese ceremony thing than any of us." Akane finished. "So we need to make sure she's not even in the running."

"Catch Crazy Girl, stuff in box, mail to South Pole." Shampoo said, shrugging. "Why go to all trouble? Japan have too-too good mail system; Might even get there before die of thirst."
"Because if she catches any of us up to those sorts of things, it's an instant disqualification." Ukyou replied. "So, we play the good Japanese housewives. We all get along. We wear the floral kimonos and speak when spoken to when we're around her, and we stretch this out as long as we can."

"The goal isn't to win, it's to make the choice so difficult she gives up, maybe even decides to let Ranma make the choice." Akane added. "Or at least stall things until Nabiki figures something out."

Shampoo sighed. "Always so complicated. Ranma should just come with Shampoo back to China, be done with."

"Hey, we're not giving up so easily!" Akane insisted, though there was an uncertainty in her voice.

"No have to. You come too. Give Kiss of Sisterhood, pass trials, become Amazons. Then you marry Ranma too. Simple!" Shampoo shrugged. "Not see why you make so complicated all of time."

"Wait… 'Kiss of Sisterhood'?" Akane cocked her head.

"Mmmhmm." Shampoo sipped her tea, settled back in her chair and crossed her legs. "Amazons not only bring strong males into tribe. Can invite strong womens too. But because Amazon Warrior is position of much honor, not as simple for womens. Must pass trials and get approval of elder. Then be considered always being Amazon. Since Ranma defeat both, Kiss of Marriage apply. Normally males not allowed more than one wife, but Ranma kill a god, so Great-grandmother say special rules apply, rules not used since time of Genghis Khan. Great honor!"

"So you could have done this at any time, and dispensed with that whole 'Kiss of Death' thing?!!" Akane scowled.

"Not so simple. Kiss of Sisterhood not given to winner of challenge. Seen as submission. Great dishonor. Only given if outsider female cannot be killed. All status of Amazon who surrender in this way go to Outsider. Death considered better." She shuddered. "Thankfully not apply." She gave Akane a hard look. "Not give to Akane right away because Akane bitch when Shampoo arrive. Mean to Shampoo. Mean to Airen. Get in way then not want Airen for own self."

"Well sooorrey for being such an obstacle!" Akane growled.

"Is okay. Shampoo forgive." Shampoo said graciously. "Understand is not Akane fault. Result of bad Japanese upbringing. Backwards thinking of silly male society. Akane not trained right, but have potential. Decided kiss good way to make peace." She glanced at Ukyou and gave her a more seductive smile that caused a blush. "Spatula girl best friend in Japan, and good fighter. Almost as good as Shampoo. Always plan to give kiss. Village probably like 'yaki stuff too."

"So, when were you planning on giving out these 'Kisses of Sisterhood'?" Ukyou asked. She found her cup had been refilled, though as far as she could tell Jiro had never left his place behind the counter. She took a sip.

"Gave ages ago. Great-grandmother give trials, say pass. Both been Amazons for almost a year now." Shampoo said nonchalantly.

Ukyou sputtered, coughing up most of her tea. "What?"

"Isn't this something you should have asked us about first?!" Akane said, though a small voice in the back of her head pointed out that this made her claim on Ranma at least as strong as Shampoo's.

"Why ask? Is great honor." Shampoo shrugged. "Shampoo worried for a while that Ranma not listen, pick only one wife, but seems Airen has come to senses."
"Oh god, is _that_ why you came onto me that night after the wedding?! I thought you were drunk and depressed!" Ukyou tore at her hair.

Shampoo narrowed her eyes. "Shampoo _was_ drunk and depressed. Airen not following law, stupid Japanese parents getting in way, ruin everything." She huffed. "Also, was horny and Spatula girl hot."

"You can't just... ARRRGH!" Ukyou threw her hands up in the air, face beet red.

"I think I kinda have a _gist_ of what happened between you two, but..." Akane twiddled her fingers. "... Did you two?"

"Shampoo depressed after wedding. Get drunk. Wander outside, get splashed by car driving through puddle." Shampoo said. "Not good. Too-too much alcohol in system for cat. Ukyou find, get back to restaurant. Give hot water. We talk, drink more, sleep as sisters."

"She doesn't mean that in the Japanese sense." Ukyou clarified, rubbing her head. "'Sleeping as sisters' is a warrior thing with the Amazons. Something like the Spartans used to do I guess? It's... it's supposed to build bonds of closeness and trust..."

"We have sex." Shampoo finished, eliciting a humiliated groan from Ukyou. "Was good! Feel much better, but Spatula Girl be all coy about it after."

"I wasn't being 'coy'!" Ukyou growled. "I'm engaged to be married to a _guy_. Even setting aside the fact I'm _not_ a lesbian..."

Shampoo gave her a bemused look. "Not enough room in closet for you and all of pictures of Girl-type Ranma you buy from Nabiki."

"I'm not!" Ukyou insisted. "I... I was just curious, okay!"

"Curious for many, _many_ hours."

"I hate you..." Ukyou snarled.

"Not what you keep saying over and over and over again all night..." Shampoo replied sweetly.

Normally Akane would have been outraged by the overly adult conversation. About the situation. About the implication of her own involvement. She would have yelled and pulled out a mallet, and probably blamed Ranma for it all.

Instead, Akane started snickering. Then she was doubled over laughing. Something had snapped inside of her, under all of the stress and worry. She simply couldn't support her indignant outrage anymore and as that crumbled away she finally saw the ridiculousness that had amused her sister for so long.

Shampoo and Ukyou both watched her for a moment, concerned.

"Akane is starting to scare Shampoo..." The Amazon said nervously.

Akane quickly waved her off to reassure her until she could regain her composure enough to speak. "I'm... I'm sorry... I just..." She shook her head. "Ukyou and I were just on our way here to propose we share Ranma so we can all date him, and here you are already ten steps ahead of us, and we're _all_ perverts, and this is _exactly_ the sort of thing I'd have accused Ranma of and malleted him into next week for, except I _know_ the hardest one to convince to go for all this is going to
be him, and…” She leaned against the table, panting. "We're all idiots, aren't we?"

"Hmph! Speak for self, Akane Tendo." Shampoo sniffed. "Not Shampoo fault you and Spatula girl slow to see obvious solution."

Ukyou sighed. "Well, the idea was we just have a standing agreement to take turns dating him, not…” She gestured in the air. "... Some Amazonian Polygamy agreement."

Akane winced, immediately realizing there was a significant problem with Shampoo's neat solution. "Ukyou has a point… besides, the Amazon laws would only cover Amazons, right?"

"I'm still not entirely sanguine about being annexed by a tribe of Chinese Amazons in absentia." Ukyou muttered.

"Akane only one in absentia. Spatula girl very present for that part, actually." Shampoo corrected.

"What do you…” Ukyou gave Shampoo a confused look, then a memory twigged and she blanched. "... That… That was just a bedroom game!"

Akane's eye twitched, and she decided to just get it out before they got distracted again. "Nabiki is in love with Ranma!"

The two other girls stared at her.

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After Shampoo collected the dishes and bounced off back to the Nekohanten, Nabiki was left with a full plate. She had already promised to help the Amazon with school registration, which she needed to do on the sly to avoid any interference from Hana or Himura. That was another task to leave to Hiroshi and Daisuke, and for another day when the School's Registrar was actually staffed.

After that was tracking down the drama club members. She had their names and numbers, thankfully, but that would need to wait until after school hours when they'd likely be home. There were a half dozen other things to take care of, but none of it was particularly doable right now. They'd all require at least a trip back home.

So she had a full plate that she couldn't immediately do anything with, and she hated that., which resulted in her being the one checking her watch as the other girls chatted. Even Ranma, who normally had no interest in gossip, seemed puzzled and fascinated by Yuka's ability to leap from topic to topic with only the most tenuous seeming connection between them, and somehow manage to be strongly opinionated about all of them.

"I hate to cut things short, but Ranma and I should be headed home." Nabiki said. Technically, she didn't need Ranma to come with her, but she had a nagging suspicion she was going to have far less of Ranma to herself in the near future.

"Actually, that was something I'd like to ask about." Sayuri said. "You have a dojo, right? I was thinking about how we were going to manage to have practise without Himura or her flunkies screwing with us. Do you think your Dad would be okay with us using it?"

Nabiki blinked. She hadn't even considered that issue, but Sayuri's idea would keep the team in territory she could secure against Hana's surveillance attempts. Any factors she could keep control of made the Madness more manageable. "That… I don't see…”

"We were going to just go to the local gym, but if it's cool we'd be happy to give the dojo our gym
fees instead.” Sayuri added, quickly sweetening the deal at Nabiki’s apparent reluctance.

Nabiki smiled, and decided she needed to revise her estimation of Sayuri up a few notches. “The Tendo Dojo would be happy to have you as customers. I remember we have a net up in the attic we can set up for you.”

“We should meet to start training soon.” Ranma said. “No telling what our competition will be like.”

“Yeah. We kind of only won that match against the boys because the coach stacked things in our favor.” Riko said glumly.

“Don’t worry! I got some ideas for training.” Ranma winked. “The Saotome School of Anything Goes Volleyball never loses!”

“The Saotome School of Anything Goes Volleyball has also never actually played a match.” Yuka muttered dryly. “Owing to the fact you just invented it ten seconds ago.”

“Technicality.” Ranma waved it off.

“Well, you might as well come along with, then.” Nabiki motioned for them to follow. “I'm sure Daddy will be overjoyed to earn some extra income without having to do anything.”

“I surprised you don't rent it out more often.” Sayuri said. “Even if your Dad isn't teaching martial arts currently, a big hall like that could see a lot of business just from people wanting to rent the space for things.”

Nabiki raised an eyebrow, and chalked another point onto Sayuri's tally. She might just be right hand girl material. I really should have shopped around more before settling for Hana.

“We could…” She had trouble keeping the annoyance out of her voice. “But he always said—and I quote—'The Dojo is a sacred trust, the sanctuary for the Anything Goes School of Martial Arts. It shouldn't be seen as a place for bake sales and office parties.’”

“But… volleyball is okay?” Rin cocked her head, confused.

“Yes, well, when Daddy said that, it was before Happosai’s last visit, and before Daddy's entire supply of sake mysteriously vanished.” Nabiki smirked.

“Besides, if we put 'Anything Goes' on it, it'll generally get Pop's and Mr Tendo's approval.” Ranma added.

“Maybe you could teach us a few martial arts moves while we're there?” Rin said, punching the air enthusiastically.

“It's Ranma.” Yuka said. “Martial Arts gets into everything with her.”

More like everything IS Martial Arts to her. Nabiki thought. Though that seems to work for her. She might be onto something.

She tuned out the rest of the animated discussion as they walked, her mind wandering through her mental corkboard. She was getting a niggling feeling that something was wrong, the model felt skewed somehow.

“Wow… This place is huge!” Rin's exclamation snapped Nabiki out of her reverie. They were at the front gates of the dojo.
"I always thought it was charming. Like something out of an old samurai movie." Sayuri said. "But... you know, with running hot water and stuff."

"Mostly." Yuka snarked.

"Still, I bet a place like this has a lot of history." Riko said, touching one of the walls.

Nabiki led them inside. "We're home!" She called out.

"Where's Ranma?" Rin asked, noticing the redhead was no longer in the group.

"I'll explain in a minute, just play along." Nabiki replied.

Kasumi stepped out into the hallway and beamed. "Oh my, so many visitors!"

"Kasumi, is Auntie Saotome home?" Nabiki asked, slipping off her shoes.

"No, she went home earlier today. Why?" Kasumi gave her a curious look.

Nabiki breathed a sigh of relief. "Good. Still, good thing Ranma is one step ahead of me on some things..." She opened the front door and beckoned. "Coast is clear, Ranma."

She wasn't entirely sure where the Redhead came from, but suddenly she was standing next to her, and slipped past her into the house. Nabiki closed the door behind her.

"What was that all about?" Yuka asked.

"Ranma's mother is... particular about which form she comes home in. Specifically, she's forbidden her from going to school as a girl."

"But Ranma is a..." Rin started. Then, as everyone turned to look at her, she scowled, readjusting her statement before trying again. "But Ranma's registered as a girl, right? The Principal told her she had to come to school in the girl's uniform every day. If she doesn't, she gets suspended and pulled off the volleyball team, right?"

"Right. Which Ranma's mother also forbade." Nabiki replied.

"But how...?" Sayuri frowned.

Nabiki folded her arms. "Logic' and 'Saotome' are mutually exclusive terms."

"Hey!" Ranma protested.

"And suddenly why Ranma Saotome is Ranma Saotome makes a little more sense." Yuka said. She kicked off her shoes, then picked them up to carry them through the house.

"I like your outfits, girls." Kasumi said brightly. "Is there an Anime Convention in town?"

"Uhhh... Something like that." Riko said self-consciously.

"Which reminds me, don't forget to change out of those. I'll need to collect them up so they can be altered."

"Awww..." Rin deflated a little. "I liked being dressed like Noriko."

Nabiki lead them through the house and out the back, through the covered walkway to the dojo hall.
"I've never actually been in a dojo before." Rin said as they stepped inside.

"It's not much different from a gym." Riko said. "Just smaller."

"Big enough, though." Sayuri walked out into the middle of the room, visualizing a net strung across the middle. "Yeah, this should be perfect."

"I think we even have a volleyball around here somewhere." Nabiki said. She glanced over and realized Ranma had already found it and was spinning it on her finger.

"We probably shouldn't practice in our new uniforms, though." Riko tugged at her top.

"We just wanted to be sure the space would work. This is good!" Sayuri grinned. "It finally feels like Himura is going to face some real competition!"

"Do you think we can really do this, Senpai?" Rin asked nervously.

"Ranma always thinks she can do it." Yuka replied.

"And I'm always right." Ranma smirked, flexing her bicep. "Give me a few days, and nothing Himura throws at us will faze you girls!"

"Honestly that scares me worse than Himura does." Yuka replied, crossing her arms.

"I've heard about your training techniques." Ranma will tone it down for us." Sayuri reassured them. "Right, Ranma?" She gave the redhead a warning glare.

Ranma sighed. "Most of that stuff was Pops anyway…" At Sayuri's intensified glare she held up a warding hand. "Okay, okay! Nothing crazy."

"Ranma!" Kasumi called from the house. "Phone call for you!"

"Phone call for me?" Ranma glanced at Nabiki.

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"You what?!"

Nabiki listened, leaning against the wall, bemused as Ranma stared incredulously at the phone. At first she was worried it was Nodoka with some new hurdle, or Himura with some sort of retribution or other scheme. To her surprise it was Ryoga.

Ranma was rubbing her forehead. "You really are an idiot, pork butt… Hey, I never said I wasn't gonna do it! But why me? Couldn't you have said I was your brother or sister or something?... What do you mean you PANICKED!? Are you seriously telling me this is the first thing you came up with?!!... HOW IS THIS MY FAULT!?"

The other girls were peering around the corner curiously. Nabiki smiled at them and shrugged. She had a pretty good idea of the other side of the conversation, knowing Ryoga.

"Look, just sit tight… No, look, I know you, okay? Don't even go look out the window or you're gonna end up in Osaka… No, I don't think I am, P-chan…! Oh pipe down, Akane isn't even home now… Don't start with that!" Ranma struggled with the urge to crush the handset into powder, counted to ten, then put it back to her ear. "Just stay put, and I will be there in half an hour. Got it?" She said sweetly. She waited a moment, then put down the receiver. "I am going to sell him to the
Korean barbecue shop."

"I know there are some shady barbecue places that are selling questionable 'pork', but I don't think even they will buy a directionally-addled teenager from you." Nabiki said quietly.

"They won't know it's not pork by the time I'm done with him." She said tightly. She took a deep breath and then exhaled. "I need to go get changed. Into something girly because Ryouga is an idiot."

"What did he do this time?"

"He's at the hospital. Apparently they found him naked and ranting in the school, and want to keep him for psychological observation. They're willing to release him, but only to a family member… so the moron told them I'm his fiancee!" Ranma pinched the bridge of her nose.

There was a squeal of delight from around the corner. "Senpai has a boyfriend!?"

"Awww crap…" Ranma muttered.

"Care to run that by us again, Sugar?" Ukyou said, a low, dangerous note in her voice.

Akane sighed. Nabiki was probably going to be mad, but better they find out when they were out of easy murder range of her defenseless sister. "Nabiki is in love with Ranma." She gave them both a hard stare in turn. "Do you want to know what caused those changes in Ranma you both seem to be enjoying so much? It was Nabiki."

Shampoo quietly cracked her knuckles. "Mercenary Girl telling fairy tales to Shampoo and Great-grandmother, it seem. Maybe time to remind her fairy tales usually have bad endings."

"You will have to go through me." Akane said coldly.

"Akane, she stole Ranma from you! Why would you defend her?!" Ukyou said, incredulous. "Why even tell us, then?"

"Because you're here talking about divvying up Ranma between you like he's a pile of loot and ready to call the problem solved because you found a clever loophole in Amazon law!" She leaned forward. "The only reason you've gotten anywhere with Ranma is because Nabiki has been going without sleep trying to defuse the mess that is Ranma's life. After all that she's done, she deserves her shot. So… I'm advocating for her."

"Akane giving up on Ranma again so easy?" Shampoo asked, raising an eyebrow.

Akane shook her head. "Not a chance! But… Ranma is happier now than I've seen him in so long. And Nabiki… she cares about something, beyond money or material things. They're good for each other." She looked at Shampoo. "Nothing Nabiki said to you or your Great-grandmother was a lie. You must know that by now? Nabiki isn't an 'obstacle' to you. She isn't your enemy. She's gotten you closer to Ranma than you ever did on your own, and she did it all for his sake."

Shampoo narrowed her eyes. "Nabiki is clever. Is ruse."

"A ruse for what? She hasn't asked for a single yen from any of us, has she? No promises, or deals, nothing other than 'help Ranma'," Akane pressed. "Ukyou, she told you to kiss Ranma, and she didn't say a word when you took more than just a peck on the cheek." She narrowed her eyes. "You
know how clever she is. If she decided she wanted to steal Ranma from you? He would already be gone. So... if you're going to make deals, you need to include her."

The hardness in Shampoo's expression faded, replaced with exasperation. "Four wives? That pushing it even for Amazon law. And Mercenary girl not martial artist. Can't give Kiss of sisterhood." She slumped in her seat, resting her chin on her fist and sighing. "Tendos know how to ruin good thing."

Ukyou covered her eyes and groaned, leaning back in her chair. She was silent for a few moments. "... Please tell me Ranchan didn't get Kasumi too?"

"Not yet." Akane felt a small grin tug at the corners of her mouth. "Nabiki thinks we should quarantine him."

Shampoo and Ukyou giggled softly at that, the tension breaking. Ukyou rubbed her eyes and looked at Akane. "All right. We'll extend the truce to Nabiki. But she's gotta come here and agree to the same terms as the rest of us."

"I'll get her here." Akane said, nodding resolutely.

"Airen going to have explaining to do." Shampoo said darkly.

Ukyou smirked. "That's good. He kisses better when he's feeling guilty."

Shampoo raised an eyebrow. "How many you get so far?"

Ukyou held up three fingers, grin widening. "One for each side so far, plus a bonus he initiated."

"Feh! Shampoo owed two then." Shampoo groused. "Airen need to learn to keep things balanced, or bad bad things happen."

Akane scowled. "Gee, my heart bleeds for you, Shampoo." She muttered.

Shampoo shrugged. "Akane just need learn take what she want. Want kiss from Airen, then kiss Airen. Males simple things. Need be direct."

Akane looked down at her teacup considering that as her reflection stared back up at her from the pale yellow liquid.

"So... Just to be clear... We're doing this?" Ukyou asked softly. "Together, I mean?"


"Just like the Three Musketeers." Akane smiled, putting her hand out on the table. "One for all?"

Ukyou leaned forward and put her hand over Akane's.

Shampoo looked to each of them, confused.

"It's a story from France, about a young nobleman named d'Artagnan who seeks to join the King's elite Musketeers of the Guard." Akane said. "He ends up befriending the three greatest Musketeers, Athos, Porthos, and Aramis, and the four of them set out to save the kingdom from an insidious plot."

"Their rallying cry was 'One for all, and all for one'" Ukyou added.
Shampoo arched an eyebrow. "Interesting. Sounds familiar." She reached out and put her hand on top of theirs. "'All for one', then."

"Well, it seems that you've made a decision on whatever it was you girls were so serious about." Jiro appeared suddenly, bearing a tray of cookies which he set down on the table. "On the house. And, a tradition. The last one, I promise, except for all the other ones." He returned to the counter and pulled out a large cardboard box.

"That's right, Akane needs to pick a teacup." Ukyou said, smiling.

"Pick a teacup?" Akane watched confused as Jiro brought over a large box filled with an assortment of teacups in all shapes, sizes and colors.

"People come here to make decisions. Big decisions, small decisions, there's always something." The owner of the odd little tea shop smiled disarmingly. "It's a point of honor for me that no one has yet left without having come to a decision about something that had been bothering them. As a little celebration, I get them to pick out their own teacup."

"I'm not sure..." Akane looked into the box, reaching in timidly. Her hand moved initially towards a yellow one, as yellow was her favorite color, but then something caught her eye.

She pulled out a white teacup, simple western style, but painted with a stylistic representation of a japanese-style building, in minimalist red and black ink. She recognized it as a dojo. "This one."

Jiro nodded, fishing out the matching saucer and placing it on the table, setting the cup on top. "It will be washed and ready for you the next time you visit, Akane Tendo." He took her hand and patted it. "Or should I say 'Aramis'? Yes, I think you're an Aramis. Torn between propriety and the demands of your heart."

"What would that make me then? Athos?" Ukyou frowned, considering that.

Jiro beamed. "Scarred and recovering from love's betrayal? Oh my dear Ukyou, it suits you quite well."

Shampoo cocked her head. "Which one is Sha-"

"Porthos." Akane and Ukyou said in unison.

"Shampoo need to read book, see if you making fun of or not." Shampoo scowled.

"So... I guess all that's left is to grab d'Artagnan and see if she's in." Ukyou said.

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Nabiki couldn't help but smile, even if the sentiment wasn't shared by the redhead walking next to her.

Ranma had opted for maximum girly, most likely to spite Ryouga. She was wearing the white sundress Akane had bought for her ages ago (And seemed to get passed back and forth between them), had put on a little light makeup and let her hair out of the braid. She'd almost be suspicious of the redhead wanting to impress Ryouga if it wasn't for the look of absolute murder in her eyes.

"It's a little scary how good you've gotten at being girly, Ranma." She noted. "I think you're actually better with makeup than Akane."
"Cologne showed me a few things on Togenkyo. It comes in handy sometimes." Ranma muttered defensively. She swung the cloth shopping bad she was carrying to bleed off some of the nervous energy.

"I'm not complaining." Nabiki said. "You've developed a pretty good aesthetic sense. Also means if I'm feeling lazy I can ask my boyfriend to pamper me and do my makeup for me."

Ranma blushed and ducked her head. "Wouldn't that be… I dunno… a little weird?"

Nabiki snorted. "Nothing about our lives is normal enough to be called 'a little weird', Ranma." She smiled. "I'll settle for whatever makes me happy at this point. Never cared much what others thought."

Ranma paused and looked at her, both hands clasped on the bag handles as she held it in front of her in a way that was unintentionally demure. She cocked her head and scrutinized Nabiki until she started to feel a little self-conscious.

"You don't need makeup, really." Ranma said finally. "But a little eyeshadow, maybe… I only really know what colors are good for me, so I'd have to experiment a little, if that's okay?"

Nabiki felt a pleasant shiver at that thought. Something was very compelling about the idea of letting Ranma run her fingers all over her face while she relaxed. She stepped in closer to the redhead, sliding her arms around her neck, looking down at her. "I think that's more than okay." She purred softly.

Ranma blushed, glancing around, her arms pinned between them and with her unable to extract them without dropping the bag. "Nabiki, we're in public. Very very public!"

Nabiki sighed and reluctantly released the girl. "I suppose we still need to be careful about that." She sighed. "I'll just add this to Himura's tab then."

"I… well that's true, but that's not what I meant." Ranma blushed a little. "I mean… I'm a girl right now. Really really girl, even. I'm not sure you'd want people to see you kissing another girl."

Nabiki raised an eyebrow. "Oh, right." She smiled, put her arms back around Ranma's neck and pulled her in, kissing her deeply before she could muster another protest. She kept kissing her until she felt her relax in her arms and start to return the attention.

She broke the kiss. "Don't want to smudge your makeup…" She explained, then leaned in and whispered in her ear. "... Yet."

Ranma's soft whimper was rather satisfying. Nabiki felt a slight pang for teasing the girl, but there was also something thrilling about knowing that she had that kind of power over the strongest martial artist in Japan.

"Come on, we'd better not keep your fiance waiting." She gave the redhead a gentle push towards the doors.

Ranma shook her head and took a deep breath. "Just… don't do that in front of Ryouga? They see that much blood come out of one person they won't care that it's a nosebleed, they'll put him in intensive care."

"No promises." Nabiki said playfully.

The reception area of the hospital was stark white. Antiseptic. People sat in the waiting area, none of
them looking very happy to be there, but Ranma hardly blamed them. There was that lingering smell all hospitals had. She wrinkled her nose in distaste.

"Can I help you?" The bored looking nurse at the reception desk asked. She was watching whatever was on the screen to her right, and wasn't even directly addressing Ranma.

"Ummm… My name is Ranma Saotome. I understand you have my… nnh… fiancé Ryouga Hibiki here?" She gritted her teeth, managing not to gag on the words.

The nurse looked up at her, sighed as Ranma had provided an answer that required actual work, and turned to her computer, clicking and typing for a few moments wordlessly. Just when Ranma was about to clear her throat, the nurse spoke again.

"Room 1268. Elevators to your left. Twelfth floor, go to the right. You'll need to talk to the floor nurse, and sign the release forms after you speak with the doctor. Have a nice day." She turned her gaze back to the other monitor, which Ranma realized now was showing some kind of TV drama. She had navigated the entire exchange without acknowledging Ranma directly once.

"Errr… thank you." Ranma bowed politely. She got no further response from the nurse, so she took a left and headed down the hall towards the elevators.

"I hate hospitals." Nabiki shivered next to her, rubbing her arms.

"Why?" Ranma asked as they reached the elevators. She reached out and punched the call button.

"My Mom." Nabiki replied softly. "She… was in a place like this a lot near the end."

"Oh… I'm sorry." Ranma muttered awkwardly.

The door slid open, and they stepped onto the lift. There wasn't even any cheesy elevator music to cut the silence, though thankfully it was a short ride.

The smell was worse on the twelfth floor. It was a mix of antiseptic, and a multitude of unpleasant smells that one assumed the antiseptic was used to clean away, with only partial success. It was like someone had tried to scrub away the smell of sickness itself.

Ranma turned to the right, immediately seeing the floor nurse's desk. Seated behind it was a nurse that could have been a clone of the one at the main desk; she was even watching the same TV drama. She had navigated the entire exchange without acknowledging Ranma directly once.

"Hello? My name is Ranma Saotome. I'm here about Ryouga Hibiki? He's in room 1268." Ranma said.

The nurse looked up, giving her a cursory examination. "Mnnh." She pulled out a clipboard and handed it to her. "Fill this out please. The doctor will be out to see you shortly."

Ranma scowled at the form. She looked hopefully over at Nabiki, but the middle Tendo seemed distracted by something. "Nabiki?"

Nabiki put a hand on her shoulder. "I need to check something. I'll be back in a minute, okay?" She walked off briskly, leaving Ranma alone to face the horrors of paperwork unaided.

Ranma sighed, resigned to her fate. She sat down in one of the uncomfortable chairs and started filling out the confusing form as best she could.
Nabiki prided herself on being observant. When in a fight, there weren't many details that escaped Ranma's notice, but outside of that she tended to ignore the same small details that other people did. But Nabiki was always on.

So when Ranma failed to notice the broken bokken in the trash behind the nurse's station, it wasn't surprising.

Nabiki put a hand on Ranma's shoulder. "I need to check something. I'll be back in a minute, okay?" She walked off before Ranma could protest.

After what happened to Akane and Ukyou, if Ranma knew Tatewaki Kuno was on this floor, there would almost certainly be an altercation. Which is why she didn't tell her. She just needed to find out what room he was in so she could steer Ranma clear of it without arousing suspicion.

It didn't take her long before she heard a familiar voice coming from one of the rooms. *Principal Kuno.* She slowed her steps to avoid making noise and crept up to the door to listen.

"... And dey got you hopped up on dis poison again!" the elder Kuno's voice came through the partially open door.

"The doctor said..." Tatewaki's uncharacteristically subdued voice replied, but he was cut off.

"No! I said none o' dat years ago, and it stands! Doctors are all quacks! Saying ye crazy, just like dey said I was crazy, jus' cuz we be havin' de monies!" The elder Kuno ranted. "I no be crazy, and so neither be you!"

"Yes, father."

"You stay here an' heal up, but don't take any o' dere muck. I send yer sister will home remedies later. Dat fix ye up. Otherwise, keep quiet, ye?"

"Yes, father."

Nabiki ducked into the vacant adjoining room as Principal Kuno stormed out of the hospital room with uncharacteristic rancor. He paused, took a breath, readjusted his hawaiian shirt, his trademark idiotic grin spreading once more across his tanned face, and he resumed walking away.

Nabiki peered out the door until she was sure he was gone, then slipped back out into the corridor and slowly opened the door to Tatewaki's room.

Kuno was lying propped up in bed, eyes dull, tray of partially eaten food in front of him. His torso and shoulders were encased in plaster, limiting his arm movements, and he had visible bruises on his face and places the cast didn't cover.

"Kuno-baby? You look rough." She said quietly. *I should find out what's going on with him. At least I can let Akane know she didn't permanently cripple him.*

He looked up at her and blinked, eyes a little unfocused. "Nabiki... Tendo?" He said, a little uncertainly.

"That's right." She walked into the room, closing the door behind her gently. "You've looked better. You've looked worse, too, to be fair. How are you holding up?"
His eyes dropped again. "... Confused." He said finally. "... Am I in a hospital again? Is my mother here?"

"Your… mother?" Nabiki blinked. She hadn't heard him refer to his mother since… Her eyes fell on a pill bottle on the fold out table his dinner was on. She picked it up, looking at the label. *Aripiprazole? For treatment of Schizophrenia and bipolar… oh.*

"The doctor said I might feel disoriented because of the anaesthetic. He also said I had not been taking my pills for a long time." He seemed to be trying to focus on the pill bottle she was holding, and failing. "Father doesn't want me to take the pills anymore."

"You should probably listen to the doctor and take them…" Nabiki said softly, putting the pill bottle down. She cocked her head, seeing something in his eyes she hadn't seen in a long time. "... Tachi-kun."

"... The book… I haven't been able to find it." He looked up at her apologetically. "I hope those bullies didn't steal it."

"The book?" She asked, sitting on the edge of his bed.

"The Book of Five Rings." He replied. "I can't find it. I asked father if he could bring it, but he ignored me. He… must be too busy. I can’t… I can't remember…" He moved his arm, as if to rub his head, but the cast restricted his movement. "... I got beaten up again, didn't I?"

Nabiki smiled, a little sadly. "Yes, you did, Tachi-kun." She said softly. "I'm sorry I wasn't there this time to patch you up."

"I… Do not wish for you to see me so weak, Nabiki Tendo. This was probably for the best." He replied. He looked around. "Where am I?"

"In the hospital, Tachi-kun. You're a little out of it from the anaesthetic." Nabiki patted his hand. "Just relax."

"I dreamt that Tomoe Gozen attacked me." He said softly.

"Something like that." Nabiki replied with a smirk.

He looked at her, and she watched as so many emotions passed across his face. Confusion. Fear. Regret. Happiness. Worry.

"Are you mad at me?" He asked.

"No. Why would I be?" Nabiki replied softly.

"I feel… As if I… as if there is a reason…" He frowned. "The medicine… I stopped taking my pills, didn't I?"

"I think you did." She said. "I didn't know you were taking them, or I would have told you."

"Father thinks they're shameful. He hides them. Throws them out." His eyes came to rest on the bottle again, squinting as he tried to focus. "They bring him trouble. Mother is away, so I have to be on my best behaviour. I can't bring him trouble…"

"Tachi-kun?" She squeezed his hand until he looked at her. "Promise me you'll keep taking your pills? Even if it makes your father mad?"
"Why?" He blinked slowly, eyes still fogged and unable to focus.

"Because you went away when you didn't take them, and I didn't know where you went." Nabiki dropped her own eyes. "I should have guessed… but I didn't. And I didn't like who took your place."

His eyes narrowed, and a little more clarity entered them. "I'm… sorry…"

"It's okay." She smiled at him again weakly. "I know now. If you forget, I'll remind you. And if you go away again, I'll understand why this time. But I'd like it better if you could stay."

He thought for a moment, then nodded, slowly and deliberately. "I will try."

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"Ms Saotome? Ms. Saotome?"

Ranma was so engrossed with her legendary struggle with Form 24C-LM that it took a couple of repetitions of the Doctor saying her name for her to look up and acknowledge him. "Oh! Uh, sorry…!"

The doctor was a man in his early 50's, with greying hair at the temples and a large number of laugh lines around the eyes. He was wearing wire frame glasses with small lenses. He smiled and waved his hand. "No, no, not at all. Would you prefer Mrs. Hibiki then?"

Through herculean effort, Ranma managed to suppress the violent urge to gag. "Oh, uh… We're not married yet." She flashed him a big smile to cover, relying on the old magic of being cute to smooth away any suspicion.

The doctor chuckled. "You'd be surprised. We have more and more couples who are living Common Law before officially registering for a marriage license these days. Some are even quite particular about it. My name is Doctor Masamune Hirano. I'm the resident neurologist at this hospital." He extended his hand, which she shook. "I wanted to talk to you about your fiance before we released him to you."

Ranma sighed. "What did he do now?"

Doctor Hirano seemed a little taken aback. "Well, aside from being naked in a high school where he wasn't even registered?"

Ranma winced. "Well… aside from that?" She chuckled weakly.

The Doctor sighed. He took off his glasses, producing a cloth from his breast pocket, and started polishing them. "I'm not accusing your fiance of wrongdoing, Ms. Saotome. Quite the opposite." He gave her a tired look. "Your fiance is showing signs of disorientation, and what I suspect are symptoms of acute depression, and possibly paranoia. Since coming here he's gotten lost trying to get to the bathroom seven times. I would like to have him come back for a CAT scan or MRI, or at the very least some bloodwork."

"Why? How would that help him getting lost all the time?" Ranma cocked her head.

"There are a number of neurological conditions that can impair spatial reasoning." He put his glasses back on. "I can't really speculate without knowing more about it, but… The issues he has could be indicative or larger neurological problems. Ones which could worsen if left untreated." He sighed. "I… tried to discuss this with him directly, of course, but he was not receptive."
"Does this mean you're not going to release him?" Ranma asked nervously.

Doctor Hirano was silent a moment, taking his time to phrase what he was going to say. "There's no legal reason to hold him. The school isn't pressing trespassing charges, and as he's known to several people attending the school, including yourself, there's no real suspicion of wrongdoing. But if my fears are realized, it could impair his ability to function in normal society. It would be unconscionable of me not to try... so I am asking you to see if you can convince him to reconsider even a cursory evaluation. I won't pretend to know his situation or yours with any authority... but it was quite obvious even to an outside observer such as myself how frustrating and embarrassing his navigational difficulties are for him. It may be something we can help with."

Ranma's gaze dropped as she considered that. "I... It's just he's always been like this, ever since we met in junior high. I mean, the rest of his family is the same way. I wasn't really thinking 'brain damage', you know?"

"So it is hereditary then?" The Doctor rubbed his chin. "That would make his reluctance to address the problem make more sense." He reached into his pocket and produced a business card. "While there's no immediate reason to detain him any longer, I would appreciate if you tried to talk to Ryouga about this? Here is my number. If he changes his mind, or his condition worsens, or even if you just have questions yourself, please don't hesitate to call me?"

"I... sure. Thank you." Ranma accepted the card, a little unsure what to do with it. She finally just palmed it, not having any pockets on the dress she was wearing. "Can I see him now?"

"Of course. He's quite anxious to see you." Doctor Hirano smiled and motioned for her to follow him. He lead her along the row of rooms until they reached 1268.

The doctor knocked on the door. "Ryouga? I have someone here to see you."

"Oh thank god..." Ryouga's voice came from inside.

Doctor Hirano smiled and opened the door, and motioned for Ranma to enter.

"Hey, how're you doing, bacon breath?" Ranma said, giving a small wave.

Ryouga was sitting on the edge of the bed, in a hospital gown with a terrycloth robe draped over. The joy and relief in his eyes at seeing salvation immediately morphed into barely restrained rage as Ranma used the familiar insult.

"Uh... it's a pet name." Ranma said in aside to the doctor, smiling weakly.

"I'll leave you two be. Just see the nurse for checkout. And think about what I said." He nodded to them both, then closed the door behind him.

"I swear to god if you screw this up I'm going to put you in the morgue downstairs," Ryouga growled.

"I love you too, sweetie." Ranma said brightly, beaming at him and batting her eyes, which just inflamed the fury in his expression.

She dropped the act after a second and walked over. "Oh pipe down, P-chan! You were the one who called me, remember? You owe me for this." She handed him the bag. "Here. Figured you'd need some clothes."

The fury bled out of his eyes and he grabbed the bag, opening it and sighing in relief. "Ohhh thank
"..." He dug into the bag, pulling out a pair of black pants and an orange shirt. "This your stuff?"

"Yeah. Kasumi is washing yours. It kinda got soaked and sat in a tool shed for a few days." And then in the dojo a bit longer because I forgot about it until you called. "I haven't worn it in forever, and it's clean."

Ryouga dug further and pulled out a pair of boxers. "... Ugh. These yours too? No thanks."

Ranma scowled. "Look, you're not going commando in a pair of my pants!"

"You'd rather I wear a pair of your underwear?"

"That's getting burned afterwards." Ranma crossed her arms. "Or, if you're gonna be a whiny bitch about it, I can trade you for the underwear I'm wearing right now. Panties would probably suit you better anyway."

Ryouga growled, but didn't reply, extracting the rest of the clothes. "Fine." He stood up and glared at her. "You gonna watch me change, too?"

She rolled her eyes and turned away, facing the wall. "Not like you've got anything I haven't seen before, Pork-butt. A small voice nagged at her about Himura and insults, and if she was feeling guilty about relentlessly insulting Akane, then why would it be different for Ryouga? But she suppressed that thought with the cold certainty that until he owned up to what he had done to Akane he had every single one of them coming.

"Yeah, well, doesn't mean I want a girl watching me change." He muttered.

Ranma smirked. "You should be so lucky!"

"I like to think I'd have better taste in women." Ryouga snorted. "I may not be a Casanova like you, but I do have standards."

Ranma whirled. "Hey! You'd be lucky to get a hottie like m..." She trailed off as her gaze trailed down, then she clapped her hand over her eyes and spun back around. "Would you please finish putting your pants on?" She said tightly, gritting her teeth.

"I'm trying!" Ryouga growled, hurriedly dressing. "Give me a minute, would you? Your clothes are too small!"

"You are not that much bigger than me, Ryouga!" She resisted the urge to turn and glare at him again. "Are you done yet?"

"Hang on... I'm trying to figure out the collar... what is this stupid bow tie thing?!"

She exhaled in frustration and turned, stalking over to him. "Here, let me do it, or we'll be here all week!"

Ryouga tried to bat her hands away, but to no avail. "Hey! I can do it...! Fine!" He leaned over a bit with his head turned to the side to let the petite redhead reach his collar and tie the unusual bow. After a moment he glanced back, curious. "Are you... wearing makeup?"

"Yeah? What's it to you?" She replied testily, focused on the bow tie. It was a little trickier from this angle. "I had to play it up... hold still... To make sure nobody asked any questions. Doctors and nurses are usually smarter than your average soda jerk or high schooler, y'know."
A mean smirk tugged at Ryoga's lips. "No, no… it suits you Ranma. You're exactly the sort of guy who should be wearing eyeshadow."

Ranma scowled. Her first impulse was to pull on the knot and just strangle the stupid jerk with his own shirt, but a better idea came to her, something more from Nabiki's playbook. She tugged in his collar a bit to pull him down a little closer. "You know what? You're right. It does suit me. You know why? Because I can be a man amongst men, and still have enough left over to rock the girl side. I do everything well, because I'm just that good." She gave him her best sultry smile, mimicking the playful smirk Nabiki always used to get Ranma off-balance. "The curse doesn't stop at half measures; Why should I?"

Ryouga blinked, confused. Then his eyes drifted down for a moment and it was as if a light switch had been flipped; he suddenly started blushing. "H-hey, lemme go…"

"Just realized I really am a girl, huh Ryoga?" She smirked and released his collar. She wanted to push a little harder, push him into the corner of his own hypocrisy, but she knew the lost boy was already dangerously close to retreating into his 'Die Ranma!' mode, and she didn't particularly want to risk getting that nice doctor hurt, much less Nabiki.

Speaking of which… "So why don't you wanna get them to check you out? That Doctor seemed to think he could figure out why your sense of direction is so lousy."

Ryouga scowled. "That's none of your business..."

Ranma leaned against the door, subtly barring the way out. "Come on, Ryoga. What have you got to lose?"

"Because it's a curse, not a medical condition!" Ryouga growled. "My head is fine."

"That's debatable. He noticed you're depressed too." She cocked her head. "Actually, you've been snarkier than normal. You usually don't come at me that hard unless I've really done something to piss you off. Everything okay?"

Ryouga looked away and clenched his fists. "Can we just go, please?"

She studied him for a moment. She could see tears in the corners of his eyes. He wasn't even bothering to lie.

She sighed. "All right, let's get you out of here." She stepped away and opened the door for him.

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The three of them walked in awkward silence. Ryoga had his hands jammed in his pockets and his shoulders hunched, emoting 'I don't want to talk' as hard as possible.

Ranma and Nabiki flanked him on either side, subtly course-correcting him. It was difficult to have a conversation through a sullen teenager, but they didn't dare trust him to follow them on his own recognizance in his current state of mind.

Ranma breathed a sigh of relief as they reached the dojo. Now she could finally scrub her face, change her clothes, and get some hot water.

Ryouga stopped walking.

Ranma and Nabiki turned to look at him, confused. At this point Ranma had expected him to sprint
ahead of them to get to the door.

"Is... Is Akane here?" He asked softly.

"She's probably home by now." Nabiki replied. "She'll be happy to see you."

He continued to look at the archway. Some unnamed emotion played across his face, and then he looked away. "Actually... Ranma, could you lead me back home? My home, I mean."

Ranma just stared.

Nabiki shrugged. "All right, I'll tell Kasumi you might be late for dinner. Have fun, Ranma!" She waved and walked to the gate, pushing it open and slipping inside.

"Ryouga what the hell!?" Ranma demanded. "We passed your place on the way here!"

"Fine. I'll find it on my own." Ryouga waved and turned and started walking away without another word.

"I..." Ranma watched Nabiki disappear past the gates, behind which would be the dojo, within which was the furo she desperately wanted a soak in. And in the opposite direction was the receding figure of Ryouga, without pack, umbrella or any sort of supplies, headed home. Going the wrong way, naturally.

"Arrrgh!" She stomped after the lost boy, grabbing his arms and yanking, dragging him back onto course.

""Hey, what're you...?!" Ryouga yelped.

"Shut up, P-chan. You are going to shut up and follow me, and not say a damn thing." Ranma snarled. "If you kick up a fuss I will break your legs and drag you home by the collar if I need to. And this is the very last favor I am doing you, so if there is anything else your self-centered little heart desires more than a guided tour to your own house, say it now."

"Don't put yourself out on my account, Ranma." Ryouga muttered, trying to tug his arm free.

"You coulda said that before I impersonated your fiancee on a legal document." Ranma glared at him, refusing to release his arm. "And stop trying to pull away, if I let go of you you'll be in Alaska before I can blink."

"Hey, the only reason I was in the hospital was your fault, Ranma!" He growled back. "And if you keep holding my arm like that... people are gonna think..." He looked around nervously.

"That I'm your fiancee? Gee, I wonder where a crazy idea like that could have come from." Ranma groused. "Your girlfriend doesn't even live in Nerima, and Akane knows better, what do you care what some nosy couple down the road thinks?"

Ryouga grimaced. "Unlike you, I value my reputation."

"They don't even know you! You're at your own home less than that stupid vacant lot you keep camping out at!" Ranma huffed.

"I would think you'd be happier if P-chan got scarce for a while, huh?" Ryouga replied. "I'm trying to do the right thing and not go running to her when..." He trailed off. "... Forget it."

Ranma peered at him. "Is this about you not being able to see Akari for a few weeks?"
Ryouga looked away. "It's more complicated than that. Look, I don't wanna talk about it."

Ranma closed her eyes and counted silently to ten. Ryouga had a talent for getting stubborn about the wrong things at the wrong time. "Hey, man, I'm just trying to help you. Believe it or not, I want you and Akari to get together."

"So you can have Akane all for yourself?!" Ryouga growled.

Ranma rolled her eyes. "Well, I wouldn't mind a little less of the 'How dare you so-and-so Akane, Ranma, prepare to die!' crap, yeah. But also? It's not like I like seeing you depressed all the time." She elbowed him gently in the ribs. "Despite what you always say, I am not out to destroy your happiness. I'd much rather have a happy, emotionally well-adjusted rival, thanks."

Ryouga scowled. "Sorry to disappoint."

"Oh come on, that's not what I meant!" Ranma sighed in frustration.

They walked silently for a while. Finally, Ryouga spoke up. "Remember Ryugenzawa?"

Ranma blinked. "Err… yeah. Big forest, fulla giant animals, magic healing water, and a big eight-headed monster thing, right?"

"Right." Ryouga continued. "Well… Akari and I went for a walk one day. I was trying to work up the nerve to ask her on a date, and I wasn't paying attention to where we were going… and…"

"You ended up in Ryugenzawa?!!" Ranma said incredulously.

"Not right away!" Ryouga shot back, then his face fell. "We… we had to wander a lot first. And I hadn't brought my pack, and Akari didn't have anything with her. She's used to travelling with Katsunishiki, so she's not used to hiking. After a while, she couldn't walk anymore, the blisters on her feet got so bad."

"Oh geez…" Ranma said softly. Akari was by no means a weak girl, and Ranma had seen her endure a fair bit of punishment for Ryouga's sake, but Ryouga's little 'treks' could be rough."

"I carried her, but then… I fell in a stream. So it was just her and P-chan." He clenched his fist. "I was helpless! And then… something huge came out of the forest. She… she couldn't run."

Ranma's eyes widened. "You… Wait, is Akari okay!?"

Ryouga nodded. "That guy showed up. Shinnosuke. The one with the broom and the bad memory, that keeps the animals in check? He saved her. Took us back to his grandfather's place and nursed Akari back to health." He sighed. "Seems his grandfather and Akari's knew each other, both being animal handlers. Called Akari's grandfather to come pick her up."

Ranma breathed a sigh of relief. Akari was a sweet girl, and didn't deserve the kind of beatings the critters in Ryugenzawa could dish out. "At least you got out of there, right?"

Ryouga laughed bitterly. "Akari's grandfather picked us up in a truck. The whole drive back, I could feel his eyes on me. Asking 'Why didn't you save my granddaughter?'" He hung his head. "I was useless to her when she needed me most, and because of the danger I put her in."

"Which is why you should maybe go talk to that doctor?" Ranma poked his side.

Ryouga grunted noncommittally.
"Hey, if there was a modern medicine way to fix my problems, doncha think I'd take it?" Ranma said.

Ryouga smirked. "There is. It's called 'castration'."

Ranma glared at him, then she covered it with a sweet smile. "See, that's funny! Because I was just thinking that as a responsible pet owner, Akane should really get P-chan neutered. I was actually going to suggest it to her today!"

Ryouga blanched. "You wouldn't…"

The smile vanished. "I wasn't planning on it, but if you're gonna make jokes about that kinda thing…"

"Fine, fine!" Ryouga sighed. "Topic is off-limits."

They walked a little further in silence.

"I wonder if there's a vet that will neuter pandas…" Ranma said softly.

That got through Ryouga's bad mood. He smirked. "Probably not, but I'm sure the zoo would be happy to have him for their breeding program."

"That's all we need, Pops being a terrible father to an entirely different species." Ranma chuckled.

Ryouga looked at the ground as they walked, lost in thought a moment. He took a breath finally. "If… If I did go talk to that doctor about the brain scan thing…"

"Yeah?" Ranma waited.

"Would… would you…" Ryouga mumbled. "I mean… I don't want to go alone, but… I can't have Akane or Akari seeing me like that…"

"I think it'd raise a lot of questions if I didn't go." Ranma noted. "But… yeah, no problem. It's a curse thing, right?"

"Not the same curse." Ryouga noted. "Uhh… but… thanks." He mumbled the last bit.

"Maybe in return you can help me with my curse problem? Specifically the Principal and him trying to disqualify me in Himura's little game." She cocked her head. "It's all hot water stuff, so no problem for you."

Ryouga considered.

"I mean, it's his fault you ended up in the hospital in the first place, what with him rigging up every water pipe in the school to the boilers." Ranma added, giving Ryouga's well-developed sense of vengeance a nudge.

"Yeah… Yeah! That's right! It's all the Hawaiian Freak's fault!" Ryouga clenched his fist.

"That's the spirit!" Ranma said. "I can't lay a finger on him unless he does something to me first, or he'd have grounds to suspend me, but you're free to pound his stupid spray-tan face in. That'll leave me free to deal with Himura, and then maybe finally my life can get back to normal."

"Whatever the hell that is for you." Ryouga replied, but the idea of a suitable vent for his frustrations had him in a much better mood.
"See? This all worked out for the best." She looked up, seeing they had arrived at Ryouga's house. And got him home with enough time for me to get back for a quick bath before dinner. Today's gone pretty well, all things considered.

Before they could reach the door however, it opened, a woman in her mid thirties inside. She had dark hair and wore a yellow scarf with black marks. She froze as she saw the both of them. "R-Ryouga?"

Ryouga's eyes were wide, as if he had seen a ghost. "M-mom?"

Ranma looked at Ryouga, then the unfamiliar woman, then at Ryouga's arm, which she was still holding firmly, in a way that could be mistaken as rather familiar. "Awwwww crap…"

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So, another chapter down!

It was nice to be able to visit Jiro's Tea Shop again. It seems some progress is being made! Which... probably means something else is going to go off the rails hardcore... Oh hey Mrs. Hibiki!

I punctured some holes in the whole idea of 'Shampoo is a Bimbo' here. She's UNINHIBITED, yes, and her Japanese is bad, but she's hardly STUPID. Feel free to fight me on the Internet over it.

I'm planning on getting more into RYOUGA'S curse in the future, too. Not the pig, the directional impairment. Which means it's likely the good Doctor will return. His name is a fusion of the names of two Japanese neurologists I picked at random. Doctor Tofu is likely going to get involved too. And no, I suspect a Neurologist and a Chiropractor are not going to work together smoothly at first, even if I expect both will be entirely professional about it.

And... As for the elephant in the room? I will address it now. *Ahem*...

"Good Elephant."

That is all.
Yakuza and Curses

After getting back to the Dojo, Nabiki saw to collecting the uniforms from the girls. Kasumi was a competent seamstress, and promised to take a look at the outfits, as well as get measurements from the girls (Riko's under protest) so she could adjust them as needed. She promised to help modify them if the Drama club wasn't agreeable, though she noted she wasn't nearly as skilled or creative as whoever had made the uniforms originally.

Her cell phone rang. She fished it out, and didn't recognize the number calling. Not a toll free number, not overseas. She had spent some time learning to differentiate the number blocks used by local telecoms. It was surprising what you could tell from the first few digits of a phone number. Non-geographic area code. Mobile service. Not one of the number blocks used by the big carriers. Pay-per-minute phone maybe? "Hello, you've reached Nabiki Tendo. All consultations are 50 yen per minute. By continuing this call you agree to this service charge. How may I help you?"

"Very amusing Ms. Tendo." The voice on the line was male. Older. Gravelly, kept low and raspy to make it tougher to identify, most likely. "I think in this case it'd be in your best interests to waive the fee. For now, anyway. The information I'm here to provide you is worth considerably more."

"I'm willing to consider a partial refund if that's the case." She said, raising an eyebrow, somewhat bemused. "But I don't issue credit to unknowns."

"You know who we are, Ms. Tendo." The voice replied. "Look out your bedroom window, towards the street. You will see a black sedan there. Come outside, and get into the back seat, and we will talk."

Nabiki glanced out the window. Late model black sedan, with tinted windows and temporary plates.

"Uh huh. Or?" She sat back in her chair, propping her feet up on her desk.

"This isn't an 'or' situation, Ms. Tendo." The voice said sternly.

Nabiki chuckled with a confidence she didn't feel. Why did I let Ranma leave without me? "And if I don't get in your carefully untraceable car after finishing this phone call on your disposable burner phone, I suppose something awful might happen to me, or my family? The one that's full of martial artists who shatter boulders with their fingers for fun? Either you are very new to Nerima, or you're bluffing."

The voice chuckled. "You're very astute… but you misunderstand me. I'm well aware of what your family is capable of. I have no intention of visiting any harm upon you or your family. We leave Nerima alone specifically because of people like your family. I am here to deliver information that I am not at liberty to discuss over the phone, and I am to remain until I deliver it. So when I say this is not an 'or' situation, I mean that I AM going to deliver my information, as that is my JOB. I'm not going to attempt to compel you in any way, but given the importance of what I have to say, I imagine you'd want this information sooner rather than later."

Nabiki's lips pressed into a thin line. She stared at the ceiling, considering. "All right." She said, sitting up and pulling out a notepad, quickly scribbling a message to Ranma or Akane, just in case. "I'll be right out." She hung up the phone, making a mental note to get a disposable prepaid phone of her own in the near future. Assuming I have one.

She made her way downstairs casually. "I'm just going to run to the corner grocery for a sec,
Kasumi. Need anything?" She called.

"No thank you, Nabiki!" Kasumi called from the kitchen, engrossed in her meal preparation. Nabiki had half hoped Kasumi would ask her to pick something up, as it would mean she'd be missed that much sooner, but at least she had established where she should be, and where she wouldn't be should they come looking, hopefully tipping them off she was missing before she ended up at the bottom of the bay or worse.

She slipped on her shoes and took a final breath here, in her own home, where it was safe to show weakness. Everything beyond this point she had to assume would be watched and evaluated. She opened the door, stepped outside and, after closing it, strode confidently towards the gates and the car outside.

Part of her hoped Ranma, or even one of the other martial artists, would vault over the wall to interrupt her. This would be an excellent time for a challenger to come knocking on the Dojo door.

No such luck. Her feet carried her inevitably towards the black sedan. Almost featureless, she could smell the exhaust from the idling motor. She paused, caught her reflection in the shaded back window, and quickly schooled her expression to one of careful neutrality. She opened the door and slipped in.

The back seat was immaculate, and empty. She closed the door after her, eyes forward. She settled onto the leather upholstery and closed the door - she could see the man in the front, though his eyes were hidden by dark sunglasses despite the late hour. He was wearing a simple black business suit. He was neither large nor imposing, but there was something about his presence — an air of confidence and control.

"Thank you for coming so promptly, Ms. Tendo." He said. He put the car into drive and pulled away from the curb. "I'm just going to drive down the road to the corner store if you don't mind. It looks suspicious if a young woman gets into and then out of a car without it going anywhere."

"Of course." Nabiki sat back and crossed her legs, adopting a casual nonchalance she didn't feel. "I don't suppose I could convince you to give me a ride to the bank as well?"

He chuckled. "This won't take that long. I'm sure you're aware of who Himura Tanaka is. Or rather, who her grandfather is, yes?"

Nabiki raised an eyebrow and shrugged. "I'm afraid I don't know much about Ms. Tanaka, actually. We hardly interact at school. Perhaps you could educate me?" She cocked her head and smiled sweetly.

He chuckled dryly. "If that were the case, you wouldn't be in this car. But all right. Nobu Tanaka is a very powerful man. While his granddaughter is primarily given free reign to manage her own affairs, he has taken a notice of your… conflict with her."

Nabiki narrowed her eyes. "I presume this is a warning, then? Seeing as there would be very little point in us having this conversation if he were intervening already?"

"No. This isn't an intimidation ploy, Ms. Tendo. Quite the opposite. Though, it would benefit you to be entirely aware of the situation you're in." He pulled the car into the parking lot, turning into a stall and stopping the car. "Himura has been known to… 'misappropriate' assets that shouldn't be used for personal situations. That's been her prerogative as Mr. Tanaka's heir apparent, but it's been a matter of concern. She was attempting to do so to deal with your challenge to her earlier today, before her grandfather intervened."
"You move quickly." Nabiki noted. "Though I am confused as to why Mr. Tanaka would intervene on my behalf against his granddaughter."

"We have been monitoring the situation since she first took an interest in your fiancé." He replied. "And... don't misunderstand. The intervention was purely to keep Tanaka Pharmaceuticals assets... as well as any other concerns Mr. Tanaka has outside of the company... from getting involved in what is obviously a personal matter. I am here to inform you that while Himura has 'connections', she will not be allowed to involve them in the dispute between the two of you."

"Himura's grandfather is cutting her off?" Nabiki asked, surprised.

"No. More he is forcing her to resolve this matter on her own recognizance, utilizing her own resources." The driver replied.

Nabiki's eyes narrowed. "That's extremely difficult to believe. Nobu Tanaka has never been one to leave family matters to another family member, much less step in on behalf of an outsider." She tapped her chin. "The Organization isn't happy, is it?"

She saw the driver's eyebrow raise in the rearview mirror. "Where did you hear that term?"

Nabiki sighed in frustration, tired of the game. "Oh please, that pseudonym is one of the Yakuza's worst kept secrets. I didn't even need to dig for that one. If you insist on pumping dread and fear into every term associated with you, it becomes a calling card as much as anything else." She crossed her arms. "Himura has abused the goodwill of her Grandfather's associates one too many times, and as she's the heir apparent, they're now demanding reassurances that she's not some spoiled princess who will compromise their operations on a whim. So, Mr. Tanaka has turned this into a test for her."

"That I'm not at liberty to say. If by some miracle Himura doesn't crush you like a bug? Then we can talk further."

He pressed a button on the dashboard, and Nabiki's door popped open of its own accord. She stared at it a moment, then at him, but he seemed to have lost interest in her. She stepped out of the car, and closed the door behind her. She watched her reflection in the dark windows as the car backed up and pulled away.

Once the car was out of sight, she leaned against a nearby lamp post and sighed heavily. Now Yakuza? Great. Just great. This was a lot less stressful when I just had to worry about someone KILLING me.

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Mrs. Hibiki covered her mouth a moment, and then when she removed her hands she was wearing the biggest smile. "Ryouga!"

"You're... you're home!" Ryouga forgot about Ranma entirely as he rushed in and hugged his
mother fiercely.

"Augh… Easy… easy Ryouta!" She laughed. "You'll crack one of my ribs yet doing that! I swear each time I see you you get stronger!" She pushed him back by the shoulders to look at him. "Oh my goodness… let me look at you! You've grown so much! You'll be taller than your father soon!" Ryouta winced visibly at that, but she didn't seem to notice.

"It's… it's been a while." Ryouta smiled weakly.

"How long has it been… three years?" Mrs. Hibiki bit her lip, looking to be on the verge of tears.

"Four…" Ryouta said, his voice choked.

"Did you get the meals I left you? Oh, I hope you didn't trip over my traps. Have you been eating well?" She released his shoulders. "I have so many pictures to show you!"

Ranma felt a lurch in her own chest. This was something she could sympathize with, and it was something she knew she was intruding on. She stepped back quietly, hoping to be able to simply slip away to leave Ryouta to his reunion with his mother and avoid any further awkward interactions.

Unfortunately for Ranma, while Ryouta's mother's sense of direction was faulty, her eyes were as sharp as ever. She looked up, spotted the redhead backing away and smiled. "Oh, I've been rude! Oh my, is this that Akari girl you've been writing and telling me about? Or is this Akane? Or… with that red hair… maybe Anna?"

"Uhh… no Mom…" Ryouta said sheepishly, rubbing the back of his head.

"Another one?" She exclaimed, though there was nothing but playfulness in her voice. "I can hardly keep track of all your girlfriends! Well, at least I know the family legacy is safe for another generation." She stepped around her son and bowed. "Welcome to our home. What's your name?"

"Best cover story is the truth, right Nabiki?" Ranma took a deep breath. "Actually, my name is Ranma Saotome. Sorry about this."

She blinked, then glanced at Ryouta. "Ranma Saotome? That rival you keep writing about so often? She's a girl?" She looked back at Ranma, and the gears turning in her head were almost visible. "Well, that certainly puts a different spin on what you wrote…" A mischievous twinkle entered her eyes. "And explains a few things too."

Ranma could see the moment; that instant in time when something is misunderstood, and the wrong idea is crystallized, and all of the wreckage it would leave in her life until it was straightened out. Sometimes those moments caught her unawares. Sometimes they were directly her own fault. But this time, for the first time, she was ready for it.

'I have a curse. Bring me a tea kettle and I'll show you.' The words were already there, rehearsed and ready. She just had to speak them. She opened her mouth…

"She was raised as a boy by her father, I only found out recently!" Ryouta blurted out.

Ranma's mouth snapped shut.

She closed her eyes, breathed in through her nose, and out through her mouth, one purifying breath. She already knew how she was going to do it, and how to make it extra painful. The only question was how to dispose of the body. Not that doing so would be difficult; it was more that there were too many wonderful, wonderful ways to desecrate Ryouta's corpse available to her.
"Oh, I've heard of such things! I'm sorry you had to go through that growing up my dear!" Mrs. Hibiki stepped forward and gave Ranma a hug that she was completely unprepared for, as she was mentally debating the pros and cons of woodchippers.

"Ack!? I… uh…" Ranma was a little off-balance. The hug wasn't the typical glomp, but simply a regular gesture of reassurance. Mrs. Hibiki released her after a moment and looked her over. "Well, I must say, for only recently having reclaimed your womanhood, you have become the very picture of femininity!"

"Thank You." Ranma said tightly, smiling weakly as her eyebrow twitched.

No, a woodchipper is FAR too quick and painless a way for him to die.

Ryouga seemed to sense the aura of death coming from the redhead, and wisely (if belatedly) kept his mouth shut.

Mrs. Hibiki was looking her over, and her smile was one of such joy and relief that Ranma wasn't quite sure what to say next. She noticed the corners of Mrs. Hibiki's eyes had that crinkle that you saw with someone who smiled a lot.

"Come in, come in! I won't have my son and his very pretty rival standing in the doorway like some unwelcome salesmen! Come in, sit down, it's been so long, I want to hear everything!" Mrs. Hibiki turned and headed off down the hall, disappearing, only to come back into view headed in another direction, this time towards the kitchen.

The lights were on, but the house was cold. "I'm sorry it's a bit chilly in here, dears." Mrs. Hibiki called as she moved about in search of the kitchen. "I only just got the power turned back on."

"Do you have any hot water?" Ranma called, hoping to quickly dispel her misconception before it went any further, even if it meant having to be a guy in a dress for a bit.

"I'm afraid the gas is off too." She called back. "Don't worry, I have an electric kettle. We don't have much dears, but I can manage some hot cocoa and cookies. Make yourselves comfortable!" Mrs. Hibiki called from the kitchen. "Ryouga? Tell your father to call the gas company to get the service back on the next time he calls—the account is in his name. It was probably that awful woman from the real estate office again."

Ryouga winced, like he had been struck (Except he never actually winced when struck anymore). "I… Okay Mom." His face fell as he replied, falling into that resigned depressive look that usually signalled an impending Shi Shi Hokodan.

"Ryouga, are you okay?" Ranma asked, peering up at his face.

"I'm fine." He growled unconvincingly.

Shirokuro greeted them as they reached the living room. Her puppies were grown and gone by this point; Ranma was a bit curious what had happened to them, but didn't feel it was a good time to ask, given how unstable Ryouga was looking.

The lost boy seemed to brighten as he saw the reliable Hibiki family pet, kneeling and hugging the dog as her tail wagged. "Hey girl. Miss me?" He got a lick across the face in response.

Ranma sat on the couch a little awkwardly. "So… your Mom seems… interesting." Ranma started tentatively. "Is your Dad the same way?"

Ryouga froze. Shirokuro whined and licked his face.
"I'd rather not talk about it, Ranma." He said finally.

"Okay, okay… I'll just drink my cocoa and be on my way then." Ranma said, pulling her knees up to her chest. The whole situation was feeling uncomfortable.

"No!" Ryouga looked up suddenly, then his eyes fell. "Look, it's… I can't explain it right now, but… Can't you stick around for the night?"

"Ryouga, come on, I'm not here to tuck you in, man." Ranma sighed in exasperation. "I bailed on a bunch of friends from school to come spring your pork butt outta the hospital. Akane's coming home tonight and it's the first chance to talk to her and Nabiki about what we're gonna do about Himura and the Principal. Besides…” She glanced in the direction of the kitchen. "Your Mom being home makes this weird. She thinks I'm your girlfriend."

"Yeah, gee, with all the times you've used disguises to pose as my girlfriend or my fiancee or something, I'm not sure how anyone could get that idea…” Ryouga muttered.

"I was going to tell her before you opened your big fat stupid mouth!" Ranma snarled. "And you are literally the only person who is ever fooled by those stupid disguises! I pretended to be your sister, which was a really stupid plan, but it worked anyway."

Ryouga smirked. "So you're stupid, and I'm trusting. I can live with that."

"And you're weirdly obsessive about your kid sister!"

"You wouldn't understand, you don't have any siblings!"

"Neither do you!"

Mrs. Hibiki walked back in, a tray with several steaming mugs on it and a photo album tucked under her arm. "I'm afraid we're out of marshmallows. I'd run to the store to get some, but… you know about our family problem I assume?"

Ranma eyed the mugs and sighed inwardly. She had missed her chance at the hot water because she'd been squabbling with Ryouga. For a moment she considered dumping the mug of hot cocoa over her head, but she liked this dress. Not that she would ever admit that out loud. "I'm pretty thoroughly acquainted with it, yes." She muttered. "I used to lead Ryouga home from school."

"Oh, that's right, Ryouga mentioned that." She said brightly. "A shame I missed you. It's so rare even two of us are at home at the same time. We tend to wander quite a bit. So, very early on, we all began taking pictures of our journeys. I've spent all day adding the pictures for my last four years into the book, and I see Ryouga has been keeping it up as well. Would you like to see?" She opened the book several pages back. Ranma could see the photographs were each marked with a date, and these were about four years old. "I guess all of this happened before you met my son. I wish I had been there for that."

"Y-yeah… a lot of stuff happened after that." Ranma said nervously. The photographs were of various landscapes, people… some looked like China, others might have been Korea. "Were you travelling with your husband?"

Ryouga winced again. He got up and settled on the couch on his mother's other side, looking a little hangdog.

"Oh, I used to. I hope I will be able to again soon." She flipped back a few more pages, and suddenly the pictures more often featured a middle aged man with sandy hair and pronounced fangs,
and a small, sullen dark haired boy who shared his father's teeth. Some of them were of all three of them. "When we would go on vacation, we would set aside a few weeks, and just pick a direction and get lost." She got a distant look in her eyes as she looked through the pictures. "We had such adventures…"

"Where is he now? I thought you'd be together?" Ranma asked, though the way Ryouga was reacting was making her nervous.

"Oh, lost as usual." She scoffed. "I'm sure he'll turn up eventually." She smiled at Ranma. "So, my son has written a little of his own adventures, but words on paper are such a poor substitute. I was hoping you could both tell me about how things have been since I was gone?"

"Well, after middle school… did Ryouga write to you at all about a place called 'Jusenkyo'?" Ranma started, then noticed Ryouga frantically shaking his head and waving his arms. Oh for the love of… "... Could you excuse us a second?" She smiled at Mrs. Hibiki and got up off the couch. "Ryouga, could you come with me a minute?"

"Uhhh, sure, I…” Ryouga started, then yelped as Ranma walked past him, grabbed him by the earlobe and dragged him bodily off the couch. He thrashed and howled as Ranma calmly dragged him along the floor, down the hallway and into the kitchen.

"What was that for!?" Ryouga demanded once Ranma finally let him up.

"I haven't decided yet." Ranma said, distracted as she started scouring the cupboards. "Now help me find that electric kettle."


Ranma whirled on him, and he reflexively took a step back at the glare she was giving him. "Because I'm not doing this, okay? I don't know what your deal is with not telling your parents about your curse, and I don't actually care, but I'm not going to pretend curses don't exist and play your girlfriend just to cover for you! I'm going to tell your Mom about Jusenkyo, I'm going to show her the curse, clear everything up up front, and just bypass all of the usual bull we go through."

"Okay, okay…” Ryouga made placating gestures, backing away a little more. "Fine, you're right. But… don't tell her I fell in at least? Mom gets really guilty whenever she finds out I got hurt when she wasn't around. Which is kind of a lot. So finding out I've got another curse on top of the family one…"

"Mhm… you have fun with that." Ranma returned to searching the cupboards. "Mrs. Hibiki?" She called out. "Where did you leave the kettle?"

"Oh! Um… I think it's out in the garage!"

Ranma paused, crouched by the sink. She slowly closed the cupboard door, straightened, and brushed her dress off stiffly. Her eyebrow was twitching the entire time.

"We… don't have a garage, do we?" Ryouga said nervously.

"No. No, you do not." Ranma replied tightly. "So… Let's go back in there, pretend that I'm a girl and have your mom get the wrong idea and start planning for the wedding. Maybe we can get her to call my mom so that she can chase me around with a katana bewailing the fact that I'm no longer manly, and in between we can surely find time to piss off everyone else so that by the end of it they all beat the crap out of me and it'll all be my fault." She laughed, but there was a hysterical edge to it.
"Maybe… we can just explain it?" Ryouga suggested weakly.

Ranma's laugh trailed off. She closed her eyes, drew in a deep, cleansing breath and exhaled. "No. You know what? I'll just own this one. But! You owe me for this, bacon-breath! I get another male suitor showing up on my doorstep, you gotta step up and defend my honor, got it?"

"What?!"

She crossed her arms and glared at him. "I'm serious! You tell them I'm taken, challenge 'em if you have to, and win. You can't just expect me to be your fake fiancee when it's convenient for you! This is a serious commitment!"

"I…" Ryouga opened his mouth, then closed it again. "... Actually? That sounds about as reasonable as any other agreement we've come up with."

Ranma nodded sharply, closing her eyes and raising a finger. "That's right! And I expect a big, fancy fake wedding!"

"Don't push it, Ranma."

"... But no more than three fake kids! I'm not a fake baby factory, you know!"

"Ranmaaaaa….

"So what is the story then?" Ranma finished, raising an eyebrow. "You know, our past, the fiancées, Jusenkyo, all of it?"

Ryouga shrugged. "I don't know… pretty much the same? We just leave out the curses?"

Ranma's eyes narrowed. "So my parents are just delusional jerks then who engaged me to a bunch of girls and are using death threats to force me to conform to some insane standard that is physically impossible for me to meet?"

"See? You being a girl doesn't even really change that!" Ryouga said brightly.

"I…" Ranma started to protest, then stopped as her brain skidded to a halt. "That's not… It's… it's not that simple!" She finally managed weakly.

Ryouga held up his hands. "Hey, I'm not arguing, they're your parents. Explain it however you want, then."

Ranma was silent a moment. "We'll… uhh… Just skim over my parents. Focus on Pops anyway, he at least deserves it."

Ryouga nodded, but he looked unconvinced.

"My Mom means well." Ranma insisted.

"I didn't say anything." Ryouga replied.

Ranma sighed. "Speaking of which… what's up with your Dad? You keep looking like you're gonna cry every time she mentions him."

Ryouga froze. He seemed to struggle internally for a few minutes, then his shoulders slumped. "My Dad… he doesn't have the family curse, because he married into the family. He was never home because he was in the hospital all the time." Ryouga's jaw tightened. "He… died last year."
"Oh…" Ranma said softly. "I'm… I'm sorry…"

"Mom… pretends that he's just out wandering." Ryouga continued. "I thought from her letters it was a joke, a way to make-believe he was still around, but… She's acting like he's really gonna call or come home any minute." He shook his head. "We… we didn't make it back in time to… to be there. You know… when it was time. I'm worried she's not dealing with it."

"How do you deal with it?" Ranma asked softly.

"I get lost." Ryouga chuckled dryly. "I break stuff. 'Ranma, prepare to die'. The usual."

"Yeah, well, what about now, when you can't do any of that?" Ranma asked, leaning against the kitchen counter.

"I do it in my head." Ryouga admitted.

"Well… try and stay present for this?" She patted his arm and lead him back into the living room.

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Mrs. Hibiki had one of those knowing smiles that told Ranma she had gotten entirely the wrong idea.

Ranma sat down next to her and sighed inwardly, steeling herself for a round of gushing about wedding plans and grandchildren and some variant of 'joining the families'.

"I do hope I haven't made things awkward?" Mrs. Hibiki asked, still smiling. "I expected my son had left out some details… I'm guessing something embarrassing happened at this 'Jusenkyo' place?"

Ranma quickly considered her options. *The best cover stories are the truth, right? So, leave out the curse, but keep the rest the same as much as possible.* "Well, Ryouga had been chasing me for who knows how long over that bread feud thing. Me'n Pops had been travelling to this old training ground in this region of China called Jusenkyo. There were a bunch of pools there, and Pops dunked me." She touched her hair. "I'd been dying my hair black the whole time Ryouga knew me, and the water washed it out. So when I chased Pops around after that, my hair was red, and I wasn't really pretending too hard to be a boy. So when we stumbled across Ryouga, all he saw was this crazy red-haired girl chasing her old man and knocking him into one of the ponds."

"Oooohhhhh…" Mrs. Hibiki said, nodding, then shot her son a smile. "Yes, I can see a moment like that being enough to do it."

"Do what?" Ranma and Ryouga said in unison.

Mrs. Hibiki chuckled. "No, nevermind me. So… Ryouga has been following you? For this 'bread feud'? I remember him writing about his rivalry, but not the cause. Is that a euphemism?"

Ranma smirked. "No. It's literally about bread. When we were in junior high together, there was always a big scuffle over getting the last of the bread. Me'n Ryouga used to square off over it. I always won, so Ryouga decided we were rivals."

"You always cheated." Ryouga growled. "And you were so insufferably smug about it. Someone needed to take you down a few pegs."

"I cheated… or maybe you just let me win?" Ranma batted her eyelashes at him.

"It was a boy's school! I thought you were a boy! I hated your GUTS!" Ryouga snarled.
"And then you let me walk you home every day." Ranma replied with a smirk, enjoying the lost boy's discomfort. If she was going to get stuck as the girl in this story, she was going to make him squirm.

"Oh really?" Mrs. Hibiki raised an eyebrow, looking at her son.

"It… nnngh! No one else would do it!" Ryouga muttered, hunching his shoulders.

"Then he challenged me to a duel to finally settle things, near the end of the school year." Ranma continued.

"Which you ran away from!" Ryouga interjected angrily.

"Which I waited for three days for him to show up." Ranma corrected. "And then Pops said it was time to break camp and made me head off with him to China."

"Oh? Why did your father decide to leave right then?" Mrs. Hibiki asked curiously.

"He…" Ranma trailed off, eyes going unfocused as a forgotten memory bubbled to the surface.

"I gotta wait for Ryouga, Pops!" The Pig-tailed boy said stubbornly. "I promised him we'd have our duel! He'll be here, I know it!"

Genma adjusted his spectacles and sighed. "I'm disappointed in you, boy. You've been entirely too friendly with this Ryouga. It's made you soft, just like with Ukyou! This isn't how I taught you!"

Ranma scowled, folding his arms. "You told me I gotta uphold honor as a true martial artist…"

"You don't do that by coddling your opponent's weaknesses boy!" Genma took two strides forward and cuffed Ranma sharply across the head, knocking him to the ground. He loomed over the boy, hands on his hips. "Look at you! Mewling after Ryouga like some lovestruck GIRL! Is that what I raised? A girl!?"

"N-no! I just…" Ranma rubbed his cheek, choking back the tears. Tears just made it worse. "He's my friend, and…"

"A real man doesn't need friends!" Genma roared. "A real man only needs the Art! So, which are you? Am I leaving today with a man? Or am I leaving behind a little girl? Ryouga or the Art boy, choose now!"

Rain was starting to fall. Ranma shuddered, feeling the droplets on his head. He was thankful for the rain, it meant his father was less likely to notice his tears. "The Art…"

"Then GET UP and help me pack!" Genma turned his back on him. "And if you so much as mention that Ryouga boy ever again, I will drop you in another pit of cats." He took a deep breath, then sighed and seemed to relax. His voice took on a gentler note. "Forget him, Ranma. Trust me, it's for your own good." He walked away, back to their little campsite to resume packing up.

"... He… Didn't like me hanging around Ryouga…" Ranma managed to finish. She cleared her throat, feeling a bit shaken. Why didn't I remember that before? "You… you know how it is." She laughed weakly. "He thought Ryouga was a bad influence. We moved a lot so I wouldn't get distracted from the Art by friends and stuff…" She fidgeted a bit, studying her hands.

"I'm sorry to hear that, sweetheart." Mrs. Hibiki said gently. She leaned a little closer, but didn't touch the red haired girl. "Are… you still living with your parents?"
"Kinda…” Ranma replied. "I mean, me and Pops landed at the Tendo Dojo a couple of years back, and I've been staying with the Tendos. Pops moved home with Mom after… well, it was complicated, but Pops had made this stupid promise to make me a 'Man amongst men' to her so she'd let him drag me all around Asia…"

"Your mother approved of this?" Mrs. Hibiki asked softly. Her voice was carefully neutral. "How do they feel now, about… Well…” She motioned towards Ranma.

Ranma winced. "She… she sorta tolerates it." Ranma said weakly. "She's been a lot cooler about it than I expected, but she gets upset if I do anything too girly." She plucked at her dress. "She'd freak if she saw me like this. Ummm…” She glanced sideways at the woman. "... Could… could you maybe not tell her, if you ever happen to meet her?"

Mrs. Hibiki nodded. "I promise." She gently took Ranma's hand. "For the record, though… I think you're very brave. To have accepted and even embraced this part of yourself despite your parent's disapproval."

Ranma blinked owlishly, then blushed and looked at the ground. "I... accepted… maybe. I dunno about embraced…"

Mrs. Hibiki nodded and patted her hand. "I understand. When you travel as much as I have, you see all sorts. Believe it or not you're not the first person I've met in this situation. I have seen families place all manner of unreasonable demands on their children." She sighed. "Perhaps that's why my Ryouga chased you halfway around the continent, hmm?" She turned and smiled at her son. "He knew."

"Knew? Knew what?" Ryouga repeated nervously. He glanced from the uncharacteristically subdued Ranma to his own mother.

Mrs. Hibiki clucked her tongue and patted his leg. "Ryouga… whenever you were bullied in the past, or faced opposition or conflict, if you couldn't win out right away you would just leave. You would turn around, shrug, and pretend you didn't care. Ever since you were a toddler." She chuckled. "Your father and I were always frantically chasing after you, lest you get lost in the crowd, like that time at the fair when you came across that carnival game you couldn't win."

"I hit the bottles squarely, and they didn't fall. It was rigged." Ryouga said, remembering. "The guy running the booth made fun of me."

"And you turned, waved and walked away." She replied, smiling fondly. "You never had time for that sort. Which is why it's so remarkable you were so determined to catch up to Ranma, isn't it?"

Ryouga squirmed. "Mom… I thought he was a guy. Really! It was an honor thing! It's not like that!"

"Of course not, sweetie." She tousled his hair. "Now, would you be a dear and go and get us some napkins from the kitchen? I'm afraid I forgot them."

"Uh… sure…” Ryouga stood and made a hasty retreat, relieved to have an escape from the awkward conversation.

Mrs. Hibiki watched him go, then sighed. "He's such a good boy. I wish I could have been there for him more often." She took a deep breath, folding her hands on her lap. "Now… there is something I need to discuss with you, Ms. Saotome, concerning my son."

"I… we're just friends!" Ranma waved frantically. "He's in love with Akari… and maybe Akane…”
"And there was that Anna girl." Mrs. Hibiki supplied helpfully.

Ranma scowled. ". . . Yeah, gonna need to ask him about that. He never mentioned her when he was mooning over Akane or asking me to help him get back to Akari's farm." She shook herself, realizing that her annoyance could be misconstrued as jealousy. "Not that I care! It's just that he's always hanging around, and half the time I gotta help him out."

Mrs. Hibiki just gave her that same exasperating smile. "He's always showing up wherever you happen to be, isn't he?"

"Yeah!" Ranma nodded, oblivious. "I mean, I'll be in the middle of nowhere and then suddenly he'll fall out of a tree, or pop out of the ground or something."

"Rather impressive for someone with no sense of direction, isn't it?" Mrs. Hibiki asked. She leaned over and whispered conspiratorially in Ranma's ear. "It's almost like you're linked, isn't it?"

"I . . . buhhhhhhhhhh..." Ranma's eyes widened. She backed away to the far side of the couch, frantically waving her hands. "No! Look, it's not like that!"

Mrs. Hibiki giggled. "I know, it's all right, Ranma." She leaned over and patted her hand. "Given your background? I imagine you need a friend far more than a confusing romance. Though I can see how awkward my son is around you. I suspect he's noticed you're no longer that young man he made friends with in middle school." She winked. "But . . . that's not the point. I'm not talking about a romantic link . . . though in many cases in our family it becomes one." She sat up straight, smoothing her skirt. "You know about our family curse. It's been with our bloodline for a very long time. Family legends say an ancestor of ours was cursed by an evil youkai for thwarting his attempts to steal a magical gem. We've made many attempts to cure this curse, to no avail, but we've learned a little more with each generation. We know it's some form of corruption of our ki . . . or vital essence. You practise martial arts, that makes sense to you, yes?" She glanced at Ranma to ensure that the girl was following her words, and nodded in satisfaction. "Well, this is what leads to the . . . distortion, is the best word I have for it. But it also means the curse is affected by emotion; changed by it. When a Hibiki forms a strong emotional attachment to someone or something—love, hate, obligation, it doesn't matter as long as it is strong—a link is formed. An 'anchor' that tethers us to it. Something that draws us back to it over and over."

Ranma blanched. "You . . . you think Ryouga..."

"I know he has." She said, and smiled. "Perhaps it was truly as a rival. Or perhaps he sensed there was more to you. I don't know for sure. But it is good you are at least friends." She fixed Ranma with an imploring gaze. "I want to make sure you understand the import of this. Even if Ryouga isn't willing to accept it, and I sense he is not. You are forever going to be a central part of his life." She put a hand on Ranma's shoulder. "That's a burden, I know, especially if the two of you have chosen separate lives." She smiled wistfully. "It would be easier . . . and certainly poetic . . . if you two had chosen each other. But from his letters, my son's eye still roams." She squeezed Ranma's shoulder gently. "I hope that is not an additional burden for you? My Ryouga is a bit of a casanova, isn't he?"

Ranma choked a little, covering a smirk with her hand. "No. . . No, though I'd really be happier if he'd pick one."

"I deeply apologize for my son's indecisiveness." She shook her head. "But . . . I hope that you can forgive him? And . . . continue to be a friend? You are the only tether he has to a normal life. He has
no choice but to depend on you, though his pride won't allow him to thank you for it."

Ranma pondered that. *I always figured Ryouga was JUST after Akane… So even after all this, it's still that stupid bread feud? And that's just how it's gotta be?* She shook her head. "I mean… Yeah, I'll help him if he needs it, but… We met a doctor. A neurosurgeon. He wants to run some tests on Ryouga. Has anyone ever done an MRI or whatever it's called on you?"

Mrs. Hibiki cocked her head. "No. I sought help from more spiritual sources. Chiropractors specializing in chi flows, vision quests in North America, Witches' Covens in Europe, ancient remedies from China… They knew there was a problem, but could never isolate or correct it." She beamed. "Maybe you will be the one to help our family find a cure at last? Modern medicine has… has come…" She closed her eyes.

Ranma had been considering how to broach the topic of her husband and finally spoke up. "Mrs. Hibiki… your husband…"

"He is my Anchor." She said softly. "And… as long as I can keep the hope alive that I will see him home again, I can find my way." She said sadly. "It… gets harder every day. When a Hibiki loses their Anchor…" She trailed off and took a deep breath. "I am sure I will see my husband soon." She smiled. "I know he would… will approve of you. For now, at least, I can still be here sometimes… to make sure my son has a home to return to when he needs it."

Ranma felt a sick knot in the pit of her stomach. *What happens when you can't ever find your way home?* "I'll look after Ryouga. Someone has to, right?"

Mrs. Hibiki smiled. "Right. Now… could you go find him? I expect he's gotten lost in the garage."

"You… don't have a garage, Mrs. Hibiki."

"We don't? Well… Then I wonder where my kettle is?"

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Ranma eventually found Ryouga wandering around upstairs, in the dark, holding an electric teakettle.

"Oh, it's you." Ryouga said gruffly as she flicked the lightswitch. He held up the teakettle. "If, uh… you wanted to explain the curse thing to my Mom…"

"Yeah no, I think that ship has sailed." Ranma replied curtly. "I have to give you credit, P-chan, that was way more awkward and uncomfortable than I was prepared for, and this week has been nothing but." She folded her arms and leaned against the wall. "So… When were you gonna tell me about this 'Anchor' stuff?"

Ryouga scowled. "That's none of your business."

She raised an eyebrow. "Your Mom thinks it is."

Ryouga immediately blushed and clenched a fist. "Listen you… Akane is my Anchor, okay? That's why I can always find her!"

"Except she's usually with me, and she wasn't there when you tracked me all the way to and from China." Ranma replied. "Look, your Mom explained it. You were pissed at me, so that made an emotional link. Why can't you just be honest about it?"
Ryouga walked up to her and stared her down, glaring coldly. "I grew up on stories about how my Mom met my Dad. How strong their connection was. All I ever wanted was to have a connection to someone like that, someone who I loved who I could always find, and who loved and cherished me back. And you screwed that up. Just like you've screwed up everything in my life."

"Hey, I didn't make the link, Pork-butt!" Ranma protested, poking him in the chest. "Why were you so mad at me anyway? I thought we were friends?"

"We were never friends!" Ryouga growled. "A friend would have waited for me!"

"I waited three days!"

"You knew I was coming! You should have waited as long as it took!" Ryouga snapped back. A flicker of old hurt passed through his eyes. "You were the first person I found that I thought would understand. Do you know what it's like to always be too late? To always be left behind and for it to always be your fault, but not be able to do anything about it? I thought you… You know what? Nevermind." He turned away. "Look, you did your job. I'm home. Thank you. Go back to Nabiki or whoever." He started to walk away.

"He would have left me."

Ryouga paused, turning and looking back at the redhead.

"Pops, I mean…" She said, looking away. "You're right, I knew you were coming. That's why I waited three days. I wanted to wait more." She looked up, her eyes hardening. "But you know what? I couldn't. Because sometimes it ain't about you, Ryouga. We were never friends? Maybe you were right. Because a friend would have understood that." She brushed past him, heading for the stairs. "I'm headed home. See you around, P-chan."

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It was later than Ranma had hoped as she trudged home, the street lights flickering on as the sunset faded to dusk.

Very clearly past dinnertime.

Ranma's stomach growled in protest. She hadn't had as much as she would have liked from the barbecue. She hoped Kasumi had saved her something, but given her luck lately…

She reached the front door of the dojo and slid it open. "I'm home…" She called, kicking off her shoes.

Kasumi popped her head out from the kitchen and smiled. "Ranma! Welcome home!"

"I missed dinner, didn't I?" Ranma said sheepishly, hoping against hope that there was something left.

Kasumi beamed. "Yes, but Nabiki warned me. I saved some for you. Give me a moment to warm it up, and I'll bring it out to you."

Ranma sighed in relief. "Thanks Kasumi! You're the best!" She hurried to the living room. She really wanted to wash her face and take a very hot bath, but that could wait if there was food in it. She knelt at the table, unconsciously smoothing her dress.

Kasumi came out carrying a tray laden with food, setting it down in front of Ranma and settling
across from her, pouring them each a cup of tea. "So how is Ryousa?"

"Stupid." Ranma muttered, digging into her food in a most unladylike manner, wolfing it down like someone was going to take it away… which with her father was a very real danger. "But he got to see his Mom today, and maybe we've got a start on fixing his directional problems."

"That's wonderful!" Kasumi beamed. "Ranma, I'm proud of you! I know you and Ryousa have your differences… It brings me joy to see you rising above them like this. To go to such lengths for him, you are a true friend."

Ranma paused her eating. "I… well, I dunno if we're 'friends' yet." She muttered. "He's still an ungrateful jerk. But… he's got a lot going on, so I guess I can understand." She sighed. "But Nabiki said it's really important if I wanna get my life straightened out that I gotta make peace where I can."

"I'm sure he'll come around." Kasumi said. "I do like what you've done with your hair, by the way. It looks good down."

"Oh, this?" Ranma self consciously touched her own unbound locks. "Well… I hadda make it look good for the doctors and stuff at the hospital."

"I noticed Nabiki bought you some new clothes for your male side too. It's good seeing you dress up a little, either way." She smiled. "It's good seeing you out with your friends, too."

"It's… a lot of girl side stuff going on lately." Ranma deflated a little. "Mom wouldn't approve, I know."

Kasumi's expression darkened. "Ranma…" She reached across the table and took her hand. "It doesn't matter what form you're in. There's no standard your friends or loved ones should have to meet, aside from that they make you happy. Everything has been rivals and challenges and fiancees with you for so long… I'm just glad to see you forging real bonds with people."

"Even if it's not 'manly'?" Ranma asked.

Kasumi winced, closing her eyes. "I… understand your Mother's position. But I don't agree with it." She opened her eyes and smiled again, her usual cheerful, reassuring smile. "Well, what she doesn't know won't hurt her, right? I won't say anything."

Ranma didn't look reassured. "I wish… it wasn't so hard to be what she wants me to be." She said softly. "I wonder what's wrong with me sometimes. I'm such an imposter. Maybe that's why it's so easy for me to put on a dress and play the girl. It's not any more fake than the 'real' me."

"Ranma…" Kasumi looked shocked.

Ranma put her chopsticks down. She laughed dryly. "Heh. Listen to me. What am I even talking about? Been spending too much time as a girl. Is the furo free?"

"I… of course." Kasumi replied.

Ranma stood and bowed slightly. "Thank you for the meal, Kasumi. It was delicious." She walked off towards the furo without another word.

Kasumi watched her leave the room, then looked back down at the unfinished plate of food. Oh Ranma...
Ranma sighed in relief as she dumped the tub of hot water over herself, the change kicking in.

It didn't bring him the relief he had been seeking, however. This odd, gnawing sense of instability was still growing in his gut. He sighed, put the washtub down and swiped his hand across the mirror to clear away the steam. *I thought I was off-balance from spending too much time as a girl...* Looking into his own eyes, he didn't see the confident assurance staring back at him that he'd been hoping for.

His mind drifted back over the memory that had bubbled to the surface during the chat with Mrs. Hibiki. Ranma's childhood was mostly a blur; days of training mixed with random hijinks. But he couldn't even name half of the places they had been or people they had met. Sometimes, when needed, a memory would float out from the fog, but most of his past was a comfortable, numb blur. He had never really questioned it, nor wondered what else might be there in the fog.

*Pops called me a girl even then.* He thought, lathering up the washcloth and scrubbing himself brusquely, like he was hoping to cleanse himself of the uncertain feeling. *Before the curse, before all the nonsense with the fiancées... how long has he been calling me that?*

"*No Daddy! Please don't put me back down there!*"

"*Quiet boy! This is for your own good! Stop crying like a little girl!*"

Ranma shuddered, squeezing his eyes shut and trying to blot out the mental image before he remembered too much about the Neko-ken training. *I guess... it was kinda his go-to when I wasn't behaving, huh?*

He rinsed himself off with another bucket of hot water and stood up, stepped into the furo, and sank down into the bath with a sigh. He took the washcloth and folded it, laid it over his eyes as he leaned back against the side of the tub. *Glad he's not here right now. Really don't think I could deal with his crap today.*

He was so lost in his thoughts that he heard nothing until the door slid open. He yelped and yanked the cloth from his head down to cover his lap.

*I forgot to put the sign up!*

His eyes immediately locked with those of the dark haired girl just stepping into the room, a small towel the only thing that preserved some semblance of modesty. He could see the rapid play of emotions through her eyes, from shock to embarrassment to rage.

His eyes snapped shut. He didn't even bother with his usual panicked denials. He *had* seen damn near everything, after all. "Sorry...!" He managed, waiting for the hammerfall.

Instead of a hammer, though, he heard the door slide closed again. He took a short breath. *Did... did I dodge a bullet there?*

Then he heard the sound of someone settling into the water next to him.

*Nopе! Gun to my head!* He froze, not sure exactly what was going on, but expecting an attack any moment. "*Kane?*" He squeaked nervously.

"I'm not going to hit you, Ranma." Akane said softly.

He was silent a moment, trying to figure out exactly what was going on. "What... what are you doing?" He asked, trying to keep his tone neutral to avoid triggering a mallet-induced death.

"Something that really *really* scares me." Akane replied in a small, soft voice.
Akane's quiet, almost timid tone overrode Ranma's fear for a moment, self-preservation instinct warring with the overwhelming urge to protect her. As usual, the latter won. He sat back in the furo carefully, putting a hand over his eyes. Not that that helped much; He could see her quite clearly in his mind's eye, sense her presence next to him, feel how she shifted the water, the way she affected the temperature of the water. He swallowed and licked his dry lips to moisten them. "Then… why are you doing it?" He asked.

"Because… What I've done… what I've always done when something scared me… is lash out at it. Attack it." She said. "And… when you came… you scared me. And you kept scaring me… You were too close, too… too real. You were fearless, and you could soar. Everyone seemed to want you and you made me feel so small." He felt her shift, and he could picture her drawing her legs up to her chest and hugging them. "And so I attacked you. Even though… even though the thing that scared me most was… was how much I…" Her voice hitched in her throat.

Ranma spread his fingers and peeked at her. Her dark hair was covering her face, making it hard to read her expression.

"... How much I wanted you to see me." She finished finally. "And so I pushed you away, and pushed and pushed, but you kept coming back… like… like there was something about me… and that scared me even more, so I pushed harder… and then I finally threw you away." She sniffed and brushed her hair away from her face. "And still you scare me, because that just made it worse. And now… even when I have no right, I… I just want you to see me." She turned her head and looked at him. Her eyes were misty, and her cheeks wet.

Ranma slowly moved his hand away. His self preservation instinct packed up its things and fled for someone who was less of a lost cause. "All right." He said finally. "I'm looking."

Akane laughed softly and shook her head. "That's not what I meant." She blushed as her eyes met his.

He clapped his hand quickly back over his eyes. "Then, I don't…"

She reached up, and gently pulled his hand away, shifting dangerously close. He could feel her body heat despite the warmth of the water. "I want you to see me. Not the uncute tomboy. Not the violent gorilla. Me. And I'm afraid… that when you do you won't like it…"

"I... Are you kidding?" Ranma said, shivering a bit. "I can always see you, 'Kane. Always. Even with my eyes closed, or when you're not here. I always could." His fingers tentatively curled around hers. "I… I know it didn't seem that way. When someone tells you something over and over, you believe it… and I've been saying lots of things about you that aren't true… and I know now that you probably believed that's what I saw, but… but… You scared me too." He took a breath. "'Cuz all of a sudden it wasn't just me when I got in a fight, or jumped off a roof, or was falling towards a magic pool. You were there too. And my life wasn't just today anymore. Now there was a future, and a home, and consequences for the stuff I did. And… And when you almost died at Jusendo…" He closed his eyes. "When you pushed me again after the wedding, I was relieved. Because… because I thought I could stop being scared."

"Did it work?" she asked softly.

He was conscious she had edged closer still. "No." he admitted.

He knew this was the time to make a dumb excuse, or say something stupid, or even just look away, but her eyes had him now. Dark, full of deep browns, but hints of green and hazel. He wondered why he was only noticing these details about them now.
Because she's close. Part of his mind supplied, a half second too late as her lips touched his.

Suddenly two years of tension, of uncertainty, of fear and longing and regret, all snapped like an overstretched rubber band. His arms were around her, pulling her to him, and hers were around him, and the kiss at once became passionate with an almost desperate intensity. One hand tangled in her hair, his other roaming her back, and everything that they had been holding back was happening all at once…

"Kasumi, did you wash my brown gi?" Soun's voice called as he rummaged around in the laundry room nearby.

"They're ALL brown, father." Kasumi's voice replied.

"Well… this one is more taupe, I guess..." His voice moved away as he continued his search elsewhere.

The two teens remained frozen for several minutes after Soun's voice faded, watching the door to the bath nervously. They strained to listen for a few more moments, then certain the danger had passed, they relaxed.

And became re-acquainted with exactly how entangled they were with each other.

Their eyes locked again. The urge to fling themselves apart warred with the urge to continue what they were doing, and for once, equilibrium was achieved.

Akane closed her eyes slowly and dropped her head to his chest. "Not yet… Not yet… Have to talk to d'Artagnan first…"

"What?" Ranma replied, confused.

Akane seemed to ignore him. "I'm sorry Ranma… that was too fast, wasn't it?" She smiled at him again.

Ranma gulped. He had been… and remained… inches away from losing his virginity. "A little…" He croaked.

"I love you." She said softly. "I want to do this with you so much. But I know it has to be the right time. I know you've got to think of my sister, and Ukyou and Shampoo, and that we need to find a solution to all of this that we can all live with, rather than just doing something impulsive…"

I'm good with impulsive! Ranma closed his eyes and shuddered, intensely aware of her. Every curve, the softness of her skin, her scent, the feel of her hair as it tickled his chest. "I'm not sure how much more of this I can handle, Akane…"

"It'll be worth the wait, Ranma." Akane smirked. "I promise. Though I have to admit, I am rather liking that you're getting more worked up about sharing a bath with me than you did with Shampoo."

She shifted her arms to slip around his neck, her eyes half lidding.

Not helping! "It's… uhh… well…" He stammered. The tile started to crack under his fingers where he was gripping it. "It wasn't… you… you know?"

"You're making it very hard to be good, Ranma." She whispered, and planted a light kiss on his neck, near the hollow of his shoulder.

~Crack~ The tile had broken, and his fingers were digging into plaster now.
"Shampoo was right, this is much better than fighting over you." Akane purred. "I found out something interesting, but before I tell you…" She smiled at him. "Would you take me back now? Not choose me, you don't have to switch the engagement from Nabiki, but…"

Ranma opened his eyes. It's not like it made a difference at this point. "If that's what you really want, Akane. Anything… I just… I don't wanna hurt you again." He timidly moved his hand to cup her cheek.

She smiled at him, that smile that made him wonder how he ever could call her uncute, or anything other than stunning.

"Good." She said. "Because… Shampoo found a way to avoid having to give the Kiss of Death to me or Ukyou. She made us Amazons. So, since you've beaten me Ranma Saotome…" She gave him another quick kiss on the lips. "Wode Airen."

Ranma felt his tenuous grip on the situation slip. It was too much. His vision started to blur as he felt his deathgrip on the tub slacken, and his body start to slip down into the water.

"Ranma…?" Akane's voice was the last thing he heard as the darkness closed in from the edges of his vision.

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"Ranma?"

"Mnnh…" Ranma reached up, feeling a cool cloth on his forehead. He was lying on his back on the cold tile of the floor, his head pillowed on something soft. The ceiling light was in his eyes, and his vision still blurry. "... 'Kane?"

Akane's head appeared at the top of his vision, upside down and looking down at him. "Are you okay? The furo must have been too hot, you got a nosebleed and passed out.

"I wha…?" He blinked as the fog receded, and he realized the softness cushioning his head was her lap. He quickly clapped a hand over his nose as he remembered what they had been doing just before he passed out. Oh god, now I'm Ryouga?! I'd rather have just drowned...

She giggled as he covered his nose. "You're safe, I'm wearing a towel. As are you."

'Safe' is relative! He closed his eyes and tried not to mentally picture that, squeezing his nose more firmly. There was also the matter of Akane having been the one to put the towel on him. "Uhh… Thanks Akane. Sorry…"

"It's okay. It's kind of flattering." Akane gently ran her fingers gently through his hair, nails lightly tracing over his scalp. "Kinda fun, too. I see why Shampoo does it. I'm a little sorry I didn't do this sooner."

'We'd be MARRIED if you had! Ranma sighed, relaxing a little. Her fingers felt nice, at least. "I'd have said something stupid and ruined it." He murmured.

"And I'd have hit you, and said the engagement was off, and gone off to my room to cry." Akane finished. "And the next day my parents would make you apologize, even if they didn't know what you did, and then everything would go back to the way it was."

"While we slowly went nuts." Ranma finished.
"I think I did go nuts." Akane said, threading her fingers through his hair. She decided she rather liked it down and loose. "I mean, look at me. Here I am seducing my sister's fiance in the furo."

"Callin' me 'Airen' an' talking about Amazon marriage laws… Should I be worried about any other tricks you picked up from Shampoo?"

"Wo ai ni," Akane murmured, and was rewarded by another shiver from the dark haired boy. She smirked. "You like it when I do that, don't you?"

"It uh…" He resumed pinching his nose. "... Comes with certain mental imagery…"

"Hentai." She said playfully, tapping his nose with her finger. "You also have no idea. When you've recovered, ask Ukyou about Shampoo teaching her Mandarin."

"Oh yeah?" Ranma cracked an eye open and peeked up at her.

"Mmhmmm. Just be careful if she's drinking anything when you do."

"Sounds like you're getting along better with them now." He said a little muzzily. The events of the day were starting to catch up to him.

"We're trying. I think we're more alike than we thought." Akane said softly. "Ranma? Can I ask you a favor?"

"Mnnn."

"Could you spar with me tomorrow? I mean… really spar." she said.

"Uh… sure?" He cracked his eye open again. "You sure you wanna spar me, not Ukyou or Shampoo? I mean, they'd be more… uh…"

Akane huffed. "I know I'm not strong enough to really spar with you yet, Ranma. But I need someone I can go all-out against. Someone I know I won't hurt no matter how hard I try. So… I need you to take it seriously, okay? Even if I can't touch you. And I need you to be mean about it too. Call me names, taunt me. Get me mad."

Ranma closed his eye and was silent. "Akane… I don't…"

"Just trust me, Ranma." She said. "I know you don't mean any of it. Please?"

"All right." He sighed, resigned. "Anything for you, Akane."

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Nabiki considered her corkboard. She chewed on her lower lip and adjusted some of the pictures.

It was lopsided, somehow. She had added in Sedan Man, and a blank card for The Organization, but they didn't really fit in her model. Mapping the Madness was only really possible because all the factors led back to Ranma Saotome, but now?

I expected some of this as we slackened the tension between the Fiancees, but… I thought it'd be more even. She shook her head. There was something obvious happening, but she was missing it so far.

She sighed and sat back down on her bed. At least I can eliminate one Kuno as a factor for a while, and Ryouga will hopefully be a bit subdued as long as Ranma is helping him. If everything went well
with Akane and this 'Fiancee's Tea', we can hopefully start tackling Himura before her friends get any more 'interested' in me.

That was a new problem. Nabiki had always operated by flying under the radar. Being around people who could take boulders to the face and leap tall buildings in a single bound made that relatively easy. Nabiki was boring. Uninteresting. Worth noticing only when she chose, by waving some choice morsel in their faces.

Now she was being watched to see how well she handled a mob princess?

Don't let it distract you, Nabiki. It's not a relevant factor currently, and even if it IS… well, the Yakuza are a bit beyond my ability to deal with.

There was a gentle knock at her door.

"Come in." Nabiki stepped back from the corkboard and sat down on her bed, taking a quick breath and making sure her usual confident mask was in place.

The door opened, and Akane poked her head in. Nabiki noticed her hair was damp. "Hey sis."

"Hey Akane. How did the tea party go?" Nabiki folded her arms and crossed her legs, a smirk crossing her face. This should be good.

"Educational." Akane said, closing the door behind her. She took a deep breath. "Ummm… we actually might have a partial solution for the fiancee issue."

"Let me guess, you all decided to share him?" Nabiki quipped sarcastically, waiting for her little sister's blush and frantic angry denial.

"Ummm…" Akane looked at the floor, blushing as she twiddled her fingers.

Nabiki's smirk slipped. "No… seriously, Akane, what was the solution you came up with?"

Akane gave her a sheepish smile. "There's a loophole in the Amazon laws…"

Nabiki's eyes widened. She uncrossed her legs and leaned forward on the bed. "Akane…This is just about dating, right?"

"Amazon laws don't apply to dating." Akane said quietly.

Nabiki blew out a breath, leaning back and flopping spread eagled on her bed. "Little sister… Do you have any idea what you're getting into?"

Akane walked over and pulled the chair out from Nabiki's desk and sat down. "Something our parents will never agree to… well, except Cologne. Something that's taboo, and will get us called perverts and worse. Something that'll never be socially acceptable."

Nabiki sat up again and gave her sister an incredulous look. "Yes! So why on Earth…!?"

"Because who cares!?" Akane shot back. "Doing what our parents want, doing what's 'socially acceptable', doing what tradition says… None of that is working." She shook her head. "We all… we all have way too much of ourselves put into this. A year ago… maybe we could have walked away, but now?"

Nabiki sighed. "Little sister, you're seventeen…"
"You're eighteen." Akane replied. "Tell me you don't feel the same."

Nabiki paused, then looked away. "I'm not…"

"It's been a couple of weeks, Nabiki, and…" She gestured at the corkboard. "... You're going to war over Ranma. If there's a point you could walk away, it's now." She leaned in, examining her sister's face. "... Can you?"

"Why are you asking?" Nabiki asked, scowling at her. "I'm not part of…" She trailed off, her eyes widened. "... No. No, you are not serious…!"

"They want you to come to Fiancée's Tea tomorrow to talk about it." Akane said softly.

"YOU TOLD THEM!?!" Nabiki yelped. She started pulling on her hair. "Aaaaugh! Akane, are you trying to get me killed?!"

"I talked them down, Nabiki." Akane tried to placate her. "I reminded them you're what got us this far…"

"That makes me feel lots better, thanks!" Nabiki stared at her with wild eyes. "Hey Kasumi, guess what? I introduced our baby sister to the joys of polygamy! Wanna join us? Everyone can play!"

She shook her head, standing up to pace. "Not that I'll get the chance, once Cologne finds out I lied to her face, she'll wake me up in the middle of the night so I can watch her kill me in my sleep!"

"Nabiki, you're ranting." Akane crossed her arms and sat back in the chair.

"Yes I'm ranting!" Nabiki threw up her hands. "I think I'm entitled to rant! We were supposed to calm things down, not… not…"

"Solve your corkboard problem?" Akane smirked and gestured to the board behind her with her thumb.

"Don't get cute!" Nabiki growled. "Do you have any idea how hard a long-term commitment between two people is?" She sat back down on her bed heavily. "People are selfish. People want attention. People make demands of each other, and they resent when their demands are overlooked in favor of someone else's. Keeping you three from killing each other long enough to have tea together was hard enough! Trying to keep everyone happy and working together in a situation like that would take…"

"... Nabiki Tendo." Akane finished for her.

Nabiki stared at her.

"Nabiki, don't you get it? Nothing worked until you started trying to fix things!" Akane shook her head. "Ranma and I were done, Ukyou and Shampoo were resigned to give up. Ranma was miserable and probably close to just packing his bag and disappearing out into the wilderness. You added something… I don't know what, but things started to fall into place when you did."

"I don't know if I would call having the Yakuza involved 'falling into place'" Nabiki muttered. Something Akane said was starting to worry at the corners of her mind still worrying the whole problem of The Madness.

"But you've got us all facing it together." Akane replied. She smiled. "This is… scary, and… and different… and I know it means I have to change… really change, and that's hard and frustrating and forcing me to deal with things I…" She trailed off, taking a breath to gather her thoughts. "... But
all of that is so much better than… than having to say goodbye. And if this going to work, we need someone who can see the whole picture, can see how it all fits, and guide us."

Nabiki put a hand over her eyes, flopping back on her bed limply.

"Ranma needs you, Nabiki." Akane said softly. "I need you… and Shampoo and Ukyou need you, whether they know that yet or not. You're the piece that makes all this work."

"Allegedly work." Nabiki corrected her. "You're talking about sharing one guy with three other girls, Akane, one of which is your own sister. Ranma is…" She sighed. "... Ranma is special. But… is he worth that?"

"I died for him, Nabiki." Akane said softly. "I was willing to fall in a magic spring and be stuck as a guy, just so he could find his cure. Whether he was worth it was never the question. I just didn't know how… Not until I had your lead to follow." She got up and sat on the edge of the bed. "So… I guess the question is… is he worth that much to you?"

Nabiki's brow furrowed. I was ready to steal him away from all of you. Then I was willing to give him back, and I've waffled back and forth between those two positions. I was okay with a truce to give him time to decide… but… "Does Ranma know yet?"

"He knows there's some stuff with the Amazon laws. I might have… overwhelmed him a little…” Akane admitted, blushing.

Nabiki moved her hand and cracked an eye, looking her over. The damp hair suddenly made sense. "You jumped him in the furo, didn't you?"

Akane ducked her head and fidgeted, going beet red.

Nabiki sighed. *It's not like I'm not guilty of as much myself.* "Did you and he…?"

"No!" Akane said, a little too quickly. "... Almost." She admitted. "We need to work this out before… before anyone takes that step."

Nabiki let her hand fall away from her eyes entirely and stared up at the ceiling. "We're going to end up killing him if we keep doing that to him." She chuckled weakly.

"Did you…" Akane asked nervously.

"Almost." Nabiki admitted. "Spent the night in the same bed a couple of times."

"I'd say not to tell the other fiancées… but Shampoo has already done everything we've done so far." Akane crossed her arms. "She's got no business being cross that we're playing catch up."

"Is she?" Nabiki asked, turning to look at Akane. "Cross, I mean?"

"I don't think so. She was too busy flirting with Ukyou." Akane replied, smirking.

Nabiki gaped. "... No. Do you mean that…?"

"Apparently after the wedding they got drunk and… Ukyou got a crash course in Mandarin." Akane replied, quirking an eyebrow. "And Shampoo wants to schedule another lesson."

"I thought Shampoo was just being her usual culture-shock self earlier when she was talking about Ranma being entitled to 'a concubine or two'," Nabiki giggled. "I didn't know she was actively pursuing this plan! So I'm guessing Ukyou is on board with this?"
Akane nodded.

Nabiki sighed and rubbed her eyes. She didn't have any trouble with Ranma's girl side, or with public perception, but knowing Shampoo she doubted the Amazon was going to limit her attentions to just one of her co-wives. This went a little further than some playful experimentation with her boyfriend's magical gender curse! "You realize Shampoo's not going to stop with Ukyou, right? Can you deal with that, little sister?" She gave Akane a searching look.

"You mean 'Akane the Boy Hater' proving them all right?" Akane scoffed, but her eyes were down.

Nabiki pillowed her head on her hand, searching her sister's face. "That's exactly what I mean, Akane. This was never something you were okay with."

"It's… tiring being afraid all the time." Akane said softly. "It's tiring being afraid of what other people think. I always envied you and Shampoo and even Ukyou your ability to not care. And then Ranma comes along… the perfect excuse… and that was worse because I felt like it was some kind of point of honor for me. Like I had to be hyper vigilant." She sniffed softly. "I… do you know how guilty I felt, when we found that Japanese Nannichuan spring, and she ran towards it, and all I wanted to do was scream 'No, don't!'?"

"It was never a problem with dealing with Ranma's girl side, was it?" Nabiki asked softly.

Akane shook her head slowly. "I like his guy side. I'm attracted to him, even, but… That's more because it's him, not because…" She squirmed a bit in her chair. "When she first came to us, with that ridiculous Panda, in those boy's clothes that were too big for her, and she was even more of a tomboy than I was, but she was still the most gorgeous person I had ever met…" She trailed off, biting her lower lip, wringing her hands in her lap. "It's hard to be in love with an illusion."

"Not as much of an illusion as you think." Nabiki said, thinking back to her conversation with Ranma. "It's not just Boy Ranma in a girl suit. The curse does stuff to his head when he changes. Perceptions change, the whole notion of 'normal' shifts involuntarily."

Akane sighed, then nodded slowly. "I know."

Nabiki sat up. "What do you mean 'I know'? I'm the first one to ask Ranma about it."

"You could see it… in how she changed in small ways. Little mannerisms, how she moved, how she talked…" She sighed. "... How she acted around boys."

"Is that why you used to get so outraged when she would vamp Kuno or act cutsey for free treats?"

Nabiki raised an eyebrow. "Yeah, though Kuno was never really a big threat." Akane replied. "I was always worried about Ryouga, though."

Nabiki gave her sister an incredulous look. "... You were worried about competition for Ranma… from Ryouga?"

"Not always? But he was always so lonely and desperate for love, and I was worried one day Ranma might get curious and…" She blushed.

"You're kidding, right?" Nabiki shook her head. "Ranma would never… I mean, she was totally repulsed when Mikado kissed her."

"Well, that's because Mikado is repulsive." Akane snorted. "You haven't seen how risque Ranma
gets around Ryouga. And it worries me that all she has to do is put on a pair of glasses and Ryouga is completely fooled. Then there was that whole thing with the koi rod…"

"Koi rod?"

Akane waved her hands. "Forget I said anything!" She sighed. "I never seriously thought there was anything there, but... Ranma doesn't seem to really understand the effect she has on people. I didn't... I didn't want poor Ryouga to go through what I was feeling."

Nabiki considered that. "... They'd actually be a cute couple..."

"Nabiki?"

"Hey, you brought up the idea." Nabiki closed her eyes and waved her off. "At least let me appreciate the aesthetics of it."

"Don't even joke about that!" Akane huffed.

"I guess Ranma's plate is a little full in that department, huh?" Nabiki said softly, suddenly subdued. She pulled her knees up to her chest, hugging them. "There's so many ways this could go bad, little sister."

"It's better than not trying." Akane smiled weakly. "I don't think Ranma would ever be able to make a decision, knowing what it would do to the ones he didn't pick. Do you have a better idea?"

"Just because I don't doesn't mean this isn't a terrible plan."

"I'm just not sure this isn't a terrible plan." Nabiki muttered. She took a breath, holding it a moment, then blew it out, blowing her bangs up from her forehead. "Let me sleep on it. I've got a lot of stuff to think about today. I'll just add this to the queue."

"I need to know by tomorrow. They're expecting me to bring you." Akane replied.

"I'll have my answer then." Nabiki said. "But I need you to promise me something. Whichever way this goes, I need you to have my back, okay?"

Akane nodded. "Always, Nabiki."

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The door to Ranma's room slid open silently. She had long practised doing this, after all, though for more nefarious purposes than she had now.

Ranma didn't stir. That was normal. Ranma tended to be incredibly difficult to wake, though he could be quite restless. She walked over and knelt next to his futon.

He looks exhausted. Nabiki thought sadly. She gently brushed a dark lock from his eyes. Is that new? Or did I just not notice before?

"I guess we wear you out, huh Saotome?" She said softly. "Three girls clamoring for your attention, your love. Then I made it four, and started trying to run your life. And now... what, in a week? I've made it so much more complicated."

"To any other guy this would be some sort of stupid fantasy wish fulfillment... But you get it, don't you?" She continued. "How much work it would be? How hard it would be to keep it from flying apart, every single day." She smiled sadly. "I was trying to cut you loose, to be free to make your own decisions, escape this place, maybe get to be normal now and then... and I just bound you to it
She studied his face in the dim light from under his door and the starlight from the window. "You'll say 'yes', won't you, Ranma? Whether it's what you really want or not… because it'll make them… us… happy. And you'll probably even be happy with that, because it neatly solves the problem. But I keep wondering… about that boy on the beach… The one who was free of fiancées or parental obligations… who was just there for a clam bake and a weekend party. The one I fell in love with. And I can't help but wonder if I'm betraying him."

She closed her eyes, squeezing them shut, the image of his face in the moonlight bright in her mind. "I tried to rescue you… Because… because you deserve a chance… to be the person you could be without all these obligations that have been piled on you your whole life. To make the choices you'd make if it was just for you. Because…” She felt a tear run down her cheek. "Because… I wanted you to choose me. But everything I do just winds it all in tighter, and now it's got me too. And I could save myself if I just let you go… I could still have my normal life, and find another boy on the beach… and… and so I'm not going to save myself. Because there isn't another boy on the beach. Not like you. And I'm going to say 'yes' because it solves the problem. And I'm going to stay here in this mad world of yours because it's the only world that has you in it… but… I need you to forgive me… Because I couldn't save you from it."

She felt a gentle hand cup her cheek, and a thumb brush away her tear. She opened her eyes in surprise to see Ranma looking up at her, his hand stroking her cheek.

"Don't cry, Nabs…” He said softly. "Whatever it is… You 'n me can beat it. We can't always win the way we want… mebbe winning has a price, but… We can beat anything together. Just gotta find a way."

"How much…” Nabiki felt the heat rise in her cheeks.

"Most of it." He replied.

She sniffed and covered his hand with her own, closing her eyes. She smiled and leaned against it, even though more tears were running down her cheeks. "Sweet-talker…” She murmured. "Are you going to be able to say that ten years from now? Or twenty?" She opened her eyes to look at him again.

"Or fifty.” He said softly. She could see the starlight reflected in his blue eyes. "Or a hundred. Whatever it takes, Nabiki Tendo. In whatever world we end up in."

She smiled. "Can I stay?" She asked softly. "I'm not trying to sleep with you, I just… I need to know you're here tonight."

He searched her face a moment, then pulled aside the blanket. She slipped in next to him, laying her head on his shoulder. She just looked at him in the dark for a moment. She felt his arm go around her, and she cuddled closer, draping her arm across his chest.

"I wish I had your confidence."

Ranma snorted. "You?! Nabs… you're the most confident person I know!"

"That's not confidence. It's planning." She replied. "It's making sure I know everything about everybody, so that there isn't any doubt. I don't actually like risks. I avoid them whenever I can."

"That wasn't what I saw today.” Ranma countered. "That… that was the Art, pure and simple.
Anything Goes School at its best."

"I'm not a martial artist, Ranma."

"The Anything Goes School was originally created as a way to steal panties." Ranma said. "It has been adapted in I don't know how many ways, from dealing with foodies with mutant mouths to fending off dragonblooded princes. Who says this is any less valid? You said yourself you were following the philosophy of the school when you came out of nowhere and kicked Himura off her pedestal. Part of being confident is having good reason to be confident."

Nabiki opened her mouth to protest, but then closed it again and sighed. He's right. I DID invoke the Anything Goes School. "Maybe it's just I have less reason to be confident than you think."

He ran his fingers through her hair, smiling. "Look… I dunno about half the stuff you deal with. It goes over my head. I'm just barely learning the first katas, and you're a grand master. But… if it helps? I am that boy on the beach. And… I had fun pretending to be normal. Normal was a nice place to visit on vacation. But… it's not who I am. You don't need to rescue me from anything, Nabiki."

"Yes I do." Nabiki huffed. "Honestly, if it wasn't Himura, it'd be someone else taking advantage of you being too naive and too trusting, and… and too honorable for your own good! You need me to… to…" She trailed off, eyes widening. She sighed and slumped against him. "... To make my sister's point for her, apparently."

"Huh?" Ranma gave her a quizzical look.

"I'll explain it in the morning." She said softly. "But… I just wanna know… what would make you happy, Ranma? If you could have anything?"

"Anything?" He closed his eyes a moment. "Couple of years ago? I'd have said 'Warm place to sleep and three square meals'. And I got that. Coming to the Tendo Dojo was the best thing that ever happened to me. But then the answer changed, because what made other people happy became important. So… I guess… if I could find a way to make everyone happy, and get to enjoy it with them… That'd be the best answer." He chuckled. "I'm kinda learning that's not that simple, but… If I could have anything." His fingers lazily stroked her soft hair. He glanced at her, seeing her eyes had shut, her expression relaxed.

He gently kissed her forehead. "I know we'll figure it out." He closed his eyes and settled in to sleep.

Kasumi woke feeling tired, worn. The usual bright promise of morning was muddied and dull for her today as she slowly sat up, swinging her legs over the edge of her bed and rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

Kasumi had never been one to take her troubles to bed with her. Even when the pantry was empty, and the bills piled high, she had found a way to put it aside for the night, and greet each day as it came. Carrying worry was not something she did, because she always trusted things would work themselves out as long as she diligently did her best.

Lately, it had gotten harder and harder to leave her worries on her pillow.

It had been like a fun game at first, the craziness. Everyone seemed happy and was enjoying themselves, and she felt content to be on the sidelines as they had their adventures. She kept a warm bed and hot kettle waiting when they needed it, vicariously enjoying the drama without having to be
But then all of that playful conflict stopped being so playful. People started digging their heels in, and it began to show how desperate they were to get their way. Cracks started showing, lines were crossed.

And in the middle of it all was someone who never asked for any of it. Kasumi had the horrible feeling that she could have done something about it. She could have nudged things onto gentler path, or taken a more active role to guide and comfort - to mentor her sisters more effectively. Obvious things in hindsight.

It was bad even before Ranma came. She remembered that first awful day when Akane had come home after Tatewaki Kuno had declared that no one could date her unless they first defeated her in combat. Half the male population of the school had formed into what were essentially rape gangs to challenge her. Kasumi was still haunted by the dead look in Akane's eyes and the trembling way she had declared how much she hated boys…

Kasumi squeezed her eyes shut. She took a moment, took a few breaths, then opened them.

No. No more. She decided. She had waited for her father to resolve things, had accepted when he had declared it a challenge Akane needed to face on her own, had accepted it when Genma had arrived, and her father's tendency to abdicate his responsibilities had become even more pronounced as the Saotomes upended their lives. But she could no longer simply remain the dutiful daughter in the face of all of this - not with her sisters' happiness at stake.

Father wasn't like this when mother was alive. She thought as she opened her closet to select the day's clothes. She wished she better remembered how her mother and father had dealt with things; if she had been subtly nudging him out of his tendency towards apathy and complacency, or if that had arisen after her death.

She winced as she remembered the coldness in Nabiki's eyes as she ordered her from her room. I need to stop making excuses for people and leaving dealing with the problems to others. She decided. She took a deep breath. She wasn't strong or defiant like her sisters; disapproval was something that was honestly difficult for her to deal with. But… if her sisters could face down demons and princes and monsters, she could handle disappointing a family friend.

She would speak with Nodoka.

She dressed and started her daily routine. Laundry was taken from the laundry room in baskets out to the hanging lines in the backyard to take full advantage of the morning sun. There was a lot of washing, so typically she only had enough room on the lines for half of it at a time. The rest she would put up at noon. She made sure the uniforms Ranma and her friends had been wearing went up first.

She smiled, looking one over. Such a daring costume. I wish I had the nerve to wear such things. Truth be told, it was considerably less revealing than some of her own swimsuits, but if she understood correctly, it was going to be their uniform for playing as a team in front of large crowds. Kasumi had always taken comfort in anonymity, blending in and letting all of the attention fall on those who were flashier. It was… safe.

She headed back into the kitchen and put a kettle on to boil. Coffee for Father and Nabiki was first, then another kettle for the morning tea. She got out a pot and began laying out the ingredients for miso soup. Usually, the smells of breakfast were enough to get most of the family out of bed.
Sure enough, Soun was up almost as soon as she started brewing the coffee. She had his newspaper ready for him.

"Going over to the Satomes' to help them with the preparations for Nodoka's bridal interviews?" She asked as she placed the cup in front of him.

"Yes… well…" He cleared his throat nervously. "I am sure the matter is just a formality to help Ranma to dispense with residual claims."

"Father... I have been speaking with Nodoka. I don't believe this is as much of a 'mere formality' as you think. In fact, I had to plead with her to promise that she would not simply dismiss Akane's or Nabiki's claims out of hand." She wrung her hands. "Please, Father... I think you need to take this matter seriously, for Akane's and Nabiki's sakes."

"N-now Kasumi... I'm sure that Saotome would never… That the agreement between our families will…" He trembled, and then suddenly burst out crying. "Oh Kasumi! The families will never be joined now!"

Kasumi sighed. She patted his shoulder. "There there, Father. I'm sure if you made it clear how important this matter is to our family…"

"I tried, Kasumi! But I swear Nodoka is on a rampage!" He grabbed her hand in both of his. "Please, you have to promise me you'll help Akane to win this challenge! Nodoka is expecting the perfect housewife!"

Kasumi scowled. "And what about Nabiki?"

"Well..." He coughed nervously. "Nabiki's engagement was always just a placeholder until Akane came to her senses…"

Kasumi's lips pressed tightly together, and she pulled her hand from his grasp. "I'm disappointed in you, Father. You should be considering the feelings of both of your daughters equally in this." She folded her arms. "As well as the young man who has been given no say in this matter since the beginning!"

"K-Kasumi…" Soun stammered, unused to such shows of defiance from his eldest daughter. "Please, you must understand I am doing my best…"

Kasumi sighed. Her patience was deep - a well she had drawn from for many years - but she was finding even that was starting to run dry. "I will do what I can, Father. But promise me you will not be afraid to confront Nodoka if she seeks to change the terms of the agreement between our families!"

"I..." He looked like he was going to protest, but shrank back at the look she was giving him. "Yes, Kasumi."

She nodded and walked out of the room. She made it as far as the hallway before pausing to put a hand on the wall and steady herself. *I must retain my composure! The others rely on me for that. If Father cannot do this, then I will just have to find another way. Maybe… maybe coaching Nabiki and Akane will be enough?*

Speaking of which, Nabiki was usually drawn from her room, grumpy and bleary-eyed, by the smell of fresh coffee. But today there was no sign of her.

*She must have stayed up late again. She has been working so hard lately. She walked up the stairs to*
Nabiki's room, knocking lightly at the door. "Nabiki?" She gave her sister a respectful few moments to respond, then opened the door and peeked inside.

Nabiki's bed was still made and didn't appear to have been slept in. Her school uniform was still hanging, which suggested she hadn't left early. *Odd…*

Kasumi closed the door and frowned. She walked over to Akane's door. Akane was usually up later than her sister, even more-so since Ranma had entered their lives. Usually she had just enough time to get ready for school, but not always. She knocked on Akane's door in the same fashion, giving her the same pause before peeking in.

Akane's bed, by contrast, was rumpled, with the covers tossed aside in a tangle, as if Akane had been tossing and turning. But again, there was no sign of the girl, and her uniform was still hung up. She closed the door again with another frown. She had a suspicion, but… it was *beyond* unlikely.

*Still…* She walked over to the guest room. She knew better than to knock, as Ranma would never wake up for such things. Though it was a breach of her personal rules, she slid the door open a crack and peeked in.

*Oh my…* Her eyes widened. She slid the door open a bit more and stepped into the room to crouch down next to the futon.

Ranma was fast asleep. He had a small smile on his face, and looked more relaxed than she had seen him in some time. Nestled against his right side was Nabiki, with his arm around her. She could see Nabiki was wearing her regular pajamas, and so doubted any sort of seduction had gone on. And then, on Ranma's *left* side…

*Well… this was certainly NOT the solution I expected them to come to.* Kasumi thought. She considered what to do next; It was a shame they lacked any real parental guidance to draw upon. *Still…* She smiled slightly, looking at them. *I suppose if this is what they want, and it makes them happy, it's already better than any of the 'solutions' our parents have presented. Maybe I should trust them.* A rare mischievous smile crossed her lips. *But… not before teasing them a little, I think.*

She reached out and poked Ranma's forehead. "Ranma. Wake up, please." She said softly.

No one else could get Ranma to wake up as effectively as Kasumi. There was something about her gentle requests that compelled even a sleeping mind to obey. His eyes flickered open, and he turned his head slightly, blinking to try and focus. "Kasumi? Mnnn… morning already?"

"Yes, Ranma. I was hoping you could explain something to me before breakfast, though." Kasumi gave him one of her most serene smiles, and gestured towards Nabiki.

Ranma turned his head, his eyes widening as the fog of sleep fled his brain, and he recalled what had happened the night before. "Uuhhh… I can explain!"

"Mnnhmmn?" Kasumi inquired sweetly. "And… what about on your left?"

Ranma blinked, then became aware of a warmth pressed against his left side as well. He turned, and saw a bit of dark hair peeking up from under his duvet, nestled in just under his arm. *Akane?*

He looked back at Kasumi, feeling an increasing need to panic, but completely unable to without disturbing one or both girls. His memory was being entirely unhelpful about when *Akane* had arrived, or if either girl was aware the other was there. "Okay, I lied…" He admitted. "I can't explain."
"I do hope you're using protection, Ranma." Kasumi said, maintaining the sweet, oblivious smile.

"What?! Nothing happened! Well…” He glanced to his left, and then to his right. "Something happened, but not that!"

"I'd suggest you carefully consider who to wake first. I'll have an ice pack ready." She straightened. "And I would like to talk with the three of you about this soon." She opened the door and slipped quietly out of the room, closing it again behind her.

_I wonder what Auntie Saotome would think about that?_ Kasumi pondered. _It would certainly fit her definition of 'manly', wouldn't it?_

Despite her traditional leanings, Kasumi found it hard to be upset about the situation. It was… _complicated_, to say the least, but… there was a peace in Ranma's sleeping expression she had never seen before.

_If they all manage to make it downstairs without one of them going out the window, I'll assume they're serious about this._ She made her way back downstairs to continue breakfast preparations.

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Ranma swallowed nervously as Kasumi closed the door. _Well, I'm busted._ He thought. He remembered clearly when Nabiki had crawled into bed with him, but _Akane…?_

He remembered a vague impression of her face in the dark. A whispered question from her, a mumbled assent from him. _I must have been mostly asleep when she came in. But that means…_ He glanced at Akane. _She came in second then? So… she saw Nabiki here and DIDN'T murder me? And she just curled up on my other side?_

Something was definitely up. He was about ready to start looking for cursed dolls in Akane's closet.

Still, that suggested that logically Akane would be the safest to wake up first, as she was the last one in, and would be aware that Nabiki was there already. So, having confirmed that logic had failed him, he gently shook Nabiki awake.

"Mnnn?" Nabiki raised her head to look blearily at him. "... Ranma?"

"Morning Nabs." He said sheepishly.

"Nuh." She replied, closed her eyes and dropped her head back against him. "Warm now. Morning later."

"C'mon Nabs…" Ranma risked rocking her a little more forcefully, mindful of jostling the girl on his left too much. Akane was _much_ easier to rouse and…

"Ranma?" A muffled voice came from his left. Akane lifted her head, her dark hair a ruffled mess. _Welp, that's it. I'm dead._ Ranma thought with cold certainty. He smiled and laughed weakly. "Aheh… morning 'Kane…" _Better to just accept it._

He was expecting a moment of rage, a mallet to appear, and then the sensation of temporary and uncontrolled flight as he soared bodily out the window.

Instead Akane leaned in and kissed him on the lips. Nothing like the kiss she had given him in the furo, but it was affectionate, familiar and playful, if brief.
"Hi." She said softly, beaming at him.

*I should really stop being surprised by that. And start searching the house for evil totems or mind altering incense." Umm… Hi…" He said nervously.

Nabiki lifted her head again and scowled. "Seriously, little sister? You couldn't wait for me to make my decision?"

"I had a bad dream." Akane replied. "You did the same thing!"

"He's my fiance. I'm allowed!" Nabiki growled back.

Akane smirked. "Well, technically he and I are already married, so…"

"If you were in the Joketsuzoku village." Nabiki shot back.

"Which we were, if you remember." Akane declared triumphantly.

"Oh my God, all of a day and Shampoo has already corrupted you." Nabiki muttered.

Ranma looked back and forth between them. He opened his mouth to interject several times, but they kept arguing over him. Finally, he put a hand over each of their mouths. "Excuse me, but could someone enlighten me as to what is going on?"

He removed his hand from Nabiki's mouth first. She didn't look terribly pleased to have been muffled. *Whoops…*

"Akane is being a little full of herself because Shampoo let her in on a bit of Amazon legal trickery that she engineered behind all of our backs." Nabiki began.

Akane ducked away from his hand. "Shampoo gave me and Ukyou the Kiss of Sisterhood, which is an invitation to become Amazons, and Cologne confirmed us. So we're Amazons, and actually have been for almost a year."

"With all the legal rights and responsibilities associated therewith." Nabiki continued. "Including requiring them to give the Kiss of Marriage to any male outsider who defeats them in combat…"

"Which we have." Akane grinned.

Nabiki gave her a sour look. "... Which means that by Joketsuzoku law, you are married to Ukyou and Akane the same way you are to Shampoo."

"Oh." Ranma's brow furrowed. "But, how does that change anything? I mean, it just adds another layer to the problem, right? I've still gotta pick one."

His confusion deepened as Akane's smile grew wider, and even Nabiki had a bemused look on her face.

"I'm missing something…" Ranma's gaze switched from one to the other.

"Congratulations, Saotome. You impressed the Joketsuzoku so much they're willing to bend traditions a little. Specifically the part where you only get one wife." She turned over, folding her arms on his shoulder and resting her chin on it. "Probably because bending the rules nets them a couple more skilled martial artists to add to the gene pool."

"Wait…" Akane blinked at looked at her sister. "What do you mean?"
Nabiki gave her an exasperated look. "Don't you get it, little sister? Cologne isn't stupid. Her goal has been to get Ranma back home to China to start making Amazon babies. This kind of solution would be an absolute bargain for her. Why do you think none of this came up until Ranma started showing interest in actually solving the stalemate? You would be going back to China too, along with Ukyou. It's not like Amazon laws apply here, do they?"

"I… didn't think of it like that." Akane said, her smile faded. Then, a smirk started to spread, taking its place. "It's almost like we need someone like you to catch these things for us so we're not taken advantage of by all the people with a stake in the outcome of all this, huh?"

Nabiki scowled. "You don't give up, do you little sister? I'd almost suspect you of having a cunning plan, if all your cunning plans didn't consist of perpetually being on the brink of disaster."

"Okay, now I'm more confused…" Ranma said uncertainly.

Nabiki groaned, thunking her forehead against Ranma's shoulder. "Akane, Ukyou, and Shampoo have come up with the brilliant plan of you marrying all four of us."

Ranma blinked. Then he considered. "Is that what this is all about? But… that wouldn't work. I can only marry one person. Otherwise Pops woulda had a field day." He considered the horrible possibilities that suggested and shuddered. "I… I can't, right?"

"Not under Japanese law." Nabiki reassured him.

"By Amazon law you're already married to three of us." Akane countered.

"Yeah… but that's Amazon law. That don't count… right?" Ranma asked nervously.

"It does if you're in China." Nabiki replied dryly.

"It's something." Akane continued to press her point. "And… we're all willing to work with it. So… you marry Nabiki by Japanese law. That satisfies our parents, joins the schools, and fulfills the obligation of honor. Then then rest of us… Well, I'm sure there's some kind of Amazonian ceremony we can do. And then we go from there."

"Go from there." Ranma repeated. "Go from there how? How is that supposed to work?"

Nabiki smirked. "It means that when Akane or Shampoo or Ukyou… or me, I suppose, if I agree to this… jump you in the furo? We don't stop just when it starts getting interesting. It means your sleeping arrangements get very complicated, and your spare time and money are probably going to go to keeping four very demanding women happy. And it means you would likely have a lot of kids."

Ranma blanched. "Oh." He said softly. "You mean married married."

"To be fair, most of Furinkan is convinced you already have that sort of arrangement with us." Nabiki reached out and started to idly play with his pigtail. "I imagine there would probably be benefits to it beyond just the chauvinist male sexual fantasy, too. But it would basically require a stupid amount of work from everyone involved to keep it stable, not to mention managing all the egos involved."

"Which is why we need Nabiki." Akane finished proudly.

Nabiki sighed.
"And… you're… okay with this Akane?" Ranma asked nervously. "You haven't been feeling odd? Smelled any strange incense? Played with any weird dolls?"

Akane scowled. "I'm not possessed, baka!"

"It's a legitimate concern around here, Akane." Nabiki pointed out.

Akane huffed, pouting. "I thought you'd be happier I was trying a different approach."

"I am! I am!" Ranma said quickly. "It's just… I mean…" He rubbed the back of his head. "I'm kinda waiting for the other shoe to drop, y'know?"

Akane smiled. "Maybe you're just really lucky this time?" She winked.

"I don't think anybody is this lucky." Ranma admitted, glancing at each of them. It was just starting to sink in that he was in bed with two very lovely women, who weren't immediately upset by the situation.

Akane kissed his cheek. "You were, it was just usually bad luck." She sat up and stretched. "We should get up. I still want to spar with you before school." She glanced at Nabiki. "And you are coming to Fiancée's Tea, right?"

Nabiki shifted onto her back, still resting her head against Ranma's shoulder. She held up one finger. "Only if Ranma comes as well."

"Fiancée's Tea?" Ranma asked, confused again.

"I… uhh…" Akane seemed momentarily unsure. She glanced at Ranma, then nodded. "All right. Sure. Ranma's a fiancé too, right? It'll make it easier to work all this out anyway."

"Drat." Nabiki dropped her arm. "I was hoping that was a deal breaker."

"Nabiki!" Akane stomped and glared at her sister.

"I'm being ruthlessly manipulated by my little sister. You have to expect me to offer some resistance." Nabiki replied. She closed her eyes. "And now I'm exhausted. Ranma? Carry me to my room?"

"Uh… sure?" Ranma sat up and prepared to scoop her up.

Akane crossed her arms. "Don't let her take advantage of you like that, Ranma!" She stepped over Ranma and grabbed Nabiki's arm, hauling her up into a sitting position. "Come on Nabiki. We need to get you some coffee or we'll never get to school."

Nabiki rubbed her eyes. "Fine. I'm surrounded by treacherous morning people. When I conquer Japan and outlaw mornings, you'll get yours!" Despite her protests, she didn't resist as Akane led her out of the room.

000

Well, well, look at that. Kasumi noticed the three teens coming down the stairs together, remarkably sedate, and discussing something between them in a conspiratorial tone; A conversation that ended as soon as they presumed they were in earshot.

Akane and Ranma were wearing their training gi and Ranma was already in girl form. That probably meant Ranma and Akane were actually going to spar seriously; another minor miracle. They headed
out to the dojo as Nabiki continued on her path towards the mug of hot coffee Kasumi already had prepared.

"Well, good morning Nabiki," Kasumi said brightly, holding out the mug to her.

"Uh huh. Gimme." Nabiki practically snatched the mug from her and took a long sip. Kasumi was moderately worried she'd burn her tongue.

Nabiki finally came up for air and sighed in relief. "God, I needed that." She stretched, her bleary eyes rapidly regaining the alertness that was practically Nabiki's defining feature.

"Good. I know you don't need to stop by Dr. Tofu's clinic today, but I'd appreciate if you would anyway." Kasumi pressed something into Nabiki's hand.

Nabiki looked at the object. It was a foil backed plastic disc with little blisters around the edge that had once held something. Days of the week were printed along an inner circle. It took her half a second to realize what it was. "Kasumi… you want me to get you a refill on your birth control pills?"

Kasumi closed Nabiki's hand over the disk. "No. I want you to get them."

Nabiki's eyes widened and she blushed, hastily checking to make sure their father wasn't looking. "Kasumi!" She hissed.

"I'm serious, Nabiki. And Akane as well." Kasumi crossed her arms. "You're too young to get pregnant, no matter what our parents might say."

Nabiki groaned. "I… already have some." She admitted finally.

"I know. You're out."

"Nnngh!" Nabiki clapped a hand over her face. "I don't want to have this conversation. I'll go see Dr. Tofu, but promise me we can pretend this conversation never happened?"

"As long as you don't run out again." Kasumi said, a decidedly Nabiki-like smirk tugging at the corners of her mouth.

"Good." Nabiki sighed, removed her hand and took another swig of her coffee, deciding there wasn't nearly enough caffeine in her system for this.

"Do you think Ranma should get them too?"

Apparently there was not enough caffeine on the wall, either.

000

Ranma bounced on the balls of her feet, shaking out the kinks as she warmed up in the dojo. She shot a few glances at Akane as she did the same. There was a kind of art to it, to watch Akane move without looking long enough for her to notice.

"Remember to take this seriously, Ranma." Akane said, not looking at her. "Even if you don't think I can hit you. I need to be sure you won't let me hurt you no matter how hard I go at it."

"C'mon Akane…" Ranma sighed, folding her hands behind her head. "I mean, I don't mind sparring with you, but you don't need to keep acting like you're gonna beat me up. Even if you've been training with Pops…"
Akane spun surprisingly fast, twisting and pushing off with her right foot as she threw her body weight into a punch that came much faster than Ranma had expected.

Ranma's reflexes took over and she let her legs go out from under her, dropping under the strike, which nevertheless was close enough to brush past her hair. She recovered, rolling backwards smoothly onto her feet.

Normally Akane would have pressed her attack recklessly, getting more and more off-balance as she continued to punch wildly. But this time she continued forward with her momentum, pushing into the air with her left into a somersault that instead took her up and over the likely response, and blocking Ranma from leaping herself as Akane came down with her right leg in an axe kick.

Ranma dodged to the left, into another roll and bounced back to her feet. "Not bad, Akane!"

"You're supposed to be insulting me!" Akane whirled in a roundhouse kick that Ranma leaned back to avoid.

"Yeah, but…" Ranma hopped back to get some distance. "I mean, you really are a lot better than the last time I saw you!"

"I… Akane paused, blushing, then scowled and charged forward. "I asked you a simple favor!" She suddenly dropped into a sliding kick, forcing Ranma to hop back further out of the dojo proper. "Now insult me!"

Sayuri's voice passed through Ranma's mind. "I actually started to believe I DID have thunder thighs after a while. That's when I knew it was time to quit."

Ranma shook her head. "Akane… I really don't wanna do stuff like that anymore…"

Akane charged forward with a series of punches and kicks, driving Ranma back into the yard. "Arrrrgh! Why do you have to be such a jerk about this?!"

Ranma blocked the last hit. "Hey, nice combo, Akane!" She smirked playfully.

"You're making me angry!" Akane ducked in, feinting a backhand, then ducking down for a deep uppercut that Ranma backflipped away from.

Ranma landed lightly. This is kinda fun! "I like what you did with your hair yesterday, too. It was really cute!"

"Stop complimenting me!" Akane roared and started to chase the redhead, who hopped onto the wall and then onto a nearby roof as the sparring match spilled out into the neighborhood.

Soun looked up from his newspaper. "Nabiki… Did I just see Ranma and Akane fighting because Ranma was saying nice things to Akane?"

"Yes, Daddy," Nabiki replied, nursing her second cup of coffee.

"Ah." Soun sighed and folded his newspaper. "Tell Kasumi to skip setting a place for me. I'm going back to bed."

000

"Come on, Tomboy, catch me!" Ranma called as she started bouncing from rooftop to rooftop. She wanted to see how far Akane had come, to push her a little.
Given that Akane could barely get up onto a rooftop before she started training with Genma, her progress was impressive. She wasn't just following Ranma, she was darting onto alternate paths to try and get ahead and cut her off.

She actually did manage to catch up, making a swipe at Ranma. There was fury and some recklessness in her attacks, but a control and balance that she hadn't had before. She's not leaving herself as open as she used to. Pops never hesitated to take advantage of that, he musta beat that bad habit out of her. "You've gotten fast, Akane!"

"Rrrrrranma!"

Ranma giggled and darted out of reach. She spotted an empty construction site and altered her course towards it. Let's see how far Pop's speed training went.

She hopped down from the nearest roof and vaulted over the fence. She landed and spun, cocky grin on her face as Akane followed a half second behind her. "Alright, Tomboy, let's see how you handle this! Kachū Tenshin Amaguriken!"

Ranma started rapidly throwing punches. She modulated her speed, watching Akane carefully to see if she blocked and backed off, or tried to bull through.

To her surprise, Akane did neither. With frankly astonishing speed, Akane started parrying the attacks, brushing the punches to the side with her open palms and pressing until she had an opening to throw one of her own, forcing Ranma to block for once.

Ranma skidded back, eyes wide, her smile only getting wider.

Akane paused, panting hard, her stance wary as she dealt with the sudden change of Ranma attacking for once.

"Holy crap Akane! That was amazing!" Ranma gushed, dropping her guard. "How did you get so fast! It took Ryouga forever to pull something like that off!"

Akane drew back her fist, scowling. Her hand trembled, and then she laughed and dropped her arm with a sigh. "Damn it, Ranma…"

Ranma blinked. "... What?"

Akane glared at the redhead. "I needed you to be infuriating. I can't see if I can keep control of my anger if you insist on being nice!"

Ranma cocked her head and blinked again. "Why would you want to be angry?"

Akane's shoulders sagged. "Because… because I put Kuno in the hospital. I probably could have put him down with one punch, but I hit him hundreds of times. I put him through a fire door… I know I broke at least a couple of his ribs." She crossed her arms and looked away. "I needed… I needed to know that if I got really angry, that I could… control myself."

Comprehension slowly dawned in Ranma's eyes. "Oh?… Oh." She rubbed the back of her head sheepishly. "I… umm… sorry for… not being a jerk, I guess?"

Akane snickered, no longer able to hold onto any of her anger. After all, she had finally gotten Ranma to take her seriously as a martial artist. "Why were you so adamant about not insulting me, anyway?"
"Oh, uh… Well, Sayuri was telling me about how Himura would tear down the girls in the Volleyball squad who weren't her 'aces'… saying a bunch of untrue, nasty stuff to them day after day… and how after a while they would start to believe it." She hung her head guiltily. "The same kinda stuff I used to say to you all the time. And… I've just kinda been feeling like crap that you might actually believe all that stuff…"

Akane raised an eyebrow and started walking over to the redhead. "Oh? Are you saying you didn't mean any of those things? Like 'flat as a board', or 'arms like a gorilla', or 'thunder thighs'?

"Well, yeah. I mean… pretty obviously." Ranma said sheepishly, not looking at her. "I never figured you'd actually listen to any of that crap from me, since I was literally the only person saying any of it."

"What about 'uncute'?" Akane stepped forward, near enough for Ranma to look up at her and realize just how close she had gotten. "Or 'unsexy'?" She said, her voice softer as she took another step closer.

Ranma's eyes went wide. "Ummm…" She stammered. "P-pretty much the opposite?" She saw the smile spread across Akane's face, though it had a more predatory edge to it than usual. "... Yeah… definitely the opposite…"

Akane slipped her arms around Ranma's neck. It was a little awkward with Ranma being shorter now, but she adjusted quickly. "Ranma? Can… Can I confess something?"

"Sure?" Ranma said uncertainly. There had been a lot confessions lately.

Akane closed her eyes. "Ranma, I… I've been attracted to you since the day you came to the Dojo."

"Oh?" Ranma smiled. "That's… I mean, I kinda always was too. Attracted to you, I mean…"

"... Before I knew about the curse." Akane finished quietly.

"... Oh." Ranma caught on a little faster this time, eyes widening.

Akane took a deep breath. "I never liked boys much. Dad… always assumed it would be something I'd grow out of. Kuno and the other guys at school didn't help much. But… as much as I hated boys because of them… I also didn't like boys. If that makes sense? I always thought that there was something wrong with me, that it was something I should understand…"

"But… you had that crush on Doc Tofu…" Ranma countered.

Akane laughed weakly. "Yeah. A guy almost twice my age who is obsessed with my sister. What better target for my affections when I didn't really ever want anything to come of them?!" She sighed. "When you first came, I was really happy. You seemed like someone who would finally understand me. Someone who was a tomboy, who liked martial arts, who wasn't feminine or really any good at girl stuff. And then I saw you in the furo. I felt… betrayed."

"I had actually just decided to come clean when I was getting out." Ranma said, looking down herself. "I liked it when you asked me if I wanted to be friends. When you didn't get mad when I beat you. For a minute… I actually regretted being a guy." She looked up at Akane. "But… if you're not attracted to guys…"

Akane gave the redhead a half smile. "Attraction isn't a black or white thing, Ranma. I like you how you are. I've said that before. I know you're really a boy, and I don't have any qualms with being with you as a boy. I love you; the you I got to know over the past year and a half. That's why I
helped however I could when you tried to find a cure, because I knew how much it meant to you."

"So that's why you were so nice whenever I was stuck as a girl." Ranma said softly. "Why you took responsibility for me when I hit my head and thought I was one."

"I never wanted you to be stuck, Ranma." Akane said softly. "Because I knew it would hurt you."

"But part of you wondered, didn't it?" Ranma gave her a dark look. She stepped back out of her embrace and turned away.

"No!" Akane insisted. "Ranma… on Togenkyo I would have fallen into that spring with you, just so you could be cured!"

"How would that have been better?!" Ranma half turned towards her. She hugged herself tightly. "Why didn't you ever tell me? Why did you cover it by calling me a pervert or a cross-dresser, when you knew I couldn't help what I was? When it was what you wanted me to be!?!"

"Because…" Akane wrung her hands. "Because I was afraid. Because the things you made me feel scared me. Because I hated that my family forced us together just as a way to 'fix' their lesbian little sister!"

Ranma blinked at that last admission. Even Akane seemed a little surprised.

"'You hate boys, right, Akane? Well he's half girl, so that solves the problem!'" Akane scoffed. "Like it was that simple. Like that was fair to you. It was actually kind of comforting that you hated it too. Even if it was for different reasons."

Akane nudged the dirt with her foot. "And then… And then I really did start to fall for you. And it was so confusing, and frustrating, because I hated the idea of my sisters' stupid idea working, and I was afraid they were right, and at the same time I was hoping they were, and I felt guilty because I didn't know if what I was falling for was actually you… And I was so afraid if you found out how I felt you'd be repulsed… that you'd hate me… Because I wanted you as a girl…"

"I'd have given it to you, Akane."

Akane looked up in surprise at the redhead.

Ranma stood awkwardly, holding her arm. "If you had just told me… Just said… I would have given it to you." She looked up at her, her blue eyes almost pleading. "I would have been whatever you wanted me to be… if… if you had just said you wanted me…"

Akane swallowed nervously, then took a step forward and pulled the redhead into her arms, hugging her tightly.

"I want you Ranma." She said softly. "That means all of you. Boy-side, girl-side, complicated love life, crazy adventures… Everything." She loosened her grip a bit, looking into Ranma's eyes. "I just hope you can forgive me for not thinking this is a curse." She stroked her cheek gently.

Ranma closed her eyes, pressing her cheek into Akane's hand. "I can live with that." She said, smiling a little. "Let's face it, I was never gonna get rid of it anyway. Price is always too high whenever it comes up."

Akane touched her forehead to Ranma's, closing her eyes and relaxing a bit. "So… Next time we try the wedding thing, which of us is wearing the dress?"
Ranma giggled. Then she had a stray thought, of Akane wearing a magician's tuxedo, with fishnet stockings, cut close to her figure, and paused. "Ummm… Better be you, or Mom will have a fit, but… maybe for a costume party or something?"

"Well, if Nabiki is having the 'official' wedding…" Akane winked.

Ranma blushed. There was something charmingly illicit about the idea. "W-well… we can worry about it when we get to that point, I guess?"

"Right… No reason to skip ahead." Akane smiled, then leaned in and kissed the redhead gently on the lips. She took her time this time, the desperate urgency replaced with confidence now that she had confessed and been accepted. She gently explored the texture of those soft lips that she had wanted to kiss for so long, but been afraid to.

I won't be afraid of this anymore! She resolved. It might not have been the answer she had come out looking for today, but it was a start.

000

So, not a lot of action in this update. At least… not MARTIAL ARTS action.

Poor Ryouga. This whole thing with Ranma is so awkward. Well, at least his Mom hasn't enrolled him in Furinkan, requiring Ranma to come walk him to school every day (As a girl because she has to now) thereby feeding her fantasies.

Yes, that would be terrible.

It seems the Tendo girls have hashed out a working arrangement. I know Akane has made a rather dramatic about-face from some of her canonical attitudes: I'll cover that later, in flashbacks I think. She's had some off-screen stuff happen, not the least of which being put through Genma Saotome's accelerated training.

I also know some people might not agree with Kasumi being so understanding of the relationship situation, given she's very traditional. I figure tradition has more or less utterly failed at this point, and she's taken to prioritizing the happiness of her family. Unlike some.
The slap was loud, dramatic. More sound and fury than real injury, but enough to topple the girl onto her backside.

It wasn't a gesture intended to harm, really. If Himura wanted that, she had people working for her who could take care of that. No, she saw this as a loving gesture, even if the wretched failure before her didn't deserve it.

She loomed over Hana, who was holding her cheek and looking up at her in shock.

"Himura, I…" She could see the pain in Hana's eyes, that moment where it was still uncристallized. Left scorned or neglected, it could crystallize into fear, or defiance. But a skillful hand could mold it into something more useful; Devotion.

Himura folded her arms and sighed. "I am disappointed, Hana. Do you understand why?"

"B-because I failed." Hana said uncertainly, her eyes flicking to the others in the room.

She fears further reprisals. Good. She understands what CAN happen. Now to make clear what she must do to avoid it. Himura shook her head sadly. "No, Hana. It's why you failed. Because in your overconfidence, you downplayed Nabiki Tendo's abilities to me, and overplayed your ability to manage her. You attempted to take ownership of tasks which I had not delegated to you, and it resulted in disaster because I was unaware of and therefore unprepared for her counterstroke."

"I…in all the dealings we've had with the other fiancees, I never expected her to…" Hana stammered defensively.

No, that will not do, Hana. Himura glared at her, cutting off her. "Your usefulness to me is not in expecting things, Hana. It is in knowing things. Anticipation and strategy is my purpose." She put her hands on her hips. "Do you understand what your failure to understand and perform your role has cost me?"

Hana looked away. She closed her eyes and shuddered. "I… I'm sorry, Himura…"

Good. Surrender. Submission. Now I can begin working on you, Hana. "I am not angry, Hana. I am disappointed. I had expected so much more from you. You are capable of so much more." She sighed sadly. "But if you are unwilling to live up to that potential, there is little I can do to push you beyond what I have already done." She started pacing. "I had imagined I was being generous… That you had appreciated my gifts, that you enjoyed being part of my inner circle. And yet, here I find them misused and broken, my trust misplaced. Did they mean so little to you? Was my friendship… my trust so worthless to you?" She allowed a few tears to gather in her eyes.

"N-no!" Hana protested. "I… I did everything I could to…"

Himura knelt and gripped Hana's chin tightly, forcing the girl to look at her. "I think you enjoyed seeing me humiliated on stage, didn't you?"

"N-no…" Hana whimpered.

"Then why?" Himura released her and stood, pacing back and forth. "After all I have done for you, Hana, why would you betray me so?"
"I... I just thought..."

Himura whirled on her, her expression angry this time. "No, you didn't think! The money you made working for me wasn't enough for you, so you jeopardized everything... everything for a few more yen. Do you comprehend the damage you have done? This was meant to be quick! We were set to crush their hopes and make them feel powerless. Now, we will have to deal with endless defiance!"

Internally Himura was smiling as she watched the girl curl inward. The others around her were shaking their heads, clucking their tongues and glaring at the girl as if she were lesser scum... Which she was, to be perfectly honest. It had been easier than she had expected to place the blame for the previous day's humiliation at Hana's feet.

But... destroying the girl wasn't useful. She still needed Hana and her contacts - but she needed her unquestioning loyalty. So now that she was questioning her self-worth, it was time to offer her a lifeline, a chance at redemption that would ensure the girl would be on the path to finding her value only in Himura's approval.

Himura sighed dramatically, looking off to the side. "Yet... despite all of this... Despite this betrayal, I still like you, Hana. I still have hope for you." She looked at her directly. "Am I foolish? Perhaps I should just listen to what my other girls are telling me to do, hmm? Perhaps I should send you crawling back to Nabiki's tender mercies?"

The other gathered girls murmured and nodded in assent as they had been carefully groomed to do.

"No! Himura-sama! Please! Give me another chance!" Hana begged. "I'm loyal, I swear!"

Good. Himura thought, though she kept her expression one of schooled skepticism. There is only Nabiki or me, Hana - and you will learn to fear her - to see her as true evil. You will beg and grovel to stay under my protective wing, and then you will learn there is only ME. "I suppose..." She sighed heavily. "With how limited my resources are, you are fortunate Hana. As much as you have already cost me, I can't afford to give up on you yet. Not with how much I have already invested in you." She crouched in front of her. "But I need you to do better. I need you to give more. Do you understand?"

"Y-yes, Himura-sama..." Hana whimpered.

Himura smiled sadly and cupped Hana's cheek. And now, after whipping the dog, you pet her, to teach her not to bite back. "I must seem an awful harridan to you, mustn't I? I only get so angry because you frustrate me so, dear Hana. I see so much potential in you. I want such great things for you. I just wish I could make you want them as much as me."

"I... I do, Himura-sama! I do!" Hana insisted.

"Hmm." Himura sighed, shook her head and stood. "We'll see, Hana... we'll see." She turned and walked towards the door, the others following suit. Leave her awkward and uncertain. Let that awful feeling fill her a while, so that when the chance to redeem herself comes, she will fling herself at it. She stepped out of the empty classroom they had been using and began walking down the hallway, flanked by Sanae and Umeko, with Mineko and Omi just behind.

For now she had a show to take in. "So the word has gotten out, I presume?" She asked Sanae.

The statuesque girl smiled and nodded. "I believe many of the boys were quite eager now that Kuno-san is... indisposed."

"Good. I'm interested to see how they perform. I have heard that Ms. Tendo has been training. After
what happened to our dear Student Council President, well…” She shrugged. "It would be a shame if she lost control and caused further injuries. It might even be cause to reexamine her enrollment in this school, regardless of any claims of self-defense."

"Is Akane Tendo really a major concern, though?" Umeko asked. "I mean, she's not even engaged to Ranma anymore."

Himura smiled as they reached the window from which she planned to watch the morning's entertainment. The crowd was already gathering outside. "Ah, my dear, sweet Umeko. She still lives in the same house as Ranma, and she still quite obviously has feelings for her. The lack of a formal arrangement between her and Ranma only makes her that much more useful as an avenue of attack. She will be a useful wedge to drive between Ranma and Nabiki Tendo." She folded her arms and leaned on the windowsill. "But, for now, we watch. Pay attention my dears; The best way to avoid the mistakes poor Hana-chan made is to observe your prey before acting."

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"You shouldn't run along the top of the fence in a dress, Akane." Nabiki said, bemused as her sister trotted along the fence top while Ranma walked demurely on the ground.

"I'll jump down if anyone comes along." Akane replied. "I just need more of a workout. Beating Ranma's Kachū Tenshin Amaguriken has got me pumped!"

"Hey!" Ranma stopped and put her hands on her hips. "You didn't beat anything! I was going easy on you!"

"Oh?" Akane hopped down off the fence, cocky grin on her face. "Or maybe you're just not as fast as you think you are, Tomboy!"

Ranma opened her mouth, then shut it, momentarily caught off-balance by the reversal of her favorite insult. "Hey, I am way more feminine than you on your best day!"

Akane's grin widened as Ranma fell into her trap. "You know, you might be right, Ranma!" She leaned in and looked the girl over. "If it wasn't for your hair, you'd be the girliest girl ever!"

"Oh yeah?" Ranma reached back to undo her pigtail, then paused. "Wait…"

Nabiki patted her on the shoulder. "Did the Man among Men finally figure out she's being baited?"

Ranma waved her off. "Just a sec, Nabiki…" She cocked her head at Akane. "What is wrong with my hair? I mean…" She tugged at the pigtail gently. "I always thought it worked…"

Akane rubbed the back of her head. "Well… aheh… It's just that you… well, you're kinda hot with your hair down."

Ranma blushed. "Really…?"

Nabiki sighed. "Oh my god, if this is where the usual insult fests are going nowadays, just kiss already! We'll be late for school if you two keep awkwardly flirting like that."

"Nabiki!" Akane hissed, turning red and ducking her head.

"We weren't…” Ranma protested frantically.

Nabiki rolled her eyes and resumed walking.
When they got near the gates of the school, Nabiki was a little surprised to see Rin, Yuka, Sayuri and Riko standing outside the gates looking in, as if they were afraid to enter.

Yuka turned, spotted the three of them and immediately ran over to Akane. "Akane! They're back!"

"Who's back?" Akane asked.

There was some kind of rallying shout from inside the school walls, followed by a massed roar.

The others motioned them over, gesturing for them to stay low and quiet.

"The Hentai Horde is back." Sayuri said with a low growl.

"They heard Kuno is laid up, and Akane isn't engaged to Ranma anymore." Yuka added.

"Something must have got them fired up." Riko said, still peering through the gates. "I've never seen them like this! Not even at their worst!"

Rin hugged the wall, peering in nervously. "I'm still not sure I understand what's going on." She shook her head. "It's kinda scary…"

"You'd have thought after all the beatings Akane gave them that they'd give up." Ranma muttered, crossing her arms.

Akane grabbed the edge of the wall with her fingertips and lifted herself up just enough to peer over the top.

The horde was massive. Nearly every male-dominated club or team had to be present, plus a sizeable number of stragglers.

"I don't understand…" Rin said, shaking her head. "Why would they think beating up Akane would make her want to date them?"

"Because Kuno declared she would only date someone who had defeated her in combat, after he challenged her and she kicked his butt." Yuka said.

"But… All of them attacking her at once?" Rin shuddered. "That's… that's…"

"It's a rape gang." Nabiki finished bluntly.

The rest of them stared at her.

Nabiki shrugged and looked away. "I'm not going to sugar-coat it. That's what it is. And if at any point they actually did overpower my sister, you think they'd stop at just demanding she go out with them?" She scowled at the gate. "And nobody bats an eyelash because this is Nerima."

Akane dropped from the wall. As big as the horde was, it wasn't anything she hadn't handled before. And that was before her training.

She clenched a fist, looking at it. But... *I never used to really hold back with then. It was stress relief; a way to vent my frustrations. What if I really hurt them now? What if I get angry and forget my control?*

She looked up at the sound of knuckles cracking.

Ranma was grinning, rubbing her fists in anticipation. "Been *forever* since I've had a good mob
battle." She shot Akane a grin. "Whatcha say, 'Kane? Wanna show 'em a few of your new moves?"

Akane felt her worry drain away at Ranma's infectious enthusiasm. She raised her fist and nodded. "Yeah!"

"Oh, I wouldn't do that."

They turned a bit more to see an unfamiliar girl in a Furinkan uniform. She was smirking, arms crossed, but her posture and the twitching of her fingers suggested she was more nervous than she was letting on. She had dark hair, cut shoulder length and hazel eyes, her cheeks dusted with faint freckles.

"Tomoko." Sayuri said, stepping forward. "She's on the Volleyball team. One of Himura's second stringers."

"Better than being recycled from the discard pile, Sayuri!" Tomoko shot back. "If it wasn't for you grabbing onto Ranma's skirt and letting her drag you along you'd still be a nobody. Nice posturing on stage, though. I never would have taken you for an Otaku."

"I strongly suggest you get to the point before one of these two martial artists forgets why they don't hit weaklings." Nabiki interrupted, transfixed the girl with the full force of her Ice Queen glare.

Tomoko trailed off, eyes flicking to Ranma, then Akane. She chuckled weakly. "Go ahead. Hit me. You do and you're off the team. New Volleyball Team rules; No fighting on school grounds."

"I'm not on the volleyball team." Akane growled and took a step forward, causing the girl to shrink back.

"S-sure… waste your energy on me." Tomoko said with weak defiance. "I'm sure the boys will appreciate it."

Ranma put a hand on Akane's shoulder. "It's not worth it, 'Kane. Come on, let's clear out the horde and get to class."

"Didn't you hear me, Ranma Saotome?" Tomoka raised her voice as they turned away. "No fighting on school grounds. At all."

"Even if she's attacked?!" Yuka said, incredulous.

Tomoko replied only with a smirk.

"Cute." Sayuri replied, narrowing her eyes. "Shoulda expected this from Himura."

Akane covered Ranma's hand on her shoulder with her own. "It's okay, Ranma. It's nothing I haven't dealt with before. I'll clear them out so none of them get the bright idea of taking a shot at you while you can't fight back."

Ranma ground her teeth, but nodded and reluctantly removed her hand.

Nabiki stepped forward. "So… this 'No fighting' rule? It applies to the whole Volleyball team, right? Sayuri, Yuka, anyone? Even if they don't start the fight?"

Tomoko nodded. "They don't even have to fight back."

Nabiki nodded. Then she threw a punch.
By Ranma or Akane's standards, the punch was painfully amateurish. But Nabiki had grown up in a dojo, and Soun had been sure each of his daughters at least knew the basics, including how to throw an effective punch. A benefit Tomoko didn't have.

The girl yelped as the hit snapped her head back. She stumbled into the wall, striking her head against the cold concrete. She slid to the ground with a whimper, holding the back of her head. Her lip was split, and blood dripped onto her blouse.

Nabiki stood over her a moment, expression cold. "Congratulations, you're off the team." Without another word she turned and led the group to the gates.

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Akane walked forward into the courtyard. Alone.

Behind her the rest of the group was waiting at the gate, including Ranma, who was practically trembling with frustration at being unable to fight.

It's okay, Ranma. Akane thought, her eyes forward on the barely restrained throng of students gathered at the other end of the courtyard. I've fought this fight alone many times before.

Despite her previous successes, and the additional training, and managing to give even Ranma a good fight, she felt a kind of gnawing dread in her stomach. It was an uncomfortably familiar feeling now, having made itself well known to her over the last month or so. Ever since she had told Ranma goodbye.

She didn't look directly at any of the gathered horde. None of them deserved that much courtesy in her opinion. She clenched her fists, taking a breath, and summoning forth the rage that had always carried her through these trials.

"Bring it," She said simply.

She raised her eyes slightly as the horde cried out and charged towards her, almost as one. But her thoughts were elsewhere, on the source of the terrible feeling churning her gut. That feeling that she hadn't realized existed until she got used to it being gone.

The sensation of being utterly alone.

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Start of school two years ago.

"... And I say now to you, good students of Furinkan High, as we embark on this new school year…"

"Geez… Kuno Senpai sure likes to talk…" Akane said in aside to her sister.

"Well, it is the school speech competition." Nabiki replied. "It's like giving a brick of heroin to an addict."

"Nabiki! That's not very nice!" Akane admonished her. It was her first year of high school, and she wanted it to start on the right foot. That meant positivity.

"You don't know Kuno baby like I do." Nabiki muttered.

"... And none shall date the fair Akane Tendo without first honoring her warrior's spirit by defeating her in combat, lest they face the wrath of Tatewaki Kuno, the Rising Phoenix of Furinkan High!"
Akane blinked, suddenly jerked back to what Kuno was saying. She looked up at the stage, eyes wide.

He was looking right at her, beaming. "Rejoice, fair Tigress! For I have seen your warrior's spirit, and it is not meant for the likes of lesser men! Now come! At dawn tomorrow I challenge thee!" He threw his arms wide. "Let all you fools who believe yourselves worthy of this fairest of the fair prove thy worth tomorrow, in front of the school! Let this battleground be a battleground of love, and let the victor be he whose heart is pure!"

Akane gaped as the entire school turned to stare at her. "W-what…?"

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True to his word, Kuno challenged her the next day, before a rather large crowd. Despite fighting bare-handed, Akane was able to beat him, though to her annoyance she suspected he was holding back, as he went down pathetically easily. Afterwards, he announced that she had won the right to date him. She tried to argue that he wasn't making any sense by his own rules, but he refused to see the contradiction.

After that it got steadily worse. The first day, it was just the kendo club. The day after that, the other martial arts clubs joined in. Then the sports teams. She went from barely noticed to the most desirable girl in school simply because she was unattainable.

And then the whispering started. The jealous stares. The little mean-spirited pranks. Nobody would sit with her at lunch. Conversations would end as soon as she came in the room.

"She's not even that pretty!"

"I hear she uses steroids, and that she pads her bra to look 'normal'."

"She scares me. What if she snaps one day and really hurts someone?"

"It's her fault we can't even get the boys to LOOK at us!"

"She likes the attention. Look at her! She's BASKING in it!"

"I wish she'd just transfer schools already so things could go back to normal around here."

She overheard some of it. They were too cowardly to say anything to her face, with how she beat down the ever-increasing horde day by day, but it filled the halls by the end of the second week. Even her usual friends found it hard to deal with the ostracization that came from knowing Akane Tendo. Despite their protests, she found herself avoiding them, just to spare them the smear on their own reputations.

And so she was alone. And every day the horde got bigger - more frantic - more desperate. She could see the looks in their eyes, the hunger - spurred on each morning by a fresh speech from Kunou. It was now a matter of standing to best her - a matter of male pride and status.

Then they got creative. They drugged her one day. She remembered her limbs feeling like lead; her vision blurring as she fought through the haze of the drug, and nearly being overwhelmed multiple times. She felt their hands grasping, groping, clawing…

Kuno put a stop to that. Nabiki had tipped him off and, for once, his sense of honor and justice had overridden his hormones. He'd waded into the horde, swinging his bokken and sending them flying while Nabiki had pulled her out and led her away - to safety, and to Doctor Tofu, who had been a
blessed comfort and reassurance. But the very next day, she was alone once more.

Until he came.

He was infuriating - arrogant and insulting - and safe… reassuring and strong. He was so skilled as to make her look like an amateur, leaving her in despair of ever catching up to him… but she never felt powerless with him. She never felt like an object with him. And as much as she projected onto him all of her anger at the other males; those who imposed and demanded; those who grabbed and leered; whenever she had slipped and fallen he always caught her before she had fallen far.

She denied her dependence on him even as she grew more dependent on him.

It should have been settled at Jusendo. He had confessed his love… he had screamed it to the heavens, and she had heard. That should have been the start of their Happily Ever After. She still hadn't told him her Secret, but… it didn't matter anymore. She loved all of him. He was enough.

But it wasn't enough for their parents. They had to keep pushing; to have the wedding now, before the bruises had even faded. They would ransom his manhood to force it to happen, to force him to betray all the others who loved him.

No wonder it had all fallen apart after that.

How could you wake up and greet someone that you'd almost married like nothing had ever happened? How could you pretend nothing had changed? And if you couldn't, how could you move forward when it had taken all of your nerve to take the step the first time?

It made sense at the time. If he really loved her… if he really wanted her, he'd say something, do something, right?

Like killing a God for her sake somehow didn't count.

"I love you, but I don't like myself when I'm with you."

As soon as she'd said it, she'd known that she had made a mistake. That old loneliness had settled across her shoulders like a damp, cold blanket - smothering, heavy and stifling.

Instead of admitting it; instead of talking to him, she had turned to her one true master; the one she turned to when everyone else turned away from her - her pride. She'd fled, taking refuge with a comforting mother figure some she'd thought would understand. Her pride demanded that she get back at him; to prove that she was better. So while Ranma had sunk into a fugue of her making, she proudly demanded that Genma Saotome train her. When he had balked, she had gone to his wife and then probably looked insufferably smug when Nodoka had scolded him into acceding to those demands.

And just what had she demanded? 'Train me exactly as you would train Ranma.'

She'd paid for that. Ranma had been working for literally his entire life to handle Genma's training routines. And, true to his word, Genma had given her no further consideration. Up at the crack of dawn to spar - getting knocked down over and over again without even seeing what he was using to hit her - being beaten relentlessly with fists or whatever implements Genma had chosen for that session. And he mocked her brutally for her efforts - teased her - taunted her - humiliated her.

She'd known he was trying to force her to quit by adhering to the letter of their agreement - to prove her to be a 'weak girl' who couldn't handle his techniques. At first she'd thought just proving her determination would be enough to earn his respect, but that had been naive. After all, he didn't
respect Ranma and Ranma could beat him.

It was give up or get better. And so she'd ignored the aching muscles, the bruises and the welts. She'd grit her teeth and she'd let herself hate the old Panda - and used that hate and anger to fuel her - to push her to keep going and deny him any satisfaction.

All the while a small part of her mind recoiled in horror.

When her father had taught her, he was gentle - stern, but even handed. He praised success and pointed out how to correct mistakes. He'd monitored to see when she'd had enough, even when she herself had wanted to continue. he'd smiled, and laughed and made it fun.

Genma had done none of those things.

He'd punished mistakes without saying what had been done wrong, leaving his student to figure that out through trial and error. He'd ruthlessly exploited weakness, giving no allowance for injury or inability. He'd pushed her until she'd collapsed, then doused her with cold water and demanded that she continue or that she give up.

This has been Ranma's whole life, that small part of her mind said.

Slowly, through a mixture of rage, determination and raw talent, she'd started to push him back. She'd started to spot his weaknesses and she was just as ruthless in punishing them. He'd got her back in kind of course, but it was so satisfying to see those moments of pain and surprise in his eyes.

He'd stepped up the training. He'd thrown hornets' nests at her - 'speed training' he'd called it. He'd set up some home brewed facsimile of the Bakusai Tenketsu, tying her up and swinging rocks at her. That he had called 'toughness training' - though she'd certainly never learned to find the breaking point of anything. There was the pit of mud where she'd had all but one arm bound and had been expected to escape - and the cave full of razor wire that she'd had to navigate blindfolded.

With each challenge, Genma would proudly announce at what age Ranma had overcome it. Nine years old for this. Eleven for that. Seven for this.

It had become about avenging that poor young boy on his tormentor; the adult who was too big and too strong for a child to overpower, no matter how much he trained.

But not too strong for Akane.

She remembered the first day he had called a stop before she was spent. She was in rough shape - she'd gone down more than a dozen times, but she could still go on. When he told her 'You've had enough!', she knew the truth; he was afraid of looking tired - of letting her see that she was pushing him.

That just made her push harder - hit harder. Soon he wasn't able to knock her down as much. She still had strength to spare when he called a rest. She could see him starting to move stiffly, as the bruises from her blows started to catch up to him.

Slowly, she was beating him.

In those increasingly long periods where they recuperated, little was said. If she did speak, Genma would often expound for some time on why she was wrong, or how foolish she was about whatever topic she had picked, but otherwise they were quiet. When Genma would give an off hand command she found herself questioning it just to provoke conversation. She learned more by forcing him to justify his orders than he otherwise would have offered up - often vital information. Ranma's rough
and often disrespectful manner began to make more sense as she found herself adopting something similar in order to manipulate information out of the old man.

And even then she knew she wasn't getting the full treatment. The burden of expectation she could hear in Nodoka's voice and the trembling in Genma's hands whenever he talked about Ranma spoke to the desperation they had for him to fulfill some nameless need they both had.

For the first time, she understood.

And when it came time to return home and to see Ranma again, she was elated. She could fix it all now. She could do better. She knew where her mistakes were and how to guide Ranma past his. She could be what he needed.

"I love you, but I don't like myself when I'm with you."

She hadn't truly understood how cruel her own words were until they were thrown back in her face. Don't do this! She wanted to scream - to reach out to him and pull him close and tell him in perfect words that she didn't have that she understood. But all she had were the imperfect, flawed words she had always had and she saw him close himself off from her - behind the pain in his eyes that she had put there. And in his shadow, she saw someone else - someone who had seen and understood before she had - the same person she had used as a convenient scapegoat to evade her own responsibilities.

She lashed out of course. It was a reflex like gagging. But even as she stormed off she knew she had failed. She had once had so much time and she had squandered it all.

The nightmares were terrible that night - of being forced to travel with Genma - forced to join the schools by learning the Saotome side of the Art - of walking away even as the bells rang out for Ranma and Nabiki's wedding. But no matter how much she'd wanted to twist that image - of Ranma getting married to Nabiki - into some nightmarish fate from which Ranma needed to be saved… she couldn't do it.

Sparring with Genma that morning had been the perfect vent. Even if things were too messed up with Ranma for him to really understand her intent, she thoroughly enjoyed pushing the fat panda harder than she ever had before and she enjoyed the schadenfreude.

She was a little curt with Nabiki after that. How could she not be? She had come home after having the epiphany that she could finally fix her relationship with Ranma, only to find her sister had stepped in and beaten her to the punch.

She'd been shocked by what she'd seen in Nabiki's eyes.

Nabiki had long stopped trying to swindle her sisters directly. They had learned to read her poker face and navigate her schemes as a defense growing up, and even if Akane found herself ensnared, Kasumi could be counted on to unravel it. So Akane had been shocked to find the familiar mask missing - her sister's eyes unguarded and clear, full of emotions that she had never associated with Nabiki before.

Her old skepticism and pride had reared their tattered heads - old, comfortable but hollow responses. They lasted only until Nodoka's unreasonable demands on Ranma had come to light.

That was something she already knew about. The entire time with the Saotomes she had spent hours at a time talking with Nodoka about Ranma - or more precisely, listening as Nodoka told her about Ranma - the boy Akane had spent more time with in the past six months than Nodoka had in his entire life.
Nodoka's 'Ranma' wasn't a person, it was a standard that the real Ranma was expected to live up to.

That had been almost as appalling as Genma and his misogyny - the very concept that you could decide what your son was going to be as a man, down to his favorite foods, his future career and the type of girl he would fall in love with - all while he was still an infant.

Part of it was loneliness, she knew. In the more than a decade and a half without her son, not knowing what kind of man he might become, she had constructed a fantasy - a 'perfect son' that would be delivered to her and justify her having given him up all those years ago. And now she expected Ranma to fulfill that fantasy for her.

Looking at Nabiki she could see it clearly then. The old spark that she was sure had been (and probably still was) in her own eyes. Ranma Saotome had claimed another victim - one who knew better - who had every reason to resist - and who had fallen anyway.

And from the way she talked, Ranma was flourishing with her - even though they were having rough patches and challenges, and though Nabiki was resisting the truth with all her might. Nabiki had even offered to pass Ranma back to her, despite everything - not because she didn't want him, but because she honestly believed it would be better for him.

So she had gotten brave - for her, at least. A peck on the cheek; a little public display of affection. And then she had gotten profoundly upstaged. She came to the decision that half measures simply weren't going to cut it, and that she would have to choose between her pride and Ranma.

It ended up being a surprisingly easy choice, once she made it.

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Himura watched as Akane dispatched the throng of attackers with something less than conscious effort. She could see the girl was distracted. Nevertheless, the boys mobbing her fell like dominoes, barely standing a chance.

"Hmm… disappointing." Himura sighed, leaning on the windowsill. "I was hoping for more of a show."

"No one at Furinkan can even come close to her, aside from Kunou-sempai, Kuonji or Saotome," Umeko said, traces of an Osaka accent giving her words a distinctive lilt. "The only time they ever got close was when they drugged her her beforehand, and after the drubbing Kunou gave 'em I doubt they'd try it again - even with him still being in traction."

"That'd hardly be any fun either. If I was of a mind to introduce pharmaceuticals to this little conflict, I could do much better than some amateurish tranquilizer." Himura snorted. "And such things are best reserved for the appropriate time. Still…" She tapped her chin. "We will need to spice this up for Monday."

"I do hope you don't expect that of us, darling." Sanae said, nonchalantly buffing her nails with an emery board. "You know I abhor violence."

"I wouldn't dream of it, my dear Sanae." Himura smirked. "But I do think Hana's little black book might have some interesting notes."

"Oooh, are we going to have a party?" Omi perked up, giggling.

"Of a sort, my dear Omi." Himura smiled. "But… perhaps it's a bit too soon to give our dear Hana such an easy way to redeem herself. We'll leave it for the end of the day." She straightened and
brushed the dust off her sleeves. "Come, we mustn't be late for first period."

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The morning classes went almost painfully slowly. Ranma had the uncomfortable sense of having a sword hanging just over her neck.

There hadn't been a peep out of Himura since they'd humiliated her the day before and the Principal was nowhere to be seen, Work crews were still finishing with the cleanup and the bottom three feet of drywall had been removed from the walls. There were still large, industrial heaters scattered about the halls. Several classrooms were still closed for cleaning and the pipes for the sprinkler systems showed shiny new copper in places.

"I almost kinda wish something would happen…" Akane said in aside during a quiet moment.

"Yeah…" Ranma replied. "It'd at least break the tension a bit." She glanced at the empty desk nearby. "I wish Ucchan were here. Another pair of eyes to watch out for stuff would be nice."

"It's better she stay out of this until she's 100%." Akane replied. "Concussion can be serious if you aggravate them."

"I know." Ranma sighed.

The bell rang to end the class and signal the start of lunch. They gathered their things to head out to the tree that was their designated lunchtime meeting place. They barely made it into the hallway before running into a teacher - the balding, bespectacled teacher of third year history. He was carrying a mug of what looked like coffee and standing nervously just outside the door of the classroom.

"Oh hello, Mr. Nishimura." Akane said.

"Hello, Akan…" he started to say, seeming a bit relieved. But on seeing Ranma step out from behind her, he cried "Whoops!" and fumbled his mug of coffee, practically throwing it at the redhead and dousing her with the dark liquid before Ranma could even react.

Still female, Ranma blinked as cold coffee dripped from her bangs.

"Oh… eheh, guess it went cold while I was waiting here." Mr. Nishimura said, then immediately attempted to correct himself, stammering. "W-what I mean is… is I'm terribly sorry! Here, let me get you…"

A middle aged woman, the first year Economics teacher Mrs. Miyazaki, came running around the corner carrying an earthenware pot and shouting, "You know what gets out coffee stains!? HOT TEA!" She flung the teapot at Ranma, the lid popping off and the hot liquid spilling.

Ranma, of course, wasn't sticking around to verify the claim. She dodged the splash with the skill of long experience, grabbed Akane's wrist and started sprinting down the hallway towards the door. As she did, the loudspeakers crackled to life.

"Greetings students! This be yer Headmaster, ye! I be havin' the big fun announcement for you all! For today only, the faculty will be coming around to alla yer classrooms with de hot cocoa for all the good little keki and wahine!"

On cue, nearly every classroom door slid open and carts carrying dozens of styrofoam cups brimming with hot cocoa were pushed into the halls by the various teachers.
"You've gotta be kidding me…” Ranma quickly clasped both of Akane's hands, a quick glance communicating intent as they leaped over the first barrage of thrown cups of hot, brown liquid. Bracing against each other they began to run along the walls on either side of the hallway, moving up towards the ceiling as they charged for the exit.

The teachers tracked their movements, continually hurling cups of cocoa at them.

"It's nothing personal!"

"My job is on the line for this!"

"Blame the Principal, not us!"

"Yes! Taste chocolatey death!"

"Don't listen to her! She's new!"

They managed to evade, sucking and weaving, and landed just before the main doors. They stopped, pushed the doors open and turned back…

To see the Principal himself behind them at the end of the now cocoa-soaked hallway, a massive grin on his face. "Where ye goin' wahine? You be missin' de big fun! Here, I deliver to ye Hawaiian style! Aloha!" He hefted two huge coconut-themed water balloons, undoubtably filled with more hot cocoa, and flung them with unerring accuracy.

Ranma instinctively stepped in front of Akane to shield her, wincing and closing her eyes as she braced herself for the splash of hot liquid.

There was certainly a loud double splash as both balloons impacted, but she didn't feel wet. She opened her eyes, blinking and checking herself. Dry. Then the realized her vision was full or red. Or more accurately, blocked by red. A certain very familiar red umbrella.

"Ryouga…?" Akane said next to her in surprise.

Ranma turned to see the Lost Boy had thrust his upper body and left arm through the doorway, holding out his umbrella. He must have jabbed it through and opened it at the last second, blocking the splash from the balloons.

"C'mon, quickly!" he shouted, pushing the door open further to let Akane past. He then grabbed Ranma's shoulder and bodily hauled her through, snapping his umbrella shut. He slammed the doors closed behind them as more cups spattered against it. He pulled out a loop of trapper's wire, flicking it with a deft motion of his wrist, causing it to wrap and tangle around the door handles.

"That'll hold 'em for a bit," he nodded in satisfaction and turned and started running.

"This way, Ryouga! My sister and the others are waiting for us." Akane motioned for him to follow. He nodded and sprinted after her as the door rattled behind them.

Nabiki was sitting at her usual spot under the tree. Rin and Riko were with her, chatting amicably about something. They all looked up as Akane approached.

"Well, the Principal is up to his old tricks," Akane said, huffing a little. "If it wasn't for Ryouga here saving us, he would have doused us for sure!"

Nabiki regarded her a moment, then glanced over at Ryouga and raised an eyebrow. "A part of me
wonders if Ryouga's priority was you this time, sis," she said, a smirk.

"What are you talking about, Nabiki? Akane is always my priority!" Ryouga insisted defensively.

Nabiki cleared her throat. "Really, Ryouga-kun? Maybe you should recheck who you're carrying in your arms then."

Ryouga blinked and looked down.

Ranma glared up at him balefully, arms crossed. He had unconsciously shifted her into a bridal carry after yanking her through the door and run the whole way here carrying her.

He yelped as if burned and hastily dropped the redhead.

By this time, Ranma was prepared for this, and landed gracefully on her feet, robbing him of the satisfaction of dumping her unceremoniously on her butt. "Oh, thank you, Ryouga!" she said in her most sing-song, saccharine voice, sidling up to him and batting her eyelashes.

He recoiled. "Augh! Get away from me, you freak!"

Ranma would have said more, but she noticed something out of the corner of her eye. Rin was watching, rapt. Her fists were clenched, and she was trembling slightly. One could almost see the stars in her eyes. Nabiki and Riko were subtly edging away from the impending Rin-splosion.

"SENPAI'S BOYFRIEND IS SO COOL!"

There was a terrible, ghastly silence after that outburst. Not just in their little group, but conversations all around had ground to a halt. Other students having their lunches were staring at them.

"I am NOT her boyfriend!" Ryouga waved his hands in frantic denial, eyes wide with terror. He looked around nervously, seeing just how many were now watching the spectacle.

"That's right, Rin… he's not," Ranma sighed then followed up with a sly smirk. "He's my fiancé."

"Yeah! That's … wait, WHAT!?" Ryouga yelped and stared at the the redhead as if she had just sprouted wings, horns and a tail.

Ranma clasped her hands, giving him her best kawaii-eyed routine. "Don't you remember, sweetheart? The doctor at the hospital thought we were such a lovely couple! And then you took me to meet your mother! She was so happy to meet me! Especially since you have so many girls on the go. Isn't that right?"

Ryouga gave Akane a panicked glance then glared at Ranma. "That's not…! I don't…! RANMA!"

Ranma giggled girlishly. "She warned me about you - said that you were a bit of a Casanova - but then you come and sweep me off my feet at school and show me that I'm the only one! I'm so happy! I-DORF~!" Ranma's routine was cut short as Akane smacked her across the back of the head with her bookbag.

"Stop tormenting poor Ryouga like that, Ranma!" Akane growled.

"Aww c'mon Akane…" Ranma rubbed the back of her head. "Pork-butt knows I don't mean anything by…” She was cut off as her hands were suddenly and enthusiastically clasped.

Rin was staring up at her with wide, almost worshipful eyes. "Senpai, I'm so happy for you!" she gushed, her eyes shining as if she could weep with joy at any moment. "That was so romantic seeing
your fiancé carry you here! He came to your rescue, didn't he!? That's so awesome! It's like one of my romance manga! And he's so handsome, too! Where did you meet? How did he propose? Do you have a ring? Can I see it? When are you having the ceremony?!

"Ryouga, help…" Ranma whimpered softly, giving the Lost Boy an imploring look.

"Sorry, you're on your own, dear." Ryouga snickered, enjoying being on the other end of the situation for once.

However, it was enough to redirect Rin's attention and he felt a cold chill as those shining eyes latched onto him with and almost audible lock-tone. "Mr. Fiance-san… why does Ranma call you 'Pork-butt'?

Having originally decided to stay out of the whole stupid exchange, Akane's own curiosity prodded her to jump in. "Actually… I've always wondered that myself, Ranma. You have a lot of pig-themed pet names for Ryouga, I've noticed."

Ryouga opened his mouth, then closed it again when all that came out was a strangled whimper. He shot Ranma a panicked look as both girls' gazes bored into him.

Ranma saw his silent plea and rolled her eyes. I really outta let you just squirm piggy… but damn if I don't actually owe you one today… Arrgh, FINE!

"It's because Ryouga doesn't like pigs." Ranma said, mindful of the first rule of good lying; base it in truth. "Or, he doesn't mind 'em, but he hates bein' compared to 'em. Dunno why. Remember how much he used to twitch when Akari did that, Akane? Anyway, I just like yankin' his chain. When he gets all flustered he's…"

"... Cute?" Nabiki supplied helpfully, giving Ranma a playful smirk.

"... Gak…" Ranma shuddered to a stop as Rin's eyes went into full night sky sparkle while Akane gave her a look that seemed almost concerned. I was gonna say 'easier to beat when sparring'! Thank you LOADS Nabiki!

Before the awkwardness became thick enough to be suitable for use as tank armor, a familiar cry cut through the air.

"THAT BITCH SCREWED US OVER!"

"Oh thank god…" Ranma deflated, feeling the unbearable weight of everyone's attention fall away.

Sayuri strode up to the group, Yuka beside her. Her eyes were flashing, and she was waving a crumpled piece of paper in her fist.

"Sayuri, language…" Rin said, blushing a bit and looking around furtively.

"She's talking about Himura." Yuka said dryly.

Rin blinked. "Oh… uh… that's okay then… I guess?" She looked around, then crossed her arms and huffed at the surprised looks she was getting. "Hey, I-I can hold a grudge too! Himura is a b…b… bad person!" She finally spat out.

"Don't hurt yourself, pumpkin." Nabiki patted her shoulder then turned to Sayuri. "So, what did she do this time?"
"Look at this schedule!" Sayuri thrust the crumpled paper in Nabiki's face. It appeared to be a list of game dates and times.

Nabiki took the sheet from her grasp. She frowned a bit. Sports odds had usually been Hana's department, but she had kept up on them enough to recognize the names. "Fuji Senior… Kiyose Higashi… Ogawa Senior… These are all…"

"They're all schools that made it into the Quarterfinals last year!" Sayuri said. "These are all championship teams!"

Nabiki sighed. "That's not entirely unexpected."

"What's more, they're all home games." Yuka said. "Himura's team took all of the out of town games."

"Isn't that good?" Rin asked. "Home field advantage and all that?"

"No it's not." Sayuri looked at Rin. "'Our 'Home Field' is hostile. Having all our games at home means Himura can see all of our tricks and strategies in action at her leisure, while all of hers are out of town, making it tough for us to see what tricks she's developed."

"Also means the Principal is free to screw with us." Ranma muttered. "Wanna bet the first ball we get thrown in a match is a water balloon fulla hot water?"

"If he still trying that?" Yuka asked, putting her hands on her hips. "Honestly, how did someone as irresponsible as him end up as an educator? You'd think the scolding he got from the fire department last time would be enough!"

"Oh, but this time he's only thinking of the students." Akane said sarcastically. "Hot Cocoa for all! Whether they want it or not, apparently." She tweaked a coffee stain on Ranma's blouse.

Riko guiltily tried to hide a styrofoam cup behind her.

"You know, I do still have that waterproof soap, Ranma." Nabiki said. "If you used that, it'd keep the Principal from being able to mess with you like that."

Ranma shook her head. "I could, but that stuff takes like three days to wear off. I'd be stuck a girl the whole time. I'm already spending way more time as a girl than I'm comfortable with, and if Mom decided she wanted to see her 'manly son', well… that's an awkward conversation I don't wanna have."

"Good point," Nabiki sighed.

"So when's our first game?" Riko asked.

"Wednesday," Sayuri replied, making a disgusted face.

"Ugh, mid-week games," Rin said. "Those used to suck when I was in middle school."

"They're all on Wednesdays," Yuka added. "Fridays are the days for away games and Himura's got those slots locked up."

"That's not a lot of time... " Riko said nervously.

"We'll just have to start training as soon as possible and hope it's enough," Sayuri sighed. "Do you mind, Akane? I know we're gonna be intruding on your home life a lot with this."
"No, not at all!" Akane beamed. "It'll be kinda nice to have girls my own age over... Who aren't trying to kidnap me, kill me, or are otherwise crazy, I mean." She added sheepishly.

"What kind of training are you doing?" Ryouga asked, piping back into the conversation.

"Volleyball. More importantly, trying to figure out some 'Anything Goes' style techniques we can use to give us an advantage while still staying in the rules." Ranma replied. She looked at him and considered. "Hey… Ryouga? You know a bunch of different styles, right? Stuff like rhythmic gymnastics that you blended together to make your own techniques? Know any good tricks that would work in Volleyball?"

Ryouga rubbed his chin, considering. "What, like Martial Arts Volleyball?"

"No, better!" Ranma grinned as they shifted more into her favored topics. "Volleyball as a Martial Art! No special rules or nothin'... but seein' the game as it is as a martial art, an' applyin' the Anything Goes precepts to it!"

Ryouga quirked an eyebrow, pondering the concept. "That's... actually an interesting idea. So, like, taking what we know about how to throw a proper punch and applying the same kind of thought process to a volleyball serve?" His mentally ran through several ideas that immediately presented themselves. "That's actually more like Martial Arts Rhythmic Gymnastics than you'd think."

"You sure? I mean, regular Rhythmic Gymnastics does have attacking and stuff."

"Yeah, that's the point though. Martial Arts Rhythmic Gymnastics isn't seeing Rhythmic Gymnastics as a martial art, it's seeing Martial Arts as Rhythmic Gymnastics. So you follow the rules of a martial arts match, but you use the tools and techniques of Rhythmic Gymnastics to accomplish it."

"I... never thought of it that way..." Ranma's eyes were wide with comprehension. She beamed up at him. "Ryouga, do you have any idea how many ways this sort of thing could be used?!"

"What, treating sports like a martial art?"

"No, treating anything like a martial art!"

He folded his arms and scoffed, but from the twinkle in his eyes anyone could tell he was enjoying the conversation. "I dunno... not sure I could see someone doing accounting that way."

"No! It works! I've seen it!" Ranma gushed. "It's how Nabiki does it, even though she doesn't realize it. She grew up immersed in the principles of Anything Goes, and so she uses 'em, but for... well, Nabiki stuff! And it works really damn well!"

"Is that why you've been so much less obnoxious lately, Saotome?" Ryouga smirked. "You've been emulating Nabiki?"

Ranma raised her eyebrow, giving him her most Nabiki-esque expression. "Careful, sweet talker, she's right here listening."

"Holy crap you are..."

Nabiki wanted to interject, but she felt the need to keep a restraining hand on Rin's shoulder as the girl's gaze kept darting back and forth between them.

To her credit, the girl was holding it in admirably, but she was vibrating like a small dog waiting patiently for the door to open so they could run outside.
"Eeeeeeemarl arts instruction couple!" She squee'd under her breath in a tone that was only just slightly lower than dog-whistle pitch.

Two martial arts prodigies in the same place. Genius at their art on their own, but if you can get them to stop fighting and focus on a common problem around the art, they start playing off each other. Nabiki noted. Inspiring each other as they latch onto the other's ideas and build upon them, accelerating the process. What would happen if you could get others into this discussion? She watched them a moment, then smiled, seeing how, as Ranma and Ryouga's guards dropped, they settled into an easy banter, the language of martial arts and the enthusiasm they both had for it bridging the old animosities, if just for a time. Akane is right. There IS a chemistry there, isn't there? Even if it's not the one she fears, or the one Rin is hoping for. They must have been interesting in Middle School together. I kinda wish I had gotten a chance to see that.

"NI HAO!"

Ranma stopped mid-sentence, her eyes going wide as she whirled, looking out for a bicycle-borne Amazon and bracing herself for impact.

Instead, a metal delivery container dropped neatly into her hands.

She blinked and nearly dropped it.

Akane was just as surprised and therefore was completely unprepared for the full force of the body impacting her, which took her to the ground with enough force to knock the wind out of her lungs and cause her to skid on her back a few feet.

"Unnngh… wha…?" Akane looked down to see a mass of soft purple hair, and a pair of mischievous red eyes looking into her own.

"Nǐzěnmeyàng, xiǎo mèimei?" Shampoo asked, beaming.

Nabiki raised an eyebrow. "Well… Now I really regret having missed the last Fiancée's Tea. So, she's your 'little sister' now, Shampoo?"

"You speak Mandarin, Nabiki Tendo?" Shampoo asked over her shoulder, not slackening her grip.

"A little. I figured it would be a useful skill when your family came to town to stay." Nabiki smirked.

"Shampoo, I am not your… Nnngh, if you would just…" Akane squirmed, trying to push the other girl off her, but finding she was somehow only getting more and more tangled, their position getting more and more compromising and embarrassing as people watched. "Ranma, how do you get out of this?!"

"Blunt force trauma to the back of the victim's skull, delivered by an uncute tomboy." Ranma deadpanned.

"I'm serious! I can't…" She squirmed, finding Shampoo had somehow managed to pin her arms. "... People are watching!"

Nabiki sighed. "Hug her back, Akane."

Akane gave Nabiki a skeptical look, but managed to get one arm free enough to tentatively hug the Amazon back. Shampoo sighed and relaxed, settling into a soft purr and snuggling even closer.

Akane blushed bright red, but before she could angrily point out to Nabiki that she had just made
Shampoo released Akane and sat back on her haunches to offer Akane a hand and help her up.

"Akane should listen to Mercenary sister. Is first person to understand proper response to greeting." Shampoo cocked her head, a friendly smile on her face.

"Why are you glomping me, though?" Akane grumbled as she accepted the offered hand.

After pulling her to her feet, and uncomfortably close, Shampoo leaned in so her nose was almost touching Akane's. "Saw Akane was annoyed when Shampoo gave all attention to Ukyou before; thought maybe was jealous?"

Akane blushed, eyes widening as she nearly threw herself back. "No! Why would I ever…!"

Shampoo smirked and somehow managed to keep Akane from gaining any distance between them until she had her backed up against the tree. "Akane should be more honest. Making same face as when loudly saying she no love Airen. Shampoo know that not true. Does that mean Akane love Shampoo too?" She batted her eyelashes.

"What!? No! I am not going to stand here and let some pervert Amazon…"

"But Akane now Amazon. Does that make Akane pervert too?"

"I… that's different!"

"Oohhhhhh… Shampoo think she see blush. Did Pervert Sister Akane do something with Airen last night?"

"I AM NOT YOUR SISTER!"

"I can't help but feel this is your fault somehow, Ranma," Ryogu said, crossing his arms as he watched. He cocked his head as Shampoo continued to tease, dodging a few swipes of Akane's mallet. "I just… haven't figured out how yet."

"Could you let me know when you figure it out? 'Cuz it'd be a lot more reassuring to know I actually have some control over any of this and that things aren't just naturally this random and chaotic."

"I'll be sure to engrave the answer on your face with my fist… You know… once I make sense of it…" Ryogu replied, still trying to parse some of the non-sequiturs the girls were tossing out. "... Wait, what's tea got to do with this? They keep mentioning tea and Ukyou."

"I dunno," Ranma muttered as she rummaged through the delivery case. "Oh, hey, Shampoo brought fried wontons too. Want some?"

Ryogu shrugged. He could figure out why Ranma needed to die after lunch. "Sure."

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The promise of food managed to cause everything to settle into a relatively amicable truce. Combining the Ramen delivery from Shampoo with everyone's lunches, they were able to generate quite a varied feast, with Kasumi's bento box items earning high praise.

Shampoo sat on Ranma's left, content to feed her Airen various items from the potluck. Ryogu sat on Ranma's right, for once a relative peace between them. Nabiki noticed Ranma was suggesting various things for him to try as a way of defusing any tension, though from the perspective of an
outsider it could look less like peace offerings and more like…

… Rin shipping fuel. Nabiki thought wryly, noticing how the diminutive girl was beaming and watching them with glittering eyes; as though she was watching a romantic scene from her favorite anime.

Akane was actually huddled on Ryouga’s right, and Ryouga was clumsily trying to offer her morsels to eat as well, laughing like an idiot. But Akane was more concerned with watching Shampoo. Normally she would be fuming, but any time she stuck her head out enough to really get a good look at Shampoo doting on Ranma, the Amazon would somehow close the space between them and pop a morsel in her mouth, to send her retreating back behind Ryouga’s bulk in embarrassment.

Shampoo has learned how to manage my baby sister, and it’s by FLIRTING with her. Nabiki noted with a shake of her head. When Ranma and Ryouga stop competing and relax around each other, how comfortable they are around each other can make them look like a couple to outside observers. And when you put all four of them together with food, they stabilize.

Nabiki was bemused to find that she was making behavioral observations about how best to manage the volatile group... Exactly like Akane knew I would.

She was interrupted as someone popped something into her mouth.

"Mercenary Girl thinking too hard," Shampoo said, grinning at her. "Should eat soon before food all gone!
"

Nabiki quirked an eyebrow and chewed the mouthful; apparently one of those sausages cut to resemble an octopus. Experimentally she snagged a skewer of dango from one of the other lunches and offered it to the Amazon.

Shampoo beamed and leaned in, plucking the first round dumpling off the skewer with her mouth. The brightness of her smile as she chewed rivalled Akane's 100 Megawatt.

Shampoo wants to be included. Nabiki noted, smiling again at the Amazon as she bit off the second dumpling herself. The cultural significance is just seasoning to her. She's after participation and attention.

Nabiki found she couldn't keep herself from turning the situation over in her mind, as though it was a puzzle. The essence of business was identifying a need and fulfilling it, and the first hurdle was the conflict of needs which obstructed that. Person A needed Item B, but it was never as simple as just getting Item B to Person A. Person C possessed Item B, and needed Service D to be convinced to part with it, which could only be performed by Person E, and so on. It was complicated, and there were always conflicts that were irreconcilable, which lead to strife, legal action, wars, and such. Or sometimes someone would simply decide that force was an easier way to get what they wanted without having to follow the entire chain.

Nabiki had always considered that Ranma's situation was a bunch of irreconcilable needs which were growing more acute until they'd inevitably break out into war. But now, getting into the heads of those involved, she was starting to see that while those needs were very acute they weren't mutually exclusive. In fact, in a number of cases, they were complimentary.

Deal with the pride and the arrogance, start fostering empathy and understanding, encourage compromise, and things start falling into place. Interlocking, even. She chewed thoughtfully as she pondered. A bunch of people who are all missing something and seeking it in someone else, but up until recently that person was blind to it. Now that he's aware and reacting and even
"You going to eat last dango?" Shampoo's face popped into her vision again, the girl close enough to make Nabiki sit back reflexively.

"Huh? Uh… no, you can have it." Nabiki offered the stick to the Amazon.

Shampoo ignored it and scooted closer. "What you thinking that so serious?" She peered at Nabiki, searching her eyes with that intense, reddish brown gaze.

Nabiki felt a little self-conscious under the scrutiny. She knew the Amazon was considerably smarter and more perceptive than most gave her credit for. She had never bought the 'bubbly bimbo' routine; Shampoo had always been far too clever than that. Though admittedly, most of her schemes were fairly straightforward and derivative when you looked at them from the perspective of the kinds of things the Amazons knew and learned. However, as a non-martial artist, Nabiki had always flown under her radar. "Just… considering the pieces of a puzzle."

Shampoo nodded slowly and from the flash of understanding in her eyes Nabiki knew that the Amazon got the metaphor. Shampoo leaned in closer, keeping her voice low. "What Nabiki think? Of puzzle?"

Nabiki smirked in spite of herself. "Do you know why I decided to go into business, Shampoo? Because transactions like this are easy. It's just math then."

"Then what math say?" Shampoo asked. There was an odd intensity in her eyes, almost as if she were looking for something from Nabiki.

Nabiki paused, considering her answer. She pulled her knees up and rested her elbows on them so she could rest her chin on her fists. "Is this were a business? This would be a merger, of sorts. And a four-way simultaneous merger would normally be a logistical nightmare. However, given how many competing interests and how much opposition the four of you face on a regular basis… intense competition, hostile takeover attempts, lawsuits, lobbying for punitive regulations… this not only makes sense, but is really the only winning strategy in the market you're in."

"Then you think is good idea?" Shampoo asked. "That what you doing now, yes?"

Nabiki closed her eyes and held up a hand to forestall any conclusions. "If this were a business. Businesses are amoral. Emotionless. Rational. At least when properly run. Businesses have simple, predictable needs. But you all aren't businesses. You have feelings and complex needs. You're emotional; messy. You get hurt and bear grudges and act irrationally. You have pride and shame, hopes and fears. There is no 'bottom line' with people and certainly not with romance."

"So… you start with business, then add mess, yes?" Shampoo asked. "That what you doing now, yes?"

Nabiki opened one eye, eyebrow arching in surprise. "That's actually pretty astute, Shampoo."

Shampoo smiled, a little color reaching her cheeks. Nabiki realized that the amazon probably wasn't used to being complimented on being smart. She filed that away as something to keep in mind about
"So… what think with mess?" Shampoo asked, a little trepidation entering her voice, despite her usual control. Her eyes darted to the right, towards Ranma, and Nabiki could see a flicker of longing.

_She wants this to work. Badly._ Nabiki filed that away as well. "I'm still working on that. I need to feel out Ukyou on this still. And… honestly? The four of you need to spend more time together just to see if you all can _coexist_, much less… well, be some kind of _family._"

Shampoo nodded. Then she cocked her head. "Why you say 'four'?'"

Nabiki blinked. "Hmmm?"

Shampoo studied her a moment. "You talk about mess. Talk about our feelings. Try and fit our pieces, see if can make picture. But… you have own mess, own pieces, yes? What think with _your_ mess?"

Nabiki stared silently, both surprised by the insight, and a little dismayed that it needed to be pointed out to her. Her eyes dropped as she hastily did a mental inventory on herself. "I guess… I'm still not entirely sure how I fit in…" She shook her head. "No, that's not true. It's obvious, and Akane even pointed it out to me. I'm not sure how _I feel_ about this or how I fit into it."

"You not used to making sense of own mess." Shampoo replied.

Nabiki nodded back up. There wasn't any guile or deception in the Amazon's eyes, which was rare. Seeing the girl with her usual defenses down was revealing a lot of things that looked… _unexpectedly familiar_. "I'm used to keeping my mess to a minimum."

She glanced over Shampoo's shoulder at Ranma, who was animatedly discussing volleyball tactics with Sayuri, Rin, and Ryouga, pantomiming moves while the others nodded, or interjected with questions or ideas. She felt a warmth in her chest as she saw the look of excitement on the redhead's face, like a kid who had just been given a new toy. More than that; Inspiration. _Joy._

"It should _be_ like this more. _Enough_ strife._ Shampoo had turned her head to follow her gaze, a smile on her face which Nabiki suspected was mirrored on her own.

"What _are_ you two talking about?" Akane asked. She had vacated her spot next to Ryouga to make room for actual volleyball team members and walked to Nabiki. She settled on her sister's left side.

"Nothing much," Nabiki replied. Which was true enough, at least in her mind. It was all information Akane knew about, though it would be a bit awkward to discuss around the rest of the girls. _Especially Rin_, Nabiki thought, bemused by the notion of how out of control Rin's shipping tendencies would get if she had any concept of the relationship tetrahedron that was threatening to form.
Akane looked skeptical. "Riiiiight. Because it's normal for you two to practically sit in each other's laps and look deeply into each others eyes at lunch."

Nabiki glanced back at Shampoo, and became aware of just how close they actually were. There was nothing untoward about their positioning, but she had been making a lot of eye contact, and given Akane's hypersensitivity to anything that had even a whiff of intimacy…

"Akane jealous?" Shampoo asked, smirking as she leaned across Nabiki towards the younger Tendo. "Maybe should have been nicer when Shampoo offer too-too delicious bites!"

"I am not jealous!" Akane leaned in nose to nose with the Amazon, eyes flashing.

Nabiki found herself leaning back and pondering if she could scoot back out of the way without getting too many grass stains on her skirt.

"Akane doing excellent impression then," Shampoo said in a low purr. "Act just like when Shampoo cuddle up to Airen. Thinking maybe it not Airen that Akane wanting attention from all this time?"

Too far, Shampoo! Nabiki thought nervously, seeing the telltale signs of her sister's temper flaring.

"Why would I want anything from a pervert like you!?" Akane snarled.

"Violent girl should maybe give it a try? Is sounding pent up."

"UGH!" Akane snatched a cup of cold cocoa from the spread and flung it at Shampoo.

Nabiki felt time slow as the cold liquid hit the Amazon. There was that brief moment of unreality, Shampoo's eyes widening, before suddenly there was a cat in her place tumbling into the pile of her fallen clothes.

Right next to Ranma.

Ranma's head turned, eyes tracking with that awful slowness as her pupils dilated, the joy and passion rapidly being smothered by a wave of irrational fear as the tiny creature struggled to free herself from the tangle of fabric.

No! Nabiki had never moved faster in her life. She snatched up Shampoo's clothing and the wriggling cat inside. Bolting to her feet with her arms full, she took off running, hoping she could outrun the inevitable freakout from Ranma.

She caught Akane's stricken look as she ran past, the dark haired girl still holding the cup as realization of what she had just done hit her.

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Nabiki ran for the groundskeeper's shed she and Ranma had hidden out in a few days prior, hoping they hadn't yet replaced the lock. It was around the corner of the school building, well out of Ranma's line of sight, and if she was lucky, it would have hot water and some privacy to let Shampoo change back.

Thankfully, maintenance was sloppy as ever, and the broken lock was still hanging loosely on the hasp. She slipped inside and sighed, allowing herself to breathe.

A Neko-ken freakout NOW would ruin EVERYTHING, especially with that stupid rule of Himura's. She thought. She paused to help the struggling cat get free of the bundle, smiling a bit as
she extracted the animal. "Easy, Shampoo. Ranma freakout averted, I think. Give me a minute to get you some hot water, okay?"

"Mrew?" The pink-furred cat looked up at her curiously, cocking her head.

Nabiki smiled and unconsciously gave the cat a scratch behind the ears as she set her clothes on the bench, careful to avoid getting them dirty in the dusty shed. She turned on the tap, and frowned as the water came out tepid.

"Seems the Principal mave have messed up the boilers with his fire sprinkler stunt," she said. She tested the water a few times and found that it was indeed slowly warming up. "Okay, just gotta give that a few minutes." She sighed and sat on the old bench, cradling the cat in her arms.

After a minute she realized she was petting and scratching Shampoo as if she were a real cat. You're basically fondling a top tier martial artist without asking, Nabiki. Her mind supplied. She nervously glanced down at Shampoo, but the cat was purring contentedly and even headbutted her hand when she stopped.

"Oh, so you like that, huh?" She smirked and resumed petting. "I guess that makes sense, with what Ranma told me about how the curses work."

"Mrah." Shampoo agreed, eyes closed as she lightly kneaded Nabiki's sleeve.

"I'll talk to Akane. Can't afford to have her messing with water like this with the challenge on the table and Auntie Saotome getting weird about Ranma's curse. Too much risk of something going sideways." She tested the water, nodding as it seemed warm enough. She lifted Shampoo off her lap, earning a sleepy 'Nya' of protest before the transformed girl shook off the pleasant trance the attention had put her in. Nabiki found an old cup, rinsed it out, and filled it with warm water. She paused a moment, looking the cat over. "You know, if we were careful about it, we could probably use your curse to help Ranma get over his phobia."

"Mrew?" Shampoo looked up at her expectantly, tail twitching as her attention focused sharply on her.

"I'd want to talk with Doc Tofu first and get his advice. Not his field, I know, but... he's about the only guy who would know enough to give an educated opinion. Give me a few days to look into it?"

"Mrew?" Shampoo cocked her head.

"Call it an apology for my sister's temper. Plus I'm recognizing this is a card I do not want in Himura's hand." She looked away and poured the water over the cat to trigger the change. She kept her gaze averted as she heard the rustling of cloth while Shampoo quickly dressed.

"Is good point," Shampoo said, signalling Nabiki that it was okay to look.

The Amazon ran her fingers through her hair, working out the worst of the moisture. Her eyes were on Nabiki though. "You is having good tactical sense. Shampoo not even think of this!"

"Himura will, if she hasn't already." Nabiki replied. She pulled out the compact grooming kit she had started carrying since having to pick glass out of Ranma's hair the last time they had used this shed. She opened it and passed Shampoo the comb. "There's no way we can cure Ranma before the first game, so we'll have to be prepared to deal with cats."

"Can handle," Shampoo said. "To get so many cats would disturb strays in neighborhood. Shampoo go out tonight as cat, see what cats say."
Nabiki's eyes widened. "You can actually speak to cats?"

Shampoo combed out her hair carefully, looking away a moment as she searched for the words to explain. "Not words. But language. Speak in emotions. Body language and pheromones and song. When catchers come, make big disturbance. Much fear-scent in markings and song. Territory shift suddenly."

"It's happened before?" Nabiki asked.

"Yes. Round up strays. Take away for day or two, then release. All fixed. Control population." Shampoo said. "Happen couple of times. Shampoo learn to read signs, need be careful."

Nabiki shuddered. Involuntary sterilization was definitely a downside of the curse she hadn't considered before. "Please be careful if they are? I'd rather not have something like that on my conscience." She considered a moment. "Not unless it involved someone who deserved it anyway."

"Shampoo always careful. Smarter than real cat. Not fall for traps or bait." Shampoo winked. "Mercenary girl should know Shampoo's skills by now."

"I do, but still…" Nabiki considered. "Actually… There is a way to get some extra protection from that… if you're willing to trust me."

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Akane shakily put down the now-empty cup, staring at it. Why did I do that?! Why can't I control my temper? WHY?!

She looked over at Ranma. The redhead was frozen in place, motionless except for the occasional twitch of her eye. Everyone else was looking at her with concern. Even Ryouga, though she also noticed he kept shooting her nervous glances as well.

"Ranma?" Akane dropped to her knees next to the redhead. "Ranma, it's okay!"

"C-c-c-c-c-c-c-c-c-c-c-c-c-c-c-c-..." Ranma mumbled under her breath. Now that she was closer, Akane could see she was trembling.

"No, Ranma. Nabiki took it away. There's no cat." Akane scooted closer and hugged the shivering girl. This was affecting Ranma much more severely than Shampoo's changes usually did.

"C-... c-..." Ranma continued a bit more before shuddering on last time. Her trembling slowed, then stopped, and she put a hand on Akane's shoulder and extricated herself from the hug. "It's… I'm okay, Akane."

Akane resisted, but then reluctantly released the other girl. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah… yeah…" Ranma still looked pale, her eyes occasionally darting to the spot where Shampoo had been. "It just… it just caught me off guard."

Her guard was down. Akane realized, remembering how focused and animated Ranma had been a moment ago. She didn't see me getting mad. She wasn't ready for it.

She noticed Ranma was keeping her hands to herself and awkwardly not meeting her gaze. It wasn't just her guard about Shampoo. She'd dropped her guard around me, too. She noticed with some guilt that the redhead's defenses were back up already, with the tentative way she glanced at Akane, as though checking to see if she were still angry while trying not to appear as though she was
Akane felt her heart sink. All that progress today... gone because I let Shampoo get to me and kicked Ranma right where it hurts. She felt the heat of shame rise in her face, followed quickly and reflexively by the rush of anger. There was someone to blame for this, there had to be!

"What just happened?" Rin asked quietly, eyes as big as saucers.

"Ranma has a phobia about cats," Yuka said. Her usual cynical tone had softened. "A really bad phobia."

"It's... it's not that bad," Ranma laughed weakly. "It just... it just startled me is all."

Rin shook her head. "No, I mean... Akane threw the cocoa on the Amazon girl and... and... ~poof!~" She made an expansive gesture with her hands. "Gone!"

"She turned into a cat," Sayuri said. "Remember how Ranma changes from boy to girl and back? Well, Shampoo has the same sort of curse, except it turns her into a..." She glanced at Ranma. "...feline."

"The curses can do that?!" Rin asked, leaning forward. "Does anyone else have a curse that turns them into an animal?"

"Oh... yeah," Ranma replied, slowly recovering. "Mousse... that long haired guy with glasses who works at Shampoo's restaurant... he turns into a duck. Pops has one that turns him into a Panda. An evil smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. "I'm sure there was another, but i can't quite remember. Can you Ryouga?"

"Nope! I'm sure that's it! Ha ha! Crazy Chinese curses, eh?" He laughed loudly and unconvincingly.

"Are you suurrrrrre?" Ranma smirked. "I'm sure there was one more... maybe some kind of farm animal?"

Ryouga laughed again and slapped her on the back, supposedly companionably, but hard enough to knock the wind out of her. "HA HA! YOU'RE SUCH A KIDDER, RANMA!"

"No, wait... I know! That Pantyhose Taro guy Akane told us about!" Sayuri said, snapping her fingers. "Didn't he turn into an ox-thing?"

"Spring of Drowned Yeti holding an eel and crane while riding an ox." Ranma wheezed. "Plus a little octopus mixed in later on. Yeah, that's him." She batted her eyes at Ryouga. "Why Ryouga, who did you think I meant?"

Ryouga clenched his fist so hard his knuckles popped. "No. One. Of. Course."

"That's cool!" Rin said. "So... do they remember they're people when they're animals? Or do the end up with animal brains and are only as smart as a cat or dog or whatever?"

"They still think like people. Y'know, smart and stuff." Ranma said. "Though... there's some animal in there too. Mousse knows how to fly like a duck, Pops actually likes bamboo and playing with tires, and Shampoo..." She shuddered, cutting off that line of thought. "It's like... you still remember who you are, and you're the same smarts and stuff, but... The curse adds and subtracts things. Like that guy from the Jusenkyo Preservation Society... uhh... Kenny?"

"Kinnii." Ryouga supplied. "Big and mean, except when you splashed him..."
"... He turned into this meek priest," Ranma finished. "Complete 180 personality-wise."

"So is that what happens to you, Senpai?" Rin asked.

"Uhhh..." Ranma's eyes widened as she realized what her line of reasoning was suggesting. "... Well, my curse is a little different..."

"No it's not." Yuka pounced on the topic, leaning forward. "Human-to-human transformation, just like this 'Kenny' guy. Your curse is the most like his!"

Sayuri leaned in with her. "So... that must mean Ranma gets the full 'girl brain' along with her girl form then, right Ranma? How much does it actually change for you? Upstairs I mean?"

"L-look, I know what you're thinking, but it really doesn't actually work that way!" Ranma said nervously, waving her hands in front of her to ward them off.

"This explains so much," Yuka said in a conspiratorial tone to Sayuri.

"It does," Sayuri replied. "We might have misjudged the situation."

"Senpai is a girl," Rin said emphatically, folding her arms. "Why do you think I keep saying that? I'm not dumb. I know about the curse. Senpai said the curse changed stuff, so that it didn't actually feel weird to be a girl. So that it felt normal. That that's why it's a curse, because it re-wires stuff in your head."

"You heard that?" Ranma asked in a small voice.

Riko covered her mouth. "Then... does that mean...?" She glanced at Ryouga.

As one, the rest of the girls' eyes locked onto him. Including Akane.

Ryouga felt the cold, damp, familiar sensation of the Cloud of Impending Doom settle across his shoulders.

Ranma glanced at Ryouga, then back to them, then noticed that she was still sitting next to Ryouga. "No. No!" She waved her arms frantically. "Do not go there!"

"I've always wondered..." Akane said softly, an old insecurity bubbling up. She caught Ryouga's gaze with her own. "Ryouga... why were you trying to snare Ranma with a magical fishing rod to make her fall in love with you? You never answered me when I asked."

All the eyes locked onto Akane, then snapped back to Ryouga. "What?"

All of the blood visibly drained from Ryouga's face.

"Magical fishing rod?" Riko, Sayuri, Yuka and Rin all chirped in unnerving unison.

"Akane, we agreed to never, ever discuss that again!" Ranma said tightly.

"No. You and Ryouga did. I just never got my question answered," Akane said flatly, never breaking her eyelock with Ryouga. "Why were you trying to snare Ranma?"

"I wasn't!" Ryouga said. "It... it was an accident!"

"You 'accidentally' bought a magical artifact with the power to make someone fall in love with you, including an instruction booklet explaining in detail how it works, and then just happened to be
"flinging it around?" Akane replied, tone still flat.

"Akane, look, it's complicated..." Ranma said nervously.

"And you're covering for him. Why?" Akane glared coldly at Ranma. "I'm tired of not knowing what's going on, Ranma. You and he have been keeping something secret for a very long time. What is it?" Her expression softened. "I'm not... I'm not mad Ranma, but... I think I deserve to know if..."

"I was trying to hook you!"

Both Ranma and Akane stopped and slowly turned their gazes to Ryouga.

He had his fist clenched and was shaking. "I bought the rod to make you fall in love with me, even though I didn't really believe in it. Like one of those charms you buy at the Shinto temple. It was stupid and... and I don't even know what I thought would happen if I did snag you and it actually worked, but..."

"Oh," Akane said softly.

Ryouga continued, desperation in his voice. "Akane... you have to believe me... I know it was a mistake to even consider something like that, but..."

"It didn't matter what I wanted, did it Ryouga?" Akane asked softly.

Ryouga's words died, strangled in his throat as his eyes widened in horror.

Akane chuckled bitterly and shook her head. "I could almost understand if it was meant for Ranma. But... how is that any better than what I go through every morning with the perverts at this school? How is it not worse?"

"Akane, enough."

Akane shot a surprised, almost hurt look at Ranma. "Why are you defending him?"

Ranma scowled. "Do you know how many people decide what I want doesn't matter? Daily! Including you. If Ukyou or Shampoo or God forbid Kodachi had got me with that rod, I'd be done. Ryouga coulda told me to do anything while I was under the power of that rod - including to jump off a cliff. And he woulda gotten everything he wanted... Revenge... you... An' he knew it, too. But when it came down to it he couldn't do it. An' he even fought to undo it."

"He beat you. Even though you were fighting with everything you had to snare him, so he'd love you back." Akane said, her expression unreadable.

"Well... I wasn't exactly at the top of my game. Plus I was fighting as a girl." Ranma said nervously, not wanting to admit a win in Ryouga's column, much less a loss in her own. "The rod was messing with my brain. I was probably holding back..."

"Like he holds back against you all the rest of the time?" Akane replied, eyes narrowing.

"Wait, what?!" Both Ranma and Ryouga said in unison, glancing at each other, then her in confusion.

"Ever since Ryouga found out about your curse, it's like a switch got flipped from 'sworn enemy' to 'best friend!'" Akane said, picking up steam. "Suddenly you're figure skating as a pair, he's helping
you try and find a cure for the curse…"

"That was… it's *complicated!*" Ryouga protested nervously, not liking where this was going.

"Then there was the thing with the koi rod, and then when you fought to protect Ranma when he was weak from Happosai's moxibustion!" Akane continued, gathering momentum. "And *then*, when you get in trouble? You and Ranma jump straight into a scheme where she gets to pretend to be your fiancée to a bunch of doctors!"

"Hey, I called him an *idiot* for that…!" Ranma protested.

"And yet you *put on makeup and a pretty dress!*" Akane snarled back. "You never even *combed your hair* for our dates! *Date*, singular, actually!"

"Maybe I should go…" Ryouga said nervously, scooting back a bit to try and get away from the impending conflagration.

"*Don't you dare!*" Ranma and Akane snarled at him in unison.

"How many times did you play 'dress up' for Ryouga, huh?" Akane growled. "I thought you were just teasing him, but now that he's started *requesting* it I'm beginning to wonder!"

"I was trying to fool him! Because I was jealous he was trying to get close to *you!*" Ranma shot back.

"Half the time I wasn't even there!" Akane retorted. "*More* than half the time you didn't even wear a *wig*! Or do you honestly expect me to believe that Ryouga is dumb enough to think there's more than one *Japanese* girl with blue eyes and red hair done up in a pigtail in Nerima?"

"He thought I was his *sister* once! He doesn't even *have* a sister!" Ranma shouted. "He is *entirely* that dumb!"

"*Hey!*" Ryouga protested, momentarily forgetting his current strategy of hoping they forgot he existed, even while they were arguing about him.

"How you and he were acting was like the brother and sister pair in Sayuri's favorite dojin!"

"*Akane!*" Sayuri hissed, blushing. "You promised you weren't going to tell anyone about that one!"

"How about how *you* run to him whenever you're mad at me, huh? 'Oh Ryouga, I was so scared!' 'Oh Ryouga, you're so reliable!'" Ranma shot back.

"Of course I do! He's my friend! He's always there for me, even though he knows I'm not interested in him that way!"

There was the faint sound of something cracking, like the fracturing of glass.

"*Not inter… You cannot* be this dense!" Ranma clutched at her own temples. "*What on Earth* would make you think he'd know…"

"Because it'd be *weird*, Ranma!"

"Why would it be weird!?"

"*You know why!*"
"Enlighten me!"

"BECAUSE HE'S P-CHAN!"

There was dead silence from all present.

"You… knew?" Ranma squeaked, her jaw hanging open as she gaped at the still-furious dark-haired girl.

"I'm not stupid Ranma! When he showed up wearing that stupid 'Charlotte' collar and you kept calling him 'P-chan' all the time when he was human, it wasn't too hard to figure out!" She crossed her arms and looked away, blushing a little. "But neither of you owned up to it, so I figured I'd just play along and let you squirm until you came clean, but then you never did, and…"

"Akane, he slept in your bed. He sleeps in your bed!" Ranma's eyes were wild as she started to realize how long Akane had actually known. "Akane you've been letting Ryouga sleep in your bed!?"

"P-chan sleeps in my bed," Akane said. "The curse changes stuff in your head, remember? Seeing how it changed him is what helped me to figure out… why you were different." She trailed off a bit, the surge of anger that had buoyed her fading.

"I'm not different…!"

"Yes you are!" Akane shouted. "You don't even realize it, but you are! As a guy you can barely talk to a girl without making an idiot of yourself, but when you are a girl, you're flirty and perky and feminine."

"That's an act! Of course I'm good at vamping boys! I am a boy! I know what kind of stuff boys want girls to say!"

"Do you think Hiroshi or Daisuke could do any of that if they suddenly had girl bodies?"

"Hiroshi and Daisuke are dorks!"

"You can't even memorize one line in a play, but you want me to believe you're suddenly an incredible actor when it comes to playing a girl? That it's all fake, that none of it comes from anywhere?" Akane leaned towards the redhead, glaring. "Did you ever notice that you're picky when you flirt? You always single out the best-looking guys to wrap around your little finger; do you realize that? And you single out Ryouga a lot."

"Arrrgh!" Ranma frantically pulled at her hair in frustration. "I do not have a 'girl brain', I am not interested in guys, and I am super not interested in Ryouga! We're friends, and to read anything more into that is insanely paranoid even for you, right Ryouga?" She turned to the lost boy for confirmation and support.

Or rather, she turned to the Ryouga-shaped empty space next to her.

"... Crap." Ranma smacked her forehead. Then her eyes widened as she realized what Ryouga's disappearance meant. We're supposed to go see that neurologist to try and cure his sense of direction! His Mom is counting on it, or she might never be able to find her way home again! If he gets lost now, she'll have to leave the house eventually and might never find her way back! "... Awww crap!" She bolted to her feet to run after him, looking around to try and track where he went before he got too far.
"See?" Akane said bitterly. "Go on. Go find him."

"Akane, this isn't...!" Ranma clenched her fists in frustration. "You don't know everything that's going on! He can't get lost right now! If he does..." She looked the way Ryouga must have gone again, then back at Akane, knowing she wouldn't catch him if she stayed and explained. "Arrrgh!" She turned and sprinted off, hoping that she could pick up his trail before it was too late.

The rest of the group was silent as Ranma's footfalls rapidly receded. Akane sat with her head bowed, her hands folded in her lap, fighting back tears, and not even truly understanding what she was feeling, or why.

Finally, Rin broke the silence.

"Senpai's boyfriend is Akane's pet pig P-chan," she stated, matter-of-factly.

And then she screamed.

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"I was gone for five minutes," Nabiki massaged the bridge of her nose, feeling a migraine coming on.

Akane was still sitting on the far side of the circle, arms crossed and a stubborn expression on her face. Sayuri, Yuka and Riko were on the far side of the pile of bento boxes, trying to console Rin, who was in the throes of some form of panic.

"If Ranma wasn't such a baka..." Akane huffed.

"I was gone five minutes," Nabiki repeated, more forcefully.

"He was in my roooooloom!" Rin wailed. "He was in my room when I got chaaanged!"

"This wasn't my fault!" Akane protested, starting to get flustered. "If she and Ryouga weren't keeping secrets..."

"Five. Minutes," Nabiki repeated again.

"Maybe Shampoo should head back home now..." Shampoo said sheepishly.

"Oh no! No." Nabiki quickly forestalled that notion. "You're staying, Shampoo. You're here to keep me from strangling my baby sister to death!"

"Me!? I didn't...!" Akane sputtered.

"Obstacles are for killing, sweet sister of mine!" Nabiki singsonged, a manic and altogether dangerous cheer in her voice. "Now, first we'll talk Rin down, then you and I are going to have a very long conversation about what happened and how in the future to go about avoiding causing me massive personal strife for five minutes."

Akane's expression darkened. "You know what? Go talk to your fiance about that. In the meantime, I know when I'm not wanted." She stood and forcefully brushed her skirt off, did an about face, and walked briskly towards the school gates.

"Akane, what the hell...!?" Nabiki protested.

"Taking a half day to go help Ukyou!" Akane shot back, not slowing her stride in the slightest.
Nabiki watched her go, incredulous, then covered her face with her hands. "Uuuuugh! How can she be so dense?!

"Want go fetch?" Shampoo asked.

Nabiki shook her head. She scrubbed her hands over her face, and slapped her cheeks. "No… no… Thank you though. We'll see her after school. Let her go cool off for now." She took a deep breath and walked over to Rin.

"Rin… you said yourself that you 'got' the curse, right? And that's why you said Ranma was a girl all this time?" Sayuri asked gently, holding her shoulder. "So… if Ryouga is P-chan, then it's okay, right? Because it's the same thing. When he was in your room, he was a pig. Akane even said so."

Rin shuddered, then looked at her blearily. "R-really?"

Sayuri nodded.

"Your virtue is intact, Rin," Yuka replied. "You didn't know, anyway."

"B-but… w-what if I g-get… p-pregnant!?!" Rin wailed again.

Sayuri frantically hushed her. "Rin! Not so loud! Now… what are you talking about?!"

Rin sniffled. "W-well my older sister took a boy to her room once… wh-when I was eight… and Mom and D-dad were mad at her, and kept saying she could have gotten pregnant, and she should have used protection, and now I had a boy in my room, and I don't even know what 'protection' means!"

Sayuri and Yuka looked at each other, then at Rin.

"Did… you skip sex ed class?" Yuka asked.

Rin sniffed. "I was sick that day. Dad asked me if I needed to know about the birds and the bees, but I told him I'm already taking biology."

Sayuri sighed. "Aaaand we're currently on plant biology. So when someone says the 'birds and the bees' when talking about reproduction…"

"... They're talking about pollination, right?" Rin brightened a little, then shrank back. "Oh god, what if he pollinated me?!"

Riko started choking on the mochi she was sampling.

Sayuri clamped her jaw shut, smile wavering as she seemed to be struggling with something, tears forming at the corners of her eyes.

Yuka seemed to hold her composure better and patted Rin's shoulder. "Rin? A Pig can't… uh… 'pollinate' a human. And you'd know if he tried, for certain. It's… different for people and animals than it is for plants."

"It is?" Rin sniffed.

"I'll loan you some reading material to help… uhh… 'illustrate'," Sayuri finally managed. "But I think if Ryouga was… uhh… that sort of pig, he'd have tried something with Akane by now. Just… if you end up taking care of someone's pet in the future, maybe give it a hot bath before letting it sleep in your room."
"I… I guess…" Rin sniffed. She looked up at the two of them. "He must be really loyal to Senpai!"

"Uhhh… sure." Yuka nodded. "Look, why don't you go wash your face. Riko, stop choking dramatically and go with her? We'll stay here in case they come back."

Sayuri and Yuka watched Riko lead the diminutive strike back to the school.

"So… We don't actually buy anything that we said there, right?" Yuka asked.

"Oh no, of course not. He's been in the girl's change room. The next time we see him we're making roast suckling pig in cooking class," Sayuri replied. She glanced over her shoulder at Nabiki, who was watching the exchange. "Did you know?"

"I suspected," Nabiki replied. "I tried a couple of times to douse P-chan with hot water, but he's fast and it seemed like more work than it was worth. I was sure enough that I could bluff it if I ever needed anything on him."

"Why didn't you say anything!? We all made a big fuss over that filthy little…" She paused, then sighed, unable to find another suitable noun. "... pig."

Nabiki shrugged nonchalantly. "First, I'm not in your class. Talk to my baby sister. Second…" She rubbed her fingers together meaningfully.

"Always money with you, isn't it, Tendo?" Yuka said sourly.

"Wouldn't be any fun if I spoiled all the surprises. Can't blame a girl for wanting a little incentive for handing out all the answers."

"Actually, Shampoo need help with something." She touched Nabiki's shoulder. "Where is school office? Shampoo need to give them registration papers."

Nabiki turned and raised an eyebrow. "You actually signed up? They didn't need you to take a placement test or anything?"

Shampoo beamed proudly. "Shampoo take equivalency test every month. Part of deal with Chinese Embassy for work visa." Her face fell a moment. "Been… hounding Shampoo to enroll, actually. Say Japanese 'unacceptable'."

"That's great!" Sayuri said, clenching her fist. "With another girl in our class who can fight and doesn't have to worry about Himura's stupid new rule…"

"Actually…" Shampoo said, a little sheepishly. "... Was placed in senior year."

"What!?!"


Nabiki raised an eyebrow, but said nothing else.

"I would be happy to escort you to the office if you like Ms. Xian Pu."

They turned to look behind them. Walking towards them in a small group was Himura and her team of 'elites'. Himura was sporting her usual confident and haughty smile.
"As acting Student Council President, one of my duties… and joys… is to welcome new students to our school," Himura said, placing her hand delicately on her chest and beaming beatifically at Shampoo. "And if I might say, you are certainly a rare and special student indeed, Ms. Xian Pu. Hěn gāoxìng jiàn dào nǐ."

Shampoo blinked, then glanced at Nabiki. "Is this challenge? Should beat up now?"

Nabiki simply smirked and shrugged. "Hard to tell with Himura."

Himura laughed, though there was a bit of an edge to it now. "Now, now! I can see we've gotten off on the wrong foot. Or rather, I've gotten off on the wrong foot with Ms. Tendo, and she's passed on her… misunderstanding of the situation."

"Actually, your grandfather's associates sent a representative to make sure I had a firm grasp of the situation." Nabiki replied dryly. "I understand Tanaka-san was a little upset with you."

Himura's eye twitched ever so subtly. She took a breath, glancing at Sayuri and Yuka, then at Shampoo. "All right. I see the situation has reached that point then. So, Ms. Tendo… would you mind taking a walk with me?" She gestured towards the school gates. "Just us two, of course."

Nabiki raised an eyebrow. "Do I look that naive to you?"

Himura laughed lightly. "Come now! If my grandfather's… employee has already spoken to you, then you understand the stakes, as well as the constraints I am expected to abide by. Besides, I am no martial artist and I am sure you have sufficient training that you will be in no danger from a simple girl such as myself. I simply wish a little privacy so that we may discuss matters that are of a… sensitive nature." Her expression hardened a bit. "There are things it is better they not be burdened with. For their sakes."

"I don't like this idea, Himura," Umeko said, wary eyes on Shampoo as she stepped forward a bit. Himura held up a hand, stopping her.

Nabiki's smirk faded. He gaze remained unwavering as she considered. "All right. Let's walk, then."

"I hope you know what you're doing, Nabiki," Sayuri said softly, just loud enough for Nabiki to hear.

Me too, Nabiki thought. She started walking as Himura gestured for her to go first.

Nabiki's mind settled into careful analysis as they walked towards the gates. This first part was a power play: Himura allowed her to go first to see if Nabiki would show her back to her, and Nabiki chose not to hesitate to demonstrate a lack of fear. Himura would see that as either foolishness of confidence, and continue to probe accordingly.

Nabiki could have insisted Himura go first, which would have suggested wariness, or possibly that Nabiki had knowledge that Himura planned something, but knowing about the 'rules' of their game, Nabiki didn't feel a physical attack was likely enough to bluff that. It still set her nerves on edge, hearing the click of Himura's expensive shoes on the tarmac behind her, and it took all her willpower to keep her gait relaxed and her gaze forward.

They reached the gates and Nabiki stepped through, rounding the wall, now out of sight of her allies and Himura's. Himura stepped up the pace to bring her even with Nabiki as they began a slow walk around the school perimeter.

"So… It seems my little game with Ranma has gotten out of hand," Himura said cheerfully. "And
you've taken it upon yourself to defend her from the predations of the 'Yakuza Princess'. That is actually surprisingly noble of you, Tendo-san. Unnecessary, but noble."

"Oh? I would love to hear your reasoning for that. Ranma doesn't often face threats of sexual offender status," Nabiki replied dryly.

Himura laughed lightly. "Oh come now! You don't believe I would seriously enact such dire consequences on Ms. Saotome?" Himura leaned forward, adopting a more casual, childlike manner. "This past year has been so very dull, you know. The only excitement has been whatever Ms. Saotome and her exciting friends stir up. It simply seemed like far too much fun, and I wanted to play as well! But, as you know, I'm no martial artist. The Principal had some suggestions on how to get Ranma to join us for something I am proficient enough to be a challenge in, and… well, I just thought that considering most of her other challenges involve some form of indentured servitude…"

"You undermined and dismantled my network, arranged the volleyball game and changed Ranma's registration," Nabiki said flatly.

Himura sighed. "Yes, I arranged the volleyball game. That was hardly a secret. I had expected Ranma to play for the boy's side, and Ms. Kuonji to play for the girls. It was meant to help out my counterpart for the boy's Volleyball team, as I know they are hurting for talent. There's nothing sinister in that." She shrugged. "The registration change came after Ranma agreed to my game. In fact, it was Coach Olga who first suggested the idea! Believe me when I say no actual harm was intended towards Ranma, despite my… theatrics. Someone like her just needs the proper motivation at times, don't you think?" She smiled brightly, then as quickly the smile was gone. "As far as your… 'network' is concerned… I will be blunt. Ms. Tendo, though my Grandfather has something of a reputation, I do value and respect law and order. The activities you were conducting were illegal and, as they involved minors, immoral. You have done an excellent job of covering your own tracks but… It was only a matter of time before you fell afoul of the authorities." She sighed. "I had thought that quietly dealing with the matter would give you a suitable wake-up call while allowing you to save face, as well as mitigating the economic impact. I am aware your family has fallen on hard times and some of your activities were taken up out of necessity…"

"... And you needed my negatives to give your threat teeth. Even if that meant using your connections to the bank I was using to access my safety deposit box. Illegally," Nabiki finished for her, still looking straight ahead.

Himura cleared her throat. "The fact of the matter is, I feel a responsibility to the students of this school and to the school itself. Due to the… recent activities of the faculty, as well as the antics your houseguests tend to attract and foster, this has required some… unusual measures. But my motivations are not malicious. I would like to mend this broken bridge between us." She stepped in front of Nabiki, facing her and halting the other girl. She extended her hand, tilting her head, still beaming. "I'd like to work together to make Furinkan High the best school in Tokyo. I would very much appreciate your help. Can we at least call a truce, for the sake of the school?"

Nabiki simply stared at her silently a moment. "Meaning you want me to work with you, to arrange for Ranma to continue playing for your team and to stop making dramatic and public waves for you, yes?"

Himura giggled girlishly. "Actually, that little stage show of yours was quite fun! I encourage the theatrics, they foster student engagement! In fact, I haven't seen the student body this engaged in an event for some time! The challenge is absolutely going forward, assuming Ranma's team is still willing." She continued to hold her hand out. "I simply wish to avoid… unnecessary animosity. And, I hope at the end, win or lose, I might count of you to at least get Ranma to hear me out about
continuing to play for the girl's team?"

Nabiki raised an eyebrow. A smile crossed her lips. "Himura, I admit, I have completely misjudged you." She raised her hand… then used to to brush a stray hair from her face, before jamming it into her skirt pocket. "I had no idea you had read me so badly. What on earth makes you think I can be bought so cheaply?"

Himura's smile faded, and her eyes hardened. She lowered her hand. "I see." A small smirk tugged at the corner of her mouth. "I didn't honestly expect it to be so easy, but I had to try. You understand of course."

"Of course." Nabiki nodded.

"Let's be frank, then," Himura said finally. "I am willing to address the matter of your lost network. Replacing your minions with individuals you can trust is a process I see you have already begun. However, given this is your senior year, I imagine rebuilding your network fully is neither possible, nor necessary. I can supply resources and assistance to help you get restarted in whatever operations you want when you move on to college." She folded her arms. "In fact… I can be persuaded to provide some assistance in secure… 'grant money', if that is a concern. I won't insult you by presuming your financial situation, of course. I'll also guarantee that your negatives are returned to your care as soon as I have secured Ranma's services for my team for the remainder of the season. You will be allowed to collect your gambling proceeds and for any other services you seek to market without interference or molestation, and the Student Council will be at your disposal if you require discrete facilitation for such things. Ranma will be released from service at the end of the school year and her records corrected and doctored appropriately and she will suffer no unnecessary indignities while under my care. You can continue to manage Ranma's team and are even encouraged to ensure that the matter comes to a showdown, so long as Ranma's team loses in the end, or Ranma otherwise agrees to work for me for the remainder of the year."

"What about Sayuri's challenge?" Nabiki asked.

"I can find ways to deal with Kamei-san," Himura said, a low, dangerous note in her voice.

"Unacceptable. She's useful to me." Nabiki replied.

"... Of course." Himura smiled widely. "I'm sure together we can find some way to convince her to… modify her challenge. Or make the matter moot entirely by ensuring a win for my team." Her smile dropped, her expression suddenly serious. "Either way, the details are a trifling matter. You know what is at stake here. I require Ranma's services for the remainder of the year and I will make it worth your while for you to assist me in ensuring that. We can both profit from the arrangement and Ranma even ends up with something positive on her transcript for once. I will even accept your agreement not to interfere, if you would rather keep out of the matter. But I wish to reach an accord on this before it becomes… messy."

Nabiki smiled. It was bright and seemingly genuine. "That is a very generous offer, Himura. And much more reasonable than most would be at this point. Pursuing a diplomatic option before matters become too acrimonious or costly is a wise move. Consider me impressed."

Himura sighed and smiled. "Oh good, you had me worried! I am so glad you're willing to be reasonable on this, Nabiki!" She extended her hand again. "So we have a deal?"

"No, of course not."

Himura's expression crashed, her carefully schooled and controlled emotions suddenly replaced by
visible surprise and a growing look of fury. "If you think this is your ticket into the Organization, I can assure you that a win here guarantees you nothing but a very bad enemy. I have the connections and influence to ensure your success and give you the introductions you need… or ensure that your victory here results in your utter destruction, so…"

Nabiki held up a hand. "I'm not interested in the Organization, or the Yakuza, or the Triad. I have no interest in selling my soul for power I can acquire on my own."

"Then why!?" Himura growled.

Nabiki smirked and wagged a finger. "Himura, Himura… You are too quick to mistake information for understanding. The answer was always in front of you; the creed of the Anything Goes School. You even used it against Ranma. That you didn't consider all the ramifications shows just how…" She gave Himura a haughty look. "…limited you are."

"You're not a martial artist," Himura said flatly, starting to see.

"Do you know why the Anything Goes school was founded, Himura?" Nabiki asked. "To steal panties. It was a ridiculous concept created by an old lecher. But, he managed to plant the seed of a very, very powerful idea. Do you know what that is?"

"Enlighten me," Himura replied tightly.

"That 'Anything Goes'. That everything is a Martial Art."

Nabiki felt a bit of satisfaction as Himura's eyes slowly widened, comprehension dawning. She stepped closer and leaning in, whispering in the taller girl's ear.

"I am Nabiki Tendo, heiress of the Anything Goes School, along with my sisters. My art isn't fists or swords, but it is no less an art and no less part of the school. And you have challenged me." She steered past her, letting her shoulder bump as she passed. "And the credo of the Anything Goes School is that we accept all challenges."

Himura turned. The anger on her face was quickly smoothed, schooled into a calm, pleasant smile. "That's unfortunate, Nabiki. I feel like we could have been friends." She sighed heavily and shook her head as Nabiki walked away around the corner.

Himura waited until Nabiki was out of sight, then stretched and turned to head back. "Mnnnn…! Thank goodness! You had me worried for a moment, Ms. Tendo… Nabiki. I thought for a moment you might actually take me up on that." She looked over at the nearby black sedan, with its immaculate, opaque-seeming dark windows. That should keep Grandfather satisfied for the time being that I'm honoring the methods HE would approve of. Oh my little Nabiki, I am going to have so much FUN showing you just how little 'Complete Immunity' actually protects you! A genuine smile crossed her face as her steps became light, almost childlike again.

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Akane walked briskly at first, her anger driving her steps. Gradually her pace slowed as the initial flush of heat and frustration bled away. It would speed up again briefly as she mentally refreshed her justifications, stoking the fire again, but these spurts grew shorter and more infrequent until finally she stumbled to a halt halfway between school and Ucchan's.

She covered her mouth and slumped against a nearby utility pole, feeling herself start to hyperventilate. What did I do?! What did I do!? WHAT DID I DO!?
It had felt *so good* in the moment. The old rush of righteous anger; the surge of jealousy and possessiveness. The emotional high and the *exultation* that came of loosing her words without restraint against someone who deserved it.

At someone she had *convinced* herself deserved it, anyway.

Her justifications seemed so clear and so sure through the lens of her anger, bringing blessed relief to her embarrassment and self-consciousness from Shampoo's teasing. Ryoga morphed in front of her into another Kuno, another face in the hentai horde, sitting next to *her* Ranma, touching *her* Ranma. Making *her* Ranma laugh. Making *her* Ranma smile.

She squeezed her eyes shut, feeling a wave of nausea. *I did it again. After I swore that I never would. I didn't even make it until lunch! And over RYOUGA of all people!*... She shuddered. *...I'm sorry, P-chan…*

Ryouga had always been a source of guilt for her. He was smitten with her, that much had been obvious right from the start. How could she not see that when such things were forced on her every single day?

But Ryoga's affections had been different. Timid, almost innocent. Needy and desperate, but submissive too - like the love of a puppy.

She took a deep breath, collecting herself. She wondered if Ryoga even realised it himself. His loyalty, his uncontrollable glee at simply being around her, his desperation for her approval - it was the love of a little domesticated piglet for his mistress.

She had taken advantage of it, of course. She knew she could trust him and felt safe with him. She had used him to make Ranma jealous when it suited her; acted oblivious to his feelings and led him on. Subtly, she had punished him for trying to love her as a man and rewarded him for loving her as a pet pig; because that's all she really wanted from him.

She resumed stumbling along. She had never intended for him to know that she knew. She had expected him to come clean so much sooner. That *Ranma* had helped him keep his secret, if clumsily, baffled her.

And then when she saw Ranma as a girl with him, it worried her.

If Ryoga could feel the love of a pet pig for her, then why couldn't *Ranma*…?

She grit her teeth, forcing herself to straighten and walk faster. *No! I'm being stupid! Ranma's never shown any interest, and now my stupid jealousy made us fight again!*

*He never showed any interest in girls until recently either,* a small, nasty voice whispered in her mind.

She shook her head and kept going until she had reached *Ucchan's*. She scrubbed at her eyes with the sleeve of her blouse to make sure she was presentable before she stepped inside.

"Welcome to *Ucchan*... Oh, Akane! You're early!" Ukyou waved to the other girl, smiling brightly.

"I uh... had a free period," Akane lied. "I thought if I came early it might be easier to see how you're making the okonomiyaki when it's slow?"

Ukyou considered. "Couldn't hurt to try. All right, uniform is upstairs. Feel free to use the shower if
you need it." She cocked her head as Akane walked past her to the stairs. "Everything all right, sugar?"

"Hmm?" Akane looked up at her. She paused, opening her mouth as if to say something, closed it, then sighed and shook her head. "It's nothing, really. Just distracted today, that's all."

"Well, don't be distracted now, or this will be a waste." Ukyou replied. "Go on, upstairs with you. I have a couple of mid-afternoon regulars who are liable to show up soon."

Akane headed upstairs, heading straight for the small bathroom. She practically tore her uniform off, tossing it carelessly aside as she turned the water on in the western style shower and set it almost painfully hot before she stepped in. She hadn't done much to get dirty that day, but she still felt soiled.

She rested her forehead against the cool shower glass, letting the steaming water beat at the back of her head. I'll apologize to Ryouga. I'm sure he'll understand. Maybe ask him to avoid Ranma… at least until I get this under control, she finally decided. She gathered herself, shut the shower off, and dried herself with one of the large fluffy towels Ukyou had on hand. She found the chef's uniform already laid out for her on Ukyou's bed and put it on.

I'm sure everything will be fine. Ryouga isn't even interested in me that way anymore, right?

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Ranma sprinted through the woods behind the school, occasionally hopping up into the trees to get a better vantage, but never actually stopping.

Ryouga's trail wasn't hard to find. A some point, just past the treeline, he had started hitting things as he ran.

Ranma had seen the damage Ryouga could do - the controlled, precise obliteration he could cause with his Bakusai Tenketsu. This wasn't anything like that. It was random, unfocused force, lashing out at whatever was unfortunate enough to be within reach as he ran. He'd left shattered tree trunks, cracked boulders and piles of debris to the left and the right of a path smashed right through the landscape.

He'd better slow down or we'll BOTH end up lost! Ranma thought. That wasn't the big worry, though. If running and smashing things was the worst that Ryouga was going to do, Ranma could live with ending up in Okinawa.

She skidded to a stop as she saw the glow; the confirmation of the possibility she had most been dreading. The ghostly light pulsed, shining through the trees with sickly reds and yellows curling out from the epicentre, just over the next rise.

Oh no… She put on an extra burst of speed, vaulting up into the trees again, hopping from branch to branch in the hope that she could get a better vantage from above.

Ryouga was kneeling in a small clearing. His arms were limp at his sides, his head rolled back a bit, looking up at the sky. His eyes were dead and empty. All around him, reds and yellows pulsed luridly, energies surging, mounting, throbbing like a heartbeat. The ground around him had already settled into a small depression from the weight of the heavy chi and there were occasional pops or bangs as trees and even rocks caught in the field started to crack and succumb to the pressure. A steadily building hum filled the air, like an electrical generator, spinning faster and faster and ever faster.
Even from where she was Ranma could feel the force of it weighing her down. Not just a physical thing, but a weight that pulled on her heart, that forced old memories of guilt and shame to dribble and leak out of the corners of her mind where she’d stuffed them. Old memories of hopelessness and fear and half-remembered nightmares.

She shuddered. She tried to focus on the Soul of Ice, to empty herself of emotions the way Ryouga did to survive these blasts… and found that she couldn’t. It was too much; it just pushed right through her control, dragging out all the things she hid from herself - all of the doubts and self-delusions and comforting lies and forced her to review them on an endless loop. And she was only on the edge!

I’ve never felt anything like this… How is he keeping himself empty of emotion? Ranma wondered, peering at him as she struggled against the tide of awful emotions.

Then she saw the tear tracks - the slight heaves of his chest - the look of peace on his face that wasn't from an absence of emotion, but more like an anticipation of… of…

Release. Ranma's eyes widened. He's NOT emptying himself! He's planning on taking the full brunt of it!

"Ryouga!" She cried out over the ascending hum. "Ryouga stop! It'll kill you!

"Go away, Ranma," Ryouga said. His voice was flat, tired. He didn't shift or look at her. "I'm tired of you. I'm tired of your games. I'm tired of being the butt of everyone's jokes. Just leave me be."

"No! You JACKASS, you think I'm actually gonna let you blow yourself up?!!" Ranma dropped to the ground, landing more heavily than she intended. She stumbled forward, fighting the incredible pressure. Every step made her feet sink into the earth more, made the weight settle more unbearably onto her shoulders, both physical and emotional.

"You don't actually care. Nobody does," Ryouga said. He chuckled weakly. "You just love being the hero. The 'good guy' who would always try and save the villain, even from himself." He sighed. "At least I was a person to you. I suppose I should thank you for that much."

"What about Akari!?" Ranma shouted, fighting her way closer. Tears stung her own eyes, and she had to fight the sobs, fight the urge to turn and run herself. She focused on him and on putting one foot in front of the other. "You think she wouldn't care if you do this?! How am I supposed to face her and tell her I just let you die?!

The light intensified, the humming growing louder, angrier. "I couldn't protect her…" Ryouga's head drooped. "When she needed me most, I was just a pig. But that's all ever I was to her. Her perfect man. A man-shaped pig." He shuddered. "That's all I am to anyone. Just a pig."

Ranma struggled to refute him, to find some hook to pull him back out of his self-destructive spiral. "You weren't a pig in middle school! It wasn't a pig I was walking home from school every day! I didn't wait three days in a stupid empty lot for a pig!" She stumbled forward, dropping to her hands and knees in front of him. She struggled to push herself up, and failing that, crawled the rest of the way to him, finally reaching out and grabbing his shoulder. "Ryouga!

His eyes came up to look at her. They were glassy, unfocused.

"Ryouga, look at me!" Ranma demanded, shuddering. It was so hard to move. So hard to think. So hard to not just accept it, let herself be crushed. Let it all end. "Look at me! We're getting out of this, okay? I need… I need you to…" Her eyes darted back and forth as she frantically tried to think of a
way to release all of the poisonous heavy chi without killing them both.

Ryouga half-smiled. "You're beautiful, you know," He said softly. "It's a shame you're not real."

"I am real, Ryouga," Ranma insisted. She shook his shoulder. "I'm here, see? I'm real."

He closed his eyes. "That's too bad then, for you…" He said softly. "A girl trying to be a man among men. Still better than being a pig. Still a person, though." He sighed. "It was kind of a fun fantasy… taking a girl home to meet Mom… talking like she would be there, like I could actually have a life and a family…Guess it makes sense that a fake person would have a fake girl as his fake girlfriend and take her to his fake home to meet his fake family and pretend it's all normal."

"Your Mom isn't fake!" Ranma latched onto that desperately. "She isn't fake, and she needs you, Ryouga! She needs you to find a cure for your curse so she can be cured, so that she can find home!"

He shook his head sadly. "Never be cured. Just hurts to hope."

"No, dammit!" Ranma snarled, grabbing his face in her hands. "You're not doing this! I'm not letting you! I'm your Anchor, I'm the one you picked to follow around for the rest of my life, so follow! I promised your Mom I'd take care of you, and I swore I'd do it! Not because I was your fake girlfriend, not because I owed her anything, but because I need you here!"

He cracked an eye open. "You don't need me."

"Yes I do!" She found she couldn't fight the tears anymore so she just let them flow. As bad as she felt at this moment, she knew it'd be nothing if she failed to convince him. "I need you because… because everyone around me… everyone… wants something from me I can't give. Nabiki wants me to be normal. Akane wants me to be a girl. Mom and Dad want me to be a perfect man, all of their contradictions included. Shampoo wants me to be an Amazon husband. Ukyo wants me to be an Okonomiyaki chef. Kuno wants me to be his friggin' concubine and his murder victim at the same time, and I don't even wanna think what Kodachi wants me to be!" She panted, eyes wild. She felt an odd calm, feeling like she was purging something that had been buried too deep for too long. "You… you just wanna be my rival. You just wanna fight me. You just wanna try to be better than me. I can do that. It's about all I can do. I need that. I need someone who isn't trying to make me into something I'm not. I need… I need an anchor of my own."

Ryouga opened both eyes. They were clearer now. "... I hate your guts, though."

Ranma smiled, in spite of the weight, in spite of the sadness and hopelessness and shame and guilt pressing down on her. "Yeah, you do. But at least you just wanna spill 'em out on the ground, instead of tryin' to turn 'em into a wasp-waisted french belle with an eating disorder."

Ryouga blinked. More clarity now.

"I don't think I can stop it," He said hoarsely.

"S'okay, I've got a plan," Ranma lied, looking around again.

"No you don't," Ryouga coughed. "Get out. Get out now while you still can. I can't hold it much longer."

"No, no, I got this. I'm not leaving you after I just told you all that crap! You gotta live so you can never tell anybody ever!" She spotted a rocky outcropping that had so far withstood the oppressive gravity. "Okay, I've got it, to your right. There's cover. When I say, let it go, and then we'll run for it..."
"I can't run," Ryouga protested weakly. "My legs have gone numb."

"Then I'll carry you! Just shut up and do it, okay?" She gripped his face and forced him to look at her, so she could be sure he was focused. "Ready?"

He nodded, though his expression was confused, like he was seeing something he wasn't entirely convinced was real.

"Okay…" She braced herself, ready for the moment she could move again. "... Go!"

Ryouga shuddered, throwing his head back and groaning as suddenly all of the negative feelings, all of the depression and anger and feelings of helplessness erupted from him all at once to become a blazing red-gold pillar reaching for the heavens. But almost immediately the cascade slowed, reaching its apex. Forever denied the heavens, the weight of his pain came crashing back down, rushing back to earth to crush him.

As soon as the gravity lifted, Ranma darted forward, slipping her arms under his and lifting him onto her shoulder as she forced herself to move. Everything felt slow, everything felt heavy still, even though she knew she was up and moving. She could feel her feet digging furrows into the ground as she kicked off, trying to force more speed. Everything around her was already getting brighter as the column of energy started to collapse back in on itself.

She dove as they reached the bluff, just cresting it as the Shi Shi Hokodan impacted.

The bluff provided almost no protection. It crumbled into rock splinters as soon as the blast hit. Ranma felt her body thrown, arms and legs wrenching painfully as a titan's fist smashed into her back with a force that would not stop. Rock shards lacerated her back, and her vertebrae popped. She screamed in pain, and for a moment she was convinced this was going to be the end for her.

She felt herself suddenly pulled around, a body pulling her close and curling around her protectively, blocking the worst of the blast as they tumbled through the air. She had an extra moment or two of consciousness to register surprise as they slammed through a tree, then another, then another, before crashing and bouncing across the forest floor, the breath crushed from her lungs and her body battered her from all sides as Gaia herself sought to pound her into submission. The world went dark long before she rolled to a stop.

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So, I'm expecting this chapter is going to be a bit controversial.

I'm an undisciplined writer. I make a general outline of what I'm planning, but when I write, I give my muse her head and let her follow threads as they emerge, which kinda of happened here with Akane. To me, Akane is a complicated girl. She's a good person, but she has some pretty severe personality tics, and in the process of exploring them with MY version of her, explaining those tics turned her 'boy hatred' into something a little deeper and darker.

Then you plug in Ryouga's obvious adoration of her, and that somehow she remains oblivious to it despite being subjected to it constantly from every other direction and… well.

I don't think she's intentionally being cruel. I think it's the mental gymnastics she's doing to allow Ryouga to be classified as 'okay' in her mind. So when she figured out he was P-chan, rather than freaking out as is the common headcanon response… she reclassified him as that.

I'm not suggesting that's anything like what Rumiko Takahashi intended. In fact, I'm pretty sure at this point her opinion of my interpretation would be best expressed in the form of a restraining
I just want to reassure my readers that I AM going to work Akane through this. She's not going to be vilified, or come out of this a bad person. But she is probably just as messed up as Ranma is, if for different reasons. All of the cast are, but Ranma and Akane undoubtedly have the lion's share of issues. So, on the path to being better person, there are hiccups, setbacks, and detours. This chapter is one of those for her, and by extension the whole group.

I might be over explaining. I try my very best to not slip into cliche or vilification as a shortcut. Even Himura gets her motivations and thought processes worked out, as horrible as they are, and she is very much a product of where she came from: Her background has been worked out in my notes, and she has good reason for being who and what she is.

I really do appreciate all your feedback, whether you think I'm doing good, or am totally off base. Whether I incorporate it or not, it all gets me thinking and considering, and generating new ideas, so please keep the reviews coming!
"All right Akane, repeat it back to me. What are the steps I just took?"

"Hmmm?" Akane blinked and looked up, taking a moment to focus on the Okonomiyaki chef. "Oh, uh… I'm sorry, Ukyou, I missed what you were doing."

Ukyou gave Akane an exasperated look and put her hands on her hips. "This is the third time you've missed it! This is the basic prep for the grill before we start making an okonomiyaki! Look, if you don't want to do this today…"

"No, no!" Akane quickly shook her head. "I do, I'm just…" She sighed, not wanting to talk about the real reason just yet. "It all bleeds together, you know? I can remember the steps, but I get the order wrong, or I leave one step out and it ruins the whole thing… Your hands are just a blur, I can barely keep track!"

Ukyou raised an eyebrow. "This from the girl who counted every one of 500 blows Ranma landed on that figure skating letch in about 15 seconds?"

"That's different. That's martial arts," Akane replied glumly.

Ukyou cocked her head. "Why?"

Akane blinked. "What do you mean 'why'? This is cooking, not martial arts! It's completely different!"

"No it's not," Ukyou said. "This is part of my martial art. Just ingredients and specific actions at specific times. Like… hot ki plus cold ki, mixed in a spiral pattern, plus properly timed redirection of cold ki with your fist equals tornado."

Akane looked past Ukyou at the grill, considering.

*Volleyball as a Martial Art! No special rules or nothin'… but seein' the game as it is as a martial art, an' applyin' the Anything Goes precepts to it!*

"Let me see you do it again," Akane said, watching Ukyou's movements intently, tracking them as if she were trying to learn a kata.

Ukyou nodded and went back to the grill, restarting her prep.

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"Owwwwww…" Ranma groaned, feeling the throbbing in her head as awareness slowly swam back to her. Her back hurt. Her legs hurt. Her head really hurt. And something heavy was on top of her.

She cracked an eye, squinting. Her vision was still waverer but she could make out a mop of dark hair and a familiar black-checkered yellow bandana.

"Ugh… geddoff me, Ryouga!" She pushed at him but he barely budged. He also didn't react, still slumped limply against her.

"C-c'mon man, don't do this… someone'll come along and get the wrong idea and Akane will really lose her mind." She pushed again at his shoulder before noticing her hand came away wet. She opened both eyes and turned her hand to see her palm covered in red stickiness.
Her eyes widened and she took another look at Ryouga. His face was pale, sallow, and there was blood running down from his temple. She could see places where blood had soaked through his shirt from the back.

She couldn't tell if he was breathing.

"No… no no no no!" She squirmed out from under him frantically, doing her best to support him and get him onto his side. From the amount of blood she guessed his back was probably a shredded mess. "Come on, Ryouga… breathe! Breathe or I swear to god I'll do mouth-to-mouth on you and neither of us wants that!"

Ryouga coughed weakly.

Ranma almost sobbed in relief. "Good… keep doing that…” she said. Her own muscles ached and protested, and she was fairly sure she was pretty badly beaten up herself, but she ignored the discomfort for the moment. She got to her knees and looked him over.

His back was caked with blood, dirt and bark and he had more than a few sharp shards of rock embedded in his skin, like flechettes from a fragmentation grenade. Blood oozed from dozens of cuts and scrapes but thankfully he didn't seem to be bleeding too heavily from any one spot. Still, it was clear he had lost a fair bit of blood simply from the amount of damage. She checked his pulse. It was weak but steady. His skin was cold and clammy too, and had a greyish tinge to it. Thankfully he didn't seem to have any broken bones, but she didn't like how much he was bleeding from his temple.

She took a breath, satisfied he wasn't in immediate crisis, and checked herself. In comparison, she was the picture of health. She was covered with scrapes, bruises and various contusions, and her Furinkan uniform was shredded, but she'd been in much worse shape before.

She tried to stand, to get a better idea where they were. She winced as she felt her knee buckle. It was definitely twisted but, if she was careful, she was pretty sure she could walk on it. She looked around the forest trying to get her bearings. The sun was still high in the sky, so it was hard to tell which way was north. They were far enough into the woods to be out of sight of any buildings. However, she could tell which direction they'd come from the trees they'd been blasted through and the furrow they had plowed into the earth when they'd hit the ground again. She closed her eyes, trying to visualize which way they had been going when Ryouga's Shi Shi Hokodan had detonated.

"Okay… okay okay… So if we were moving this way, then Furinkan High is back over there somewhere… Doc Tofu's is pretty far… the hospital is closer. Okay…” She took a deep breath, knelt back down and carefully gathered Ryouga up as best she could. She slung his arm over her shoulder to support him and tried carefully to stand. He was a tremendous dead weight, and her knee wobbled again, but she managed to get up.

"Y'know… if by any chance you were thinking of miraculously recovering and being able to walk out of here on your own, now would be the time, buddy," Ranma grunted. She looked at his face but saw only his chest moving as he took shallow breaths.

"Yeah… I didn't think so…" she said. She shifted him, getting one of his arms over each of her shoulders as she draped him over her back, biting her lower lip at the pain. She did her best to ignore it and started slowly hobbling in the direction of the hospital with Ryouga's feet dragging in the soft forest dirt behind her.

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Ukyou nodded in satisfaction as she watched Akane work.

'Martial Arts' had been the magic phrase. Somehow, it made something click with Akane and the next time Ukyou ran through her prep, Akane got it mostly right, missing only a few small details. What's more, she had been aware she had missed them.

She didn't grasp the why of it yet, of course, but she was starting to separate all of the steps into separate, discrete and precise movements that lead into each other. Like a kata, you had to do all the moves in the proper sequence, or you'd end up in the wrong place or off-balance. Akane was using that mindset to quickly make the prep work into a similar sort of routine.

"Make sure the oil is evenly spread." Ukyou said. "It's what carries the heat to the food and keeps it from sticking to the hot surface and burning. You don't need very much; just a thin layer for it to skate on."

Now that Akane was getting the motions, Ukyou had started to slip in bits of the 'why' behind them, like a teacher would with a martial arts student. First master the movements, then master the theory behind them. Then one could understand and start to adapt them.

Akane had always tried to do that last step first with her cooking - adapting and making substitutions willy-nilly. Ukyou idly wondered if she had been that way with Martial Arts to begin with as well, and if Soun had somehow broken her of it. If that was so, she would have to concede a lot more respect for the man as a teacher.

Akane stopped, having greased the grill to her satisfaction. "All right…" She wiped her brow then reached for the tools to scrape down and clean the grill to start over.

"That's good, sugar," Ukyou smiled, seeing a customer come in. "Leave it, I'll use it as is."

"R-really?" Akane's eyes widened.

Ukyou kept her expression serious, but it heartened her to know that Akane was seeing this as progress as much as she was. She rewarded her student with a small smile and a wink. "Yep. First test passed. Now, be sure to watch the next steps carefully, okay?"

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"So, this is the place you have your 'Fiancée's Tea' meetings?" Nabiki asked.

Inwardly she was laughing at the coincidence as she looked over the eclectic yet somehow very deliberate jumble that was the front of Clara's Leaf tea shop, feigning unfamiliarity.

"Not look like much," Shampoo said. "Well, look like much, but not sure much what. But is best place to go to talk. Also best tea Shampoo ever have."

The humor of the situation alleviated some of Nabiki's annoyance. Ranma was still nowhere to be found and, given it was Ryoga she was chasing, Nabiki half expected to get a call from New York requesting her to wire plane fare so she and the Lost Boy could get back. That or Ryoga snapped and went full 'Prepare to Die!' mode on Ranma. At least they got clear of school grounds, but hopefully Himura doesn't find out about it. She could use an altercation like that to cause trouble for Ranma. She sighed and resigned herself to finding out about it sometime tomorrow. For now, Ranma or no, there were some ground rules that desperately needed to be hashed out amongst the Fiancées if she wanted to avert a full-scale meltdown.
The bell on the door chimed faintly as they stepped inside, eyes adjusting to the softer light within. Nabiki had no trouble spotting Akane and Ukyou sitting at a table, as they were the only other patrons present. Oddly enough, Akane was wearing an Okonomiyaki chef’s uniform and chatting animatedly with Ukyou.

She walked over with Shampoo pacing her. "When you said you were taking a half day to help Ukyou, I didn't realize you meant that literally," Nabiki said, raising an eyebrow.

Akane looked up, then glanced down at herself and blushed. "Uh… drat, I forgot to change… well…” She rubbed the back of her head sheepishly. "Ukyou only lets me do prep work so far."

Both eyebrows were up and Nabiki’s gaze switched to Ukyou. "Seriously?"

"Hey…” Akane protested weakly.

Ukyou smirked and nodded. "We've done a few trial Okonomiyaki, but we still need to get her spatula work improved so she doesn't shred them when she tries to flip. That typically takes a little while, especially with the tools I use. But not bad progress at all. She's got the steps memorized, she just needs to get the timing and execution right."

Nabiki slipped into a chair, her usual composure somewhat diminished. She leaned forward towards Ukyou. "How?"

"Okonomiyaki preparation as a Martial Art," Ukyou winked. "Took a page from Ranchan's playbook and it's working."

Akane nodded. "It makes so much more sense now!"

Nabiki rocked back in her chair, letting out a deep breath as she rolled her head back and stared at the ceiling. "Okay, I've heard Ranma's tirade on this, but this is actually scary. Either Ranma is a genius, or reality is severely broken."

"The way Ranma tells it, you were the one who first suggested the idea," Akane replied.

"I was just trying to get him to see social interactions as more complex than he was treating them, but at the same time frame it as something he could deal with," Nabiki replied. "I didn't expect his whole life to turn upside down as a result."

"Speaking of which, where is Ranchan?" Ukyou asked. "I thought you insisted that he come to this?"

Shampoo scowled, taking a seat next to Nabiki. "Maybe Akane should explain?"

Akane winced. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "I… lost my temper and said something I shouldn't have…"

"Oh Akane…” Ukyou shook her head. "I thought you had this figured out! Did you break the engagement again!?"

"Oh no, it wasn't what she said to Ranma that did it. This was an innocent bystander," Nabiki said, sitting back up and giving her sister a hard look.

Akane scowled. "Ryouga was hardly innocent."

"Oh come off it, Akane!" Nabiki growled. "You accused him and Ranma of the same nonsense you
accuse Ranma of whenever a girl happens to look sideways at him, just because, for once, we had them having a discussion like human beings rather than trying to kill each other!"

"What!?" Ukyou's jaw dropped and she stared at Akane.

"You don't know what Ranma does!" Akane started defensively. "It's different when Ranma's a girl! Shampoo, you know what I mean, right? You have a curse too!"

"Not that different," Shampoo sniffed, crossing her arms and turning her head. "Leave Shampoo out of this one."

"No, you don't get to sit this one out, Shampoo. You're the one who wound her up, and you knew you were doing it," Nabiki said sternly. She turned her attention back to Ukyou. "And Shampoo and Ranma aren't the only ones in this with a curse. Apparently Ryouga has one too. And Akane knew about it the whole time."

"Ryouga has a curse?" Ukyou said. "You mean, a Jusenkyo curse, not just the directional impairment? Poor guy… how long has he had that?"

"Apparently since before he arrived in Nerima," Nabiki nodded, shooting her sister a warning glance to keep her quiet. "He's P-chan."

Ukyou was silent a moment as she tried to process that, then slowly turned to look at Akane. "Akane…"

"It's… it's not like that!" Akane said hastily.

"No, it's not," Nabiki continued. "Because apparently my baby sister decided the best way to deal with the situation and get to keep her pet piglet was to stop seeing Ryouga as a human being."

"That's not true!" Akane protested.

"That's exactly what you said, so if you meant something different then you had better explain really quick."

Akane looked nervously around, not finding any friendly faces at the table currently as all three of the girls were glaring at her. She shrank back, feeling that isolation seeping in again. "I… I just… I meant… I knew he wouldn't do anything when he was a pig, because… because…"

"How long have you known?" Ukyou asked slowly.

"A little over a year, I'd guess?" Nabiki answered for her.

"And she said all of this in front of Ryouga?" Ukyou asked Nabiki, incredulous. Next to her Akane shrank down in her seat.

"Like he didn't even exist," Nabiki replied coldly. "All of this was while she was trying to accuse Ranma of trying to seduce him. I think you can guess what happened next."

Ukyou closed her eyes. "Knowing Ryouga? Either he'd bolt and run or fire off a massive Shi shi hokodan. You're not all cinders, so I assume it was the former?"

Nabiki nodded. "And Ranma ran after him."

"So they're in Antarctica by now. Great!" Ukyou pinched the bridge of her nose. "Akane…"
"This isn't fair!" Akane stood up, knocking her chair over and slamming her hands down on the table, eyes wild and tear-filled. "This isn't my fault! If… If Ranma didn't always… If Ryouga had just come clean…! If… if…"

Nabiki just looked at her. She noticed out of the corner of her eyes that Ukyou was opening her mouth to speak and raised a finger to keep her from responding. She just maintained eye contact with Akane and silently counted down.

Akane ran out of steam and shuddered. She started sobbing as she sank slowly to her knees, and buried her face in her arms. "... What have I done?"

Nabiki took a breath and closed her eyes to center herself. "Akane… For the next couple of minutes, no one is going to yell at you. But I need you to listen to me. Really listen, okay? Because this has been going on for a really long time."

Akane was silent a moment before there was a muffled sniffle and a nod, her face still buried in her arms.

"Good. Akane, you've got a pattern to how you deal with strong feelings. Kasumi and I saw it start happening after Mom died and… we didn't know how to help. I still don't, really, but maybe just getting it out there..." She took a breath. "When you get embarrassed or frustrated or just plain scared… whatever feeling you're not comfortable with… even things like attraction to another person, you bleed it off into anger. After Daddy started training you, anytime you got upset, you'd run into the dojo and start punching bricks. That was fine for a while, but… when Kuno gave his brilliant little speech in front of the whole school, it wasn't just bricks you were punching anymore."

"They deserved it," Akane said, still muffled.

"Yeah, they did," Nabiki replied. "You were hitting them to stop them from forcing themselves on you, and it was scary, so you poured that into your rage and used it to hit them harder. It worked, and it kept working. And when Kuno would try it worked on him, too. But it didn't end there. And I think… I think you forgot how to deal with it any other way. What's more, you started to associate boys with needing to be angry."

Akane looked up. Her eyes were puffy and red, her cheeks damp. "I'm not gay, Nabiki!"

"Akane, come off it!" Ukyou growled. "Do you honestly think after all this time anyone actually cares if you are or not? That there's some kind of judgement you need to ward off? From me!? From Shampoo!?" She gestured at their surroundings. "Does this tea shop scream 'conservative mindset' to you!? Just spit it out already! Or at least stop being so damn sensitive about it!"

Akane winced and fell silent.

"It's guilt on that one, isn't it, Akane?" Nabiki said softly. "Because of Ranma."

"Because Ranma has the curse, and everyone thinks she has to at least be bi or something?" Ukyou furrowed her brow.

"It's because what I wanted from him… wasn't what he wanted to be." Akane replied miserably.

Shampoo leaned forward and touched Akane's hand. "Shampoo understand that. Is confusing, yes? Fall in love with one way, find out is another… but still love. Shampoo do much same as Akane. Feel much the same as Akane."

"This isn't my fault!" Akane stood up, knocking her chair over and slamming her hands down on the table, eyes wild and tear-filled. "This isn't my fault! If… If Ranma didn't always… If Ryouga had just come clean…! If… if…"
"Because you feel in love with his guy side, but then found out he turned into a girl, and thought he was a girl with a guy curse?" Akane asked, remembering the misdirection Ranma had used on the Amazon during her first visit to Japan.

Shampoo shook her head. "No. Shampoo take uncomfortable feelings... feelings of love for one Shampoo should not love... and try and make into anger and hate."

Akane blinked. "... Wait, what?"

Shampoo smiled sadly. "Shampoo best of her generation in village. Not have many friends, not think want any. See others as weak. Then strange girl come, challenge, and beat. So angry, so... powerless. Give Kiss of Death. Hunt for long time." She looked down as she relived the memories. "Hunting not about find and attack. Not with such strong prey. Have to watch, to learn about. Have to find weaknesses, then find time to strike. Watched girl very long time. Learn early was no good to attack when asleep; girl somehow know, somehow dodge. Best time when just waking. So, when find, watch sleeping a lot."

"Strange thing happen. Stop looking for weakness. Start watching... just to watch. Girl different. Strange. No friends. Always wandering. Only have old man, or sometimes Panda. Both beat her, both abuse. Saw old man try and sell a few times. Succeed a few times, then steal back. Is sad. Alone, like Shampoo, but unlike Shampoo not have choice. Not because of strength or position. Girl have nothing, always taken by old man or panda. But she not know she have nothing. Not seem to know she should have anything. Seem happy. Shampoo think is idiot."

"Then, one night, girl have nightmares. She toss... turn... not aware like usual. Can hear her cry... beg... plead... not to put in dark place... in pit. She beg old man to help." Shampoo shuddered. "Old man hit her to wake up. Yell at her for tears. Tell her not to wake him up. Tell her to not be weak. She still confused from dream; not know where she is, try to reach out. He toss her away and roll over. Shampoo see then, girl happy because any other feeling punished. Not allowed to be sad. Yelled at or hit if not do what old man want. She fight back, but that usually what old man want anyway. Old man always get his way because she not have anything else."

"Hard to kill then. Keep watching. Shampoo know she must kill, or lose everything. But hard. Next nightmare girl have... Shampoo sneak into bed. Hold girl, comfort. Make nightmare go away. Leave before she wake. Happen... more than once. Shampoo almost ready to forget about Hunt. Not think about village, just want to help girl... protect girl. Then find again in Japan. Big, nice house. Big, nice family. Good food. Think maybe girl lying, fooling Shampoo. Think maybe was all trick. Make easier to try and kill. Shampoo remember village, remember punishment if no complete Kiss of Death. Shampoo convince self so can kill."

"Then meet boy-type. Same eyes as girl. Same house, same family. But see in eyes; boy have nothing. Happy because all allowed to be. Just like girl. Shampoo... Shampoo let boy knock her out so she can comfort, same way always wanted to comfort girl. Is... substitute, but is allowed by law. If Shampoo bring home strong husband then maybe Kiss of Death be forgiven. Shampoo chase him and try and forget girl, but girl keep appearing and not let Shampoo have peace. Shampoo convince guilt she feel is anger, so try and kill. Not try too hard, though. Never try too hard, even at first."

"Shown curse at last. Girl and Boy are same. Boy is curse, only ever was Girl. Shampoo almost angry enough to kill... convince self girl play trick. But then see eyes. No trick. Even after all Shampoo do, not want to fight back. Shampoo... Shampoo understand mistake then. Too quick to give Kiss of Death. Too quick to make law. Not want to kill. Want to hold and kiss and tell 'is okay'. Realize... Shampoo love girl. Realize always know, somehow, Boy was Girl. But no can now, because give Kiss. So... run away. Take punishment. Pretend not to feel that way." She sighed,
closing her eyes. "But should have stayed. Should have hugged girl and told her she sorry and she love her. Shampoo... make many mistakes." She smiled weakly at Akane. "Is why give you and Ukyou Kiss of Sisterhood. Not want to repeat mistakes. Want find way to fix."

Akane looked away guiltily. "I don't... I know all that." She said softly. "I know what I want to do. I know what I need to do. But then... then suddenly I don't. I get flustered or embarrassed and then I get angry, and then the only thing I know is that I need to get it out. I..."

"And you learned boys are a really good target for that," Ukyou said quietly. "Because Kuno and the horde taught you they were subhuman and it was okay."

"Not all of them!" Akane said quickly. "Not... not Dad or... or Doctor Tofu, or..." She trailed off, struggling to find examples. "They just... they just all seemed to want something from me that I didn't want from them. And no one seemed to understand that. And the only way to make them stop, even for a little while was... was to hit them. Or threaten them. Or make them afraid of me."

"And then Ranma came," Nabiki said. "And we pushed him off on you, because we figured the curse would fix it."

"It made it worse," Akane hiccuped. "Because... because she was everything I ever wanted, and I didn't even know it until I saw her. She was... she was like me. She understood. I didn't even mind that she was better than me. And then... and then I found out about the curse. And I still wanted her. But she wasn't real. I thought she wasn't real. She was just... a costume some boy was wearing." Akane fidgeted, plucking at her collar with fingers. "I was disgusted at first, but then... then I got to know him. And he didn't try anything with me. At first I thought... heh... I thought he might be gay, you know? He barely raised an eyebrow when the girls looked at him. But... that didn't last long. He was just... confused, and packing it all down, and turning it into something else because he didn't know how to deal with it. Just like me. And he was that way around me, and I liked that. He was part girl and I really liked that and I thought maybe I could work it out with him. But I was so afraid he'd turn out to be fooling me... that he'd suddenly pull off the disguise and be a... a..."

"A boy," Nabiki finished for her. "So... what about Ryouga?"

Akane sighed heavily. "I'm... I'm okay when boys don't... when it's not obvious they... You know. And I don't think Ryouga was really even interested in me until... until I found P-chan. Even then he was just awkward and laughed a lot and brought presents. It wasn't threatening... at first, anyway. He was like a little boy on the playground trying to show a girl he liked her without having any idea how."

"Then came that whole ice skating thing. I saw him wearing that hideous 'Charlotte' collar Azusa had put on P-chan and suddenly it all clicked. I couldn't really deal with it at the time. I was kind of in shock. So I... I convinced myself that... that Ryouga only liked me because P-chan liked me. I figured... he would tell me sooner or later, or Ranma would. But they tried to hide it. So, I didn't let on. Then Ryouga got that waterproof soap and suddenly he thought he was cured, and..." She shook her head. "He scared me. But... but I didn't want him to be a boy like that. I didn't want to think of him that way. So... so I just thought of him as P-chan."

"But he's not. And you weren't thinking of Ranma as a 'boy' either, were you. You were thinking of him as a girl, right?" Ukyou said. "So then one or both of 'em would do something to remind you of the reality, and..."

Akane squirmed. "I know it's stupid. I know Ranma's not attracted to Ryouga, but..."

"Oh no, he is," Nabiki replied matter-of-factly. "But that's not the point."
There was dead silence at the table.

"WHAT?!"

Nabiki sighed and rubbed her ear. "Ow. Ladies, please, use your inside voices."

"What do you mean 'Ranma is attracted to Ryouga'!?" Ukyou demanded, slamming both hands on the table and leaning across towards Nabiki.

"How could you know such thing anyway?" Shampoo asked skeptically.

Nabiki sighed. "I asked him. I asked how the curse worked, how things changed, and yeah, I asked him about how he felt about boys." She shot each of them a glare. "It's amazing what you can learn about someone when you just take the time to ask them questions rather than just demanding answers from them, you know?" She crossed her legs, leaned back in her chair and lifted a finger, going into full lecture mode. "Ranma's perceptions as a girl are different than as a guy. He's actually tested it, to the best of his ability. Taste, sight, touch… all work slightly differently. It's... the same software; it's still Ranma, but it's totally different hardware. And that hardware gives feedback differently."

Shampoo made a face. "Why use technology example?"

"Because it's what I know and grew up with. You should already understand all of this, you have your own curse." Nabiki replied, and then continued. "Ranma's girl side reacts differently to guys. Mikado scared him because he reacted like a girl to the unwanted kiss. I even got different answers when I asked the same question when he was a guy and a girl. The guy side was disgusted. But the girl described it to me as 'something she wanted to happen, just not with them.' Then I straight out asked her… and she wasn't sure. She didn't like being groped or manhandled, of course, nor did she feel anything but disgust for the ones who usually perpetrated it, like Kuno."

"But how do you know she is attracted to Ryouga?" Ukyou pressed.

"Body language," Nabiki replied. "By the way, she's attracted to you when you're full bishonen too, Ukyou." She tossed that out casually, smirking a little as the Okonomiyaki chef blushed and ducked her head. "But… at least on a physical level, Ranma reacts to Ryouga different from almost any other male. Part of that is just the familiarity that comes of them being friends. She certainly doesn't seem to be afraid of him trying anything. But there's an element of attraction there, I'm sure of it."

"So… I am right!" Akane sat up straight.

"Absolutely not," Nabiki replied, cutting her back down. "Akane… It's normal to be attracted to people you have no intention of being with. I'd think you'd have figured this out during the whole transition about how you feel about Ranma. Attraction is a complex thing. Part of it is biology and part of it is mental. It's why 'love at first sight' is such a complete myth; The mental can easily override the biological. You can see a person and think they're cute at first glance… maybe even feel a really intense initial rush. Or you could find someone completely plain and uninteresting. But as you get to know a person, your perception of them changes. The whole physical aspect becomes just a single part of a complex picture."

"That's an awful lot of relationship philosophy for someone who wasn't even interested in Ranma until recently," Ukyou said, crossing her arms and giving Nabiki a skeptical look.

Nabiki smirked. "My whole business is about figuring out how people think and what they want. I dated plenty but I always kept it at the 'initial attraction' stage. Usually because once I got to know most guys they were boring as hell and 'boring and pretty' is still boring." She sighed. "Ranma
is very pretty, but far more trouble than he's worth… or so I thought. Then I spent some time with him."

Ukyou grinned. "And how the mighty have fallen."

Nabiki smiled wryly. "Pretty sure the math still says I'm crazy. But the point is, even if Ranma's girl side has a base physical attraction to Ryouga, that's really not likely to change anything. Ranma already compartmentalizes that stuff. And Ryouga… well, naturally he's attracted to her girl side. The entire male population of Nerima is, including the ones that know about the curse. But the mental side of things comes into play and he doesn't even see it because it's Ranma. Hide her identity though, even for a bit, and the hormones come out to play."

"He gets fooled awfully easily…" Akane muttered.

"He might not realize redheads are rare in Japan," Nabiki replied. "He's been all over the world and doesn't even know it. That last care package he sent us came from Germany."

"So… what do we do?" Akane asked nervously.

Nabiki closed her eyes. She could visualize the corkboard in her mind, lines lighting up red as they were 'pulled' by various forces, mapping out the ripple effect of Akane's outbursts. "Long term? We should probably consider a therapist or something." She held up a hand to forestall protest. "For all of us. Including Ranma and Ryouga, if we can convince them. And that's assuming we can even find someone who could believe some of the problems we have. In the meantime…" She considered. "Start a journal, maybe? Find ways to get the feelings out that don't involve breaking things or people. Start developing new techniques for it. Invent 'Anything Goes Martial Arts Emotional Stress Management' maybe."

"You aren't serious," Akane replied, deadpan.

"I'm absolutely serious," Nabiki replied. "Relating stuff to martial arts has been working for everything else. Maybe that's the way to do it. If you're used to relating to problems in martial arts terms, why reinvent the wheel when dealing with other problems? Martial arts is flexible, inventive and disciplined." She shrugged. "There are worse models to use."

"What about Ranma? And Ryouga?" Ukyou asked.

Nabiki sighed. "Akane should probably keep her distance from Ryouga until he's stabilized. In fact, we should probably steer him clear of anyone who was there when Akane revealed his secret to the world. Shampoo excluded due to her own curse." She glanced over, satisfied that her sister looked suitably sheepish. "The rest… is going to take time and careful management. That's a lot of trust in you and humanity in general that got smashed on the floor all at once. When he and Ranma wander back into town we should have an uninvolved party talk to him and feel things out."

"I'll do it," Ukyou replied. "Ryouga is my friend. He talks to me about his problems all the time. Even the stuff that involves Ranma. He trusts me."

"M-maybe I could make him an apology okonomiyaki? Like you do with Ranma?" Akane suggested hopefully.

Ukyou shook her head. "Not a chance, sugar. First off, you're not far enough along to learn the art of okonomiyaki apology letters. And second… Ryouga doesn't take betrayal well."

Akane slumped in her seat. "I know. I just… I wish I could do something to fix this. I feel so awful!"
"Get it under control, then." Nabiki leaned across the table, putting her hand on her sister's arm. "Ranma is going to look, now and then. And so are we, even if we don't realize we're doing it. Doesn't make him or us unfaithful. You have to learn to trust and give Ranma and even Ryoga the benefit of the doubt they deserve."

They were quiet a moment. Suddenly, Akane, Ukyou and Shampoo realized they had cups of steaming tea in front of them, in their personal cups.

"It sounds like you've made some good progress," Jiro said as he placed a cup in front of Nabiki.

"Oh, uh..." Ukyou glanced at Nabiki, unsure how she would react to the odd proprietor of the tea shop. "Nabiki, maybe we should have explained this place a little..."

"Well, that's what you told me this place was for, right Jiro?" Nabiki smiled, unfazed at the effeminately dressed man pouring her tea. She picked it up, revealing the beach scene artfully painted on the white china surface of the cup. "My usual, of course?"

"As you like it," Jiro replied with a smile and a wink.

"You know each other?!" Akane gaped, looking at her sister, then back at Jiro.

"Everybody needs a warm cup of tea now and then, Akane," Nabiki replied cryptically.

"And a sympathetic ear," Jiro added.

"And a quiet place to make a difficult choice," Nabiki finished, sipping her tea. She smiled up at Jiro. "Excellent as always. I noticed the new wind chime out front, too. Very interesting design."

"Oh, I'm glad you liked it!" Jiro beamed. "It was a gift from one of my regulars. It's a Salusian antique. Such delicate craftsmanship, don't you think?"

Shampoo leaned over to the other two. "Tea shop appear out of nowhere, with owner who seem to know everything. Why Shampoo not surprised Nabiki already know all about?"

Jiro noticed and clapped his hands. "Ah, but I'm premature, aren't I? Have the three of you solved your musketeer problem?"

"Musketeer...?" Nabiki frowned for a moment.

"She's definitely d'Artagnan material," Ukyou said, turning to the others.

"You see what I'm talking about now?" Akane said. "We need her for when... when stuff like this happens!"

"Maybe not need so much if Aramis not bundle of issues," Shampoo countered, motioning at Akane with her cup.

"You're one to talk, Porthos," Akane shot back.

Shampoo scowled. "Am reading book now. Still not sure if that name insult or not."

"Let's be realistic. We've all made messes and done stuff bad enough that it's a miracle Ranma still talks to us, much less wants to be with us," Ukyou said, her tone reasonable. "Even when we do get alone time with Ranma, our wobbles screw it up before we get anywhere. We need someone who can... well... balance us."
Nabiki smirked, getting the reference. "Well, Athos, managing you three is something of a full-time job. And that assumes you are willing to listen," she sipped her tea to buy time to gather her thoughts. "I'm not a martial artist. I don't have the power to knock sense into you if you're not willing to listen to it. So I need to know you're going to be willing to listen, even if it's not something you want to hear."

"In other words… You want to be in charge," Ukyou said, leaning back in her chair.

"No, I don't," Nabiki replied, narrowing her eyes at her. "I need to be, if this is going to work."

"That asking a lot of trust," Shampoo said. "Situation already difficult with Amazons before adding girl who no can fight, much less make leader."

Nabiki put down her teacup, steepled her hands, and rested her chin on her thumbs. "You called me here, not the other way around. I'm fully aware that I'm asking a lot up front, and I'm keenly aware of the consequences of failing that trust, believe me. I also know this still leaves huge problems to work through and causes almost as many. There are…" She paused, taking a deep breath, shuddering slightly as she thought of all of the dark paths her imagination had taken her down in the last week, "…so many ways this could go badly. This isn't a short term agreement. This isn't a contract with any sort of 'end'. If we do this, we will, for all practical purposes, be fighting the entire world until we fail, or we die of old age, or by some bizarre coincidence society decides to accept this while we're still alive. Best case scenario, we manage to fend it all off well enough that we can get the occasional cease fire or lull in the conflict to snatch some happiness together. This is not the future I wanted. This is not the future I would ever have chosen. Not because of any of you, but because of all of them." She gestured towards the door. She took a deep breath. "But… this is what I will do. Because being a good businesswoman is about seeing needs, and figuring out how to fulfill them. And as things stand, we've all ended up on roads with nothing but bad ends. Any path forward for any one of us is paved with the wreckage of the lives of the rest. Ranma figured this out and has nearly killed himself trying to keep things from moving forward. But that isn't an option anymore." She gave each of them a look in turn, meeting their gazes. "So… do you want to roll the dice that you'll be the one who makes it out of the wreckage to keep going forward? Or do you want to follow the girl who has the plans for a new road?"


Ukyou sighed. "I didn't start my own business to work for someone else," She said after a moment's deliberation. "I've been my own boss since I was six years old. I even figured that when Ranchan and I finally got together that I'd be the one wearing the pants in the family." She laughed softly. "Maybe even literally. I spent who knows how long in night school courses and with my nose buried in self-study books to figure out how to handle a business, and learned just how much more there is to it than simply making good okonomiyaki. And I did it all by myself because I didn't want to rely on anyone. And if all of that struggle taught me anything, it's this;" She met Nabiki's gaze. "I know when I'm in over my head. I know when a problem is too big and it's time to get out of the way, get crushed or get help. Everything you're describing here… I can see the edges of it. Not being accepted by society? That's nothing new to me. But that's me going at it alone. But… a family? With kids? I… I always knew it'd be too big. I'd… have to change who I am… hide behind Ranma and let society see me as the housewife. Or force my kids to fight those battles too. I even accepted I might have to give up making okonomiyaki… I wouldn't even do that for Ranma. You're talking about taking on so much more." She shook her head, "and you see more of the picture, too. You
understand it well enough to be afraid, and you're not." She shook her head. "Who else is going to lead? I can't." She pushed her teacup forward. "All For One."

Akane looked at Ukyou then glanced at Shampoo and then her own cup. "Part of me is angry about this," She said softly. "This all started before I was even born. It was planned and agreed upon and then trampled on and ruined before I ever heard the name 'Saotome'. And then…" She sniffed. "... and then our parents had the cruelty to deliver my soulmate to me, right when I needed him the most; for me to fall in love with him only to find out it was doomed from the start. They had decided on my future without asking me and then sold it before I realized I wanted it." She scowled, putting her hand over her teacup. "I want this fight. I begged and pleaded and negotiated. I've fought and won challenges, fought myself, fought my own heart, and I'm tired of letting other people decide when and how I can fight, and for what." She pushed her cup forward. "All For One."

Nabiki allowed herself a small smile, though part of her still wondered if this was really a victory, or just a final failure of the last vestiges of common sense, immediately preceding the fall. She looked at the three teacups together and a quote came to her, widening her smile a little and easing her uncertainty.

"'Never fear quarrels, but seek hazardous adventures. The merit of all things lies in their difficulty.'" She put her hand on her teacup and pushed it to the center to join the others. "And One For All."

Slowly, Nabiki's grin became infectious as the others starting to smile as well. They looked around the table at each other, a sudden uncharacteristic shyness overcoming them as the import of what they had just agreed upon struck them.

"I kinda feel like… given what we just decided to do… Maybe we're being a little too formal?" Ukyou broke the silence timidly. "Maybe we should have a group hug or something?"

"Only hug?" Shampoo said, mock hurt in her voice and a mischievous twinkle in her eye.

"Don't push your luck!" Akane growled, then caught herself. She seemed to struggle internally, a flustered blush rising in her cheeks. "I mean… I'm… I'm going to need some time to be comfortable with more than that."

Shampoo's mischievous grin was replaced with a warmer, less threatening smile. "Shampoo understand. Not have many touch so far that not bad touch. Spatula girl have same problem. Sake helped."

"Okinawa cold. We weren't." Shampoo replied. She kissed her on the cheek. "Is okay, Ukyou shy in public. Shampoo know Ukyou loves. Hug now, take Shampoo to date later."

Nabiki raised an eyebrow as she stood up. "So there was more than one Mandarin lesson?"

Ukyou deflated a bit, then sighed. "I was worried Ranma would think this was weird if we got married and he found out about it. I guess that's kind of a pointless fear, huh?" She slipped out of Shampoo's embrace and stood, then reached a hand out to Akane.
Akane blushed and timidly took her hand, head bowed. She gave Ukyou a watery-eyed look. "This is really hard for me," she said softly, shaking a little.

"Well, uh… remember the roof?" Ukyou said.

"Yeah?"

*Good, because I don't!* "Ummm, maybe just like that?" Ukyou suggested. Part of her wasn't entirely sure what she was suggesting, but Akane didn't resist as she pulled her into a hug.

"That was a weird day." Akane said, leaning her head on Ukyou's shoulder. "I think I was just desperate for my own kiss."

Ukyou blinked. *Then did we…?* Her thought was interrupted as Shampoo glomped them both. The Amazon squeezed, then reached out for Nabiki's hand.

"I'm not really a hugger…" Nabiki said as she walked over to them, uncertainly offering her hand and wondering if she could get away with a quick squeeze and roll away.

It was made clear to her that was not going to happen as Shampoo pulled her in, smushing her into the other girls with surprising strength.

Nabiki quickly slipped an arm around Shampoo's waist, as Ukyou did the same from the other side, squeezing back and prompting Shampoo to relax. With the pressure off, Akane was able to slip her arm around Nabiki's waist. The four of them settled into a kind of huddle, with an obvious space in the middle.

"Shampoo think she know what to do when next see Airen." She said.

"Not sure he could handle it," Nabiki replied wryly. "The poor boy still isn't used to physical affection that doesn't result in him getting clocked. Also, that's my butt, Shampoo."

"She knows," Akane and Ukyou said in unison.

"Do you think they're okay?" Akane asked, eyes on the floor. "Ranma and Ryouga, I mean."

"Ranma has my cell phone number. She'll call if they need any help," Nabiki reassured her. "They've both been lost in the woods before."

Akane was silent a moment. "What if… What if you're wrong, Nabiki? About Ryouga, I mean. You said there wasn't anything between them because of the mental side of things, but minds change."

Shampoo rolled her eyes. "What, fall in love in five minutes together they not trying to kill each other?"

"Were Ranma and I much better?" Akane asked.

"Actually, yes. You two fought a lot, but you were like glue," Nabiki said. "Even when you didn't need to be together, you always were. It was like it just didn't occur to you to be apart, and when you were, it was a huge deal."

"I know. I guess… I'd just feel better if I had an idea how we'd handle something like that," Akane said softly. "What do we do if we put aside all our differences to be with Ranma, only to have someone on the outside try and pull him away?"

Nabiki considered a moment, then shrugged. "We get them a teacup. Now,* enough* worrying
about *theoretical* disasters! We've got enough *real* ones coming up to keep us busy." She released them and returned to her seat. "Nodoka's interview is this Sunday. We'd better start figuring out how to be ready for it if we want any chance of having Ranma's mother on our side for this."

"Speaking of disasters… who delivered the letter to Kodachi?" Ukyou said nervously.

Shampoo raised her hand, a sour look crossing her face. "Give to stupid pet ninja. Would have put in mailbox, but mailbox *explode*." 

"At least it didn't drop you into a giant washing machine." Akane said.

"Try to do that too, but Shampoo ready for trap door this time." Shampoo huffed. "*Hate* House of Kuno. Money and crazy bad mix!"

"At least we did our due diligence," Nabiki noted. "Fairly safe to assume Kodachi will be there."

"So, we just watch each others' backs, don't eat or drink or smell anything, and when she starts acting crazy we just punt her over the wall together," Ukyou said, twirling a minispatula in her fingers.

"We have to be careful. If Auntie Saotome thinks we provoked her or something, she'll be mad," Akane said. "We'd have to wait until she's *clearly* being disruptive on her own before we do anything."

"So, what is interview all about?" Shampoo asked, leaning forward. "Shampoo know about arranged marriages in China, but not know how work here."

"They *don't*," Nabiki muttered dryly. "No one *does* this anymore."

"Auntie Saotome is very… *traditional* in some things," Akane said carefully. "The whole concept of marriage is one of them. The traditional way it's done is called an *omiai*. She was very upset with how Mr. Saotome handled the *omiai* between me and Ranma, and spent considerable time telling me how she thought it *should* have gone. The rest of this I got from the school library. Usually the prospective couple and their families will meet to introduce the bride and groom to one another, with a matchmaker called a *Nakōdo* to act as a go-between." Akane sighed. "Obviously this isn't going to be your usual *omiai* since there are multiple parties involved and we all know each other pretty well already."

"Who will be matchmaker then?" Shampoo asked.

"Undoubtedly that'll be Nodoka, since she's the one who intends to make the decision," Nabiki said.

"There are matchmaking services these days, but a family member can do in a pinch," Akane continued. "She'll probably want you all to bring a *rirekisho*… a short personal history. Name, age, where you come from, and a picture or two of you."

"Doesn't she already know all that?" Ukyou asked.

"If Akane thinks she's going to be a stickler for tradition with this, it's probably best we stick as close to the traditions as possible," Nabiki replied. "Better to have it and not need it than to show up and take an immediate black mark. Besides, the more we give her to mull over, the longer we can delay things so we can figure out a way out of this."

"The *omiai* is just an informal meeting. Usually there are three meetings and then a decision is made. Since Ranma already knows us, I imagine this will be about us getting to know *her*, so she can
decide if we're a good match for Ranma," Akane continued.

"Informal. So… regular dress then?" Ukyou said skeptically.

"Informal by Nodoka's standards," Nabiki corrected her. "Which means traditional kimono. Demure and ladylike to the nines."

"Should dress Japanese? Or wear something formal from home?" Shampoo asked.

Akane winced. "There's a… strong bias against foreigners in these things. I don't know what criteria Auntie Saotome is looking for, exactly, but I know she's very concerned about Ranna's wife supporting him the way she supported Genma, so…"

"... Play the traditional Japanese housewife as best you can," Nabiki finished.

"And then express a willingness to let our husband leave home with our two year old child to wander the wilderness for fourteen years?" Ukyou muttered sarcastically. "With or without the massive cat-induced psychological scarring, do you think?"

"Don't bring that up," Akane added quickly.

"She doesn't like confrontation," Nabiki agreed, remembering that Nodoka had always been dismissive of her concerns.

"Any family members involved should come if possible, but it's not required," Akane added.

"Is good. Great-grandmother plan to come anyway," Shampoo said.

"Does she… know about all this?" Ukyou asked. "I mean, I know this was kind of your idea, the… uhh…"

"Harem?" Nabiki suggested.

"... I really would prefer we use a different word," Ukyou muttered. "But… yeah. The harem thing."

"Great-grandmother… amused by idea," Shampoo said sheepishly. "Like aud… aud… like that is bold plan. Say Ranna have to pass scrutiny of elders. Us too… especially Mercenary Girl." She glanced at Nabiki. "And say we expected to return to village eventually, contribute to prosperity."

"What's 'eventually'?" Nabiki asked, narrowing her eyes.

"Restaurant do well, send money back to village. Ukyou business also do well. Ranna, Akane, Nabiki still have much schooling to do. Cologne want come back with education, make restaurant sufficient, so no have to run ourselves anymore…"

"I think you mean self-sufficient, Shampoo," Nabiki noted, her expression softening into one of amusement.

Shampoo cocked her head. "But… is restaurant. No have a 'self', only have kitchen, tables, building. Is place with things."

"I should show you some of the stuff in business law sometime. You might be surprised," Nabiki replied. She took a deep breath. "I'm going to be honest… moving to China is not my first choice."

"It all buys time, right?" Ukyou said. "We keep doing what we're doing, get successful… who knows? At that point we might want to open branches in China anyway."
Nabiki considered, a sly smile spreading. "You know, if we do have to go to China, I do prefer the idea of going as a business tycoon. Especially since we've already got a couple of successful brands to start with…"

"And this is where we start discussing prenuptial agreements," Ukyou said nervously.

Nabiki grinned, wolf-like and leaned forward, resting her chin on the back of her hand as she gave Ukyou a look that could be described as *seductively predatory*. "Oh no, Ms. Kuonji, now that I've got this idea in my head, you and Shampoo are far too marketable to let go."

Ranma picked at the food on the tray in front of her. She put her fork down and sighed. Hospital food technically wasn't as bad as Akane's cooking but her appetite hadn't been that great to begin with.

She rubbed the back of her hand where the IV was. She hated having it stuck in her, but the doctors had insisted and she wasn't about to argue too hard with them for fear of getting separated from Ryoga.

She glanced over at the other bed then slipped out from under the covers of her own, grabbed her IV stand and walked over to the other bed.

Ryoga was laid on his side, bandages covering most of his torso. They had spent almost two hours in the operating room pulling shards of rock out of his back while Ranma was forced to sit and wait. Thankfully, they still had her on file as Ryoga's medical contact. She didn't even blink when they referred to Ryoga as her fiance. There wasn't any acting required this time; she was genuinely scared for him.

She pulled up a chair next to his bed and sat down. If anything, he looked worse; dark circles under his eyes, his cheeks sunken. The blood and dirt had been cleaned up, replaced with bandages, but he was still pale and limp and she didn't like it. It wasn't how Ryoga should look. *Ever."

Explaining how they had gotten their injuries had been tricky, but Nabiki's guidance paid off once more. Ranma had kept it simple. They had been in the woods together. There had been an explosion. She didn't know what it was. Ryoga had protected her from the worst of it with his body.

It worked. The doctors theorized that it could be anything from a natural gas pocket near the surface to an old, unexploded World War II munition. The authorities were going to investigate but didn't think they'd find much after the fact.

"Couldn't really tell them the truth now, could I?" Ranma thought, looking at Ryoga's face and remembering that awful, empty look in his eyes as the physical manifestation of his depression threatened to crush them both. Without thinking, she brushed a stray lock of hair from his face. *That was too close. I knew things were tough for you but I didn't know you were that close to the edge! I shoulda… I…* Her train of thought stalled out. She wanted desperately to help him somehow, but she was at a loss as to *how*. Everything that should be good in Ryoga's life seemed to just be tangled up in more pain for him.

"Is that what you feel all the time?" Ranma wondered. She folded her arms on the side of his bed and rested her chin on them, just watching him breathe to reassure herself that he was still there. *All that awfulness pulling you down like that? All the bad stuff in your life stuck on an infinite loop in your head?*
There was a soft knock at the door. Ranma straightened self consciously as the door slowly opened and the nurse poked her head inside.

"I'm sorry, I'm not disturbing, am I?" she asked, smiling. "I just need to check on Mr. Hibiki."

"Oh, uh… no, not at all." Ranma scooted back.

The Nurse walked over, checked Ryouga's IV’s, listened to his pulse and made sure his dressings were clean. Ranma fidgeted a bit, noticing the nurse kept shooting glances at her over her shoulder.

The nurse finished, then turned. "He's doing well. I don't see any reason why he won't be awake tomorrow. Do you need any help yourself?"

"Oh, uh… no…" Ranma shook her head. She felt self conscious in just the hospital gown.

The nurse smiled. "Please forgive me for being nosey, but… have you and your fiance known each other long?"

Ranma blinked. It took a moment for her to remember the nurse was referring to Ryouga. "Ummm… since middle school," she said, not seeing any harm in being truthful.

"Oh! High school sweethearts!" She clapped her hands together.

Ranma rubbed the back of her neck sheepishly. "Uh… not really. We… uh… we kinda didn't get along well then."

She beamed. "Well, passion is passion, after all. The intensity remains even if passionate dislike turns into something else, hmm?" She gave Ranma a knowing glance which succeeded in turning the redhead's face almost the same shade as her hair.

"It's… Me'n Ryouga… it's… complicated." Ranma finished as she fidgeted in embarrassment.

"It always is at your age," the nurse said knowingly. "But… you should know… the doctors were talking about you two the whole time they were working on him. The injuries he took, compared to yours… He sacrificed himself to save you. With no hesitation whatsoever." She leaned in conspiratorially. "You should also know that many of the girls on the floor are terribly jealous. It's hard enough finding a man who's reliable enough to take out the trash these days. This is like something out of a romantic novel."

_You OWE me for this, Ryouga!_ Ranma thought internally as her cheeks burned. _You owe me for this FOREVER! _"Y-yeah… That's my Ryo… always charging in to protect me. Aheh..."

"And here you are keeping vigil, after carrying him through the woods to safety despite your own injuries." She smiled warmly. "It's not hard to see it goes both ways."

Ranma was fighting a losing battle with her own rising humiliation, the urge to blurt out the truth and set the record straight only restrained by the grim imaginings of the kind of awkwardness that would create.

She clucked her tongue. "Oh, I'm embarrassing you, aren't I?" She put a hand on Ranma's shoulder. "I'm sorry, dear. I forget sometimes how confusing and difficult it can be to be young. It's all so intense and urgent and immediate, isn't it?"

Ranma took a deep breath, trying to calm herself. "You could say that."
"I'd say 'enjoy it while you can', but age colors the memory. It's all much more pleasant with the comfort and selective memory a few years brings." She gave Ranma a cursory check while she waited. "Would you like a hand back to bed?"

"I'm fine," Ranma replied. "Thank you." She added as an afterthought, trying to soften the slight edge that had crept into her voice. "I… I just… I need to be here when he wakes up is all." To defuse any lingering notions of blowing himself up!

"Would you like a blanket and a pillow then, maybe?" She asked more softly this time.

"I… yeah." Ranma surrendered and nodded, unable to deny she felt cold.

The nurse stepped out a moment, and Ranma folded her arms on Ryouga's bed again, resting her chin on them, fatigue slowly winning out against her self-consciousness.

"... You better still be here when I wake up," she muttered, eyelids drooping closed in spite of herself.

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Consciousness was pain.

This wasn't a new concept to Ryouga Hibki. Usually his waking hours were defined by some sort of nameless, lonely ache. But in this case it was considerably more literal.

He gasped. His back was on fire, and the smallest movement set tearing, burning pain down his spine. He could feel tightness and constriction of bandages and the familiar tug in his flesh of stitches as each breath pulled on them ever so slightly. He carefully opened an eye, not entirely sure what was going to greet him.

He was on his side in bed. His right shoulder was asleep from laying on it so long, his arm tingling with pins and needles. The room was a sea of neutral whites and pastel shades… a hospital room - a lot like the one he had been in so recently. It was even possible that it was the same hospital.

It took no more than a moment to process all of that.

What held him up was the thing he couldn't make sense of. At the side of the bed, wearing a hospital gown of her own and covered by a blanket over her shoulders, was a beautiful girl. She was asleep, head pillowed on her arms on his bed, right next to him. Her red hair fell in an unkempt wave around her head to frame her face. Her lovely features seemed relaxed as she dozed, but from the dark circles under her eyes and the subtle twitching of her facial muscles, it probably wasn't a terribly restful sleep.

He tried to jog his brain, to remember who she was. His mind was still sluggish, fogged by whatever medication they had him on and probably whatever residual anaesthetic had kept him knocked out this long. He remembered light… pressure… and a face. Her face, smudged with dirt and streaked with tears, her blue eyes pleading… and her words…

I need you here!

The rest was a jumbled mess but he got the notion she had saved him and had endured a lot of pain to do it. That just confused him further as to her identity. She was familiar but he couldn't think of anyone like her who would do that for him. Something nagged at him but it was still hard to string thoughts together and the memories drifted out of his reach. He wanted to sit up, to get off his shoulder, but he couldn't seem to muster the willpower to make his muscles obey him just yet. So he
was left with little to do but study her and wait for things to clarify.

She showed signs of injuries too, though not so severe as what he was feeling along his back. That made him feel… better? There was an explosion... He remembered. She cried out. That's right... I tried to protect her. I guess it worked. He felt a small bit of relief at that though he couldn't shake the sense that the injuries she did have were still his fault. It was hard to tell; his emotions felt muted... deadened… emptied. It was an oddly familiar sensation. He knew he had felt it before but he got the sense it usually didn't take so long to come back. It allowed him a certain detachment to think things through that he didn't usually have. He was pretty sure that, under normal circumstances, the panic he'd feel at finding a girl next to his bed would be paralyzing. There was something else there; something in his dim, unfocused memories that told him he wasn't going to be happy when everything finally came back to him.

Too bad. This is kind of peaceful. He simply lay there a while longer, not really thinking of anything. It was odd being in a place with someone else and just being silent. Just being there, with all his usual guards down, being aware of another person and not being afraid of having a thousand nameless emotions wrapped up in it.

Inevitably the discomfort in his shoulder and arm became hard enough to ignore that he decided he needed to move. He tried to will his limbs into motion but they didn't respond at first. It wasn't paralysis as much as just finding the will to make them move. Finally he managed a weak flop of his left arm. A few more attempts and he felt the odd disconnect with his body starting to ease. He used his left arm as leverage and tried to ease himself up without disturbing the girl asleep by his bed.

He felt a flare of pain in his back as his muscles tensed and he struggled. What was usually a trivial, unconscious motion was now a trial, trying to make a movement without using the damaged muscles that usually did the job. He quickly had to trade his careful movements for less elegant flailing as he narrowly avoided flopping onto his back.

The shaking of the bed caused the girl to stir. Her eyes opened slowly and she blinked once; twice. They were in fact blue, just as his blurry memory suggested. He watched, curious what she was going to say or do. She lifted her head and her eyes came into focus as she became aware of him and her surroundings.

"Oh!" She saw him struggling still and threw off the sleep, reached for his shoulder and helped him lever himself fully upright. "Easy there, Ryouga… you don't want to pop a stitch."

Are you real? He found himself gripped with the absurd notion to ask that question even though she undoubtedly was. He had a vague sense of not really believing in her existence before. For some reason just accepting the reality plainly in front of him didn't feel quite right.

I AM real, Ryouga! I'm here, see? I'm real!

"Sorry…” he croaked. He wasn't exactly sure why, but it felt like the right thing to say. He was barely audible, his mouth and throat dry, his tongue swollen and clumsy.

She noticed immediately and reached for a glass of water on the nightstand next to the bed and offered it to him. He felt a flicker of annoyance and an urge to try and take the glass with the protest that he could do it himself but his limbs were still not quite on speaking terms with him and his left arm flopped a bit uselessly. He submitted and let her give him the drink, only to realize just how thirsty he really was.

"Better?" She asked after a few sips. He wanted more but he nodded, his mouth moistened enough that he could wait until he could manage the glass on his own. He didn't know why, exactly, but he
didn't want her fussing over him. It was… what was it? He didn't want her to see him this way for some reason.

She seemed to see the confusion in his eyes. "You remember what happened?"

"Kinda fuzzy…” he admitted. "Hard to remember... Something bad. Explosion... My fault."

"They've got you doped up pretty good," she said. "I bet your back must hurt." Her eyes dropped and her voice almost became a whisper. "You scared the hell out of me, man."

*She was afraid for me. Am I important to her?* He prodded his sluggish brain but couldn't tell for sure. It was maddening how the sense of familiarity only grew but he still couldn't seem to pluck a name or an identity for her from the fog. *Is she important to me?* That answer was easier. *Yes, she is.* That thought carried with it a strange mix of emotions, but not what he'd expect to feel regarding a pretty girl his age. Frustration. Anger. A desire for respect. A sense of betrayal. Those feelings were old and strong. Around them were newer emotions - a timid sense of trust. Hope. Confusion. And through it all, binding it all, was the certainty that this person was *important* to him in some way.

"I'm sorry," he said, more sincerely now. "Were you hurt badly?"

She shook her head. "Scrapes and bruises, mostly. Twisted my knee. They said I got pretty badly dehydrated carrying your heavy ass out of the forest, though." She smirked at him, holding up her left hand to show off her own IV line.

"Sorry…” he mumbled again. She was tiny compared to him; the notion that she could *lift* him, much less carry him through the forest over any distance was astounding. He wondered what kind of relationship they had that she would do that for him. He kept getting the notion that she didn't like him, that he didn't like *her*, or that he *shouldn't*, but his memories, her actions, and how she was treating him now just didn't mesh. Something didn't make sense.

"You can stop saying that." She said sarcastically. She lightly tapped him on the shoulder with her fist. "But… you're not going to do that again anytime soon, right?"

"I don't even remember what I did…” he said, feeling an odd urge to chuckle. It wasn't mirth, though. It was a dark thing, something that came from the black ooze of emotions that were gradually seeping back into him.

"Doesn't matter. Promise me you aren't gonna *ever* do that again. Swear it on your honor. You owe me that much." Her eyes were hard, and… captivating? There was anger there, but also fear. Desperation? Things he couldn't identify yet. Complexities.

"... Please?” she said finally, holding his gaze.

That broke him. He knew that when he remembered he'd feel differently, that there was something important he was forgetting about her, but right at that moment, had this been a different place or age, he would have pledged his sword to her.

"I swear…” he said slowly.

She seemed to relax, letting out a breath she had been holding. "Good. Look, they only needed to keep me overnight, but they want to keep you a few days longer to make sure that mess you call a backside doesn't get infected. Are you gonna be okay if I have to leave you here on your own?"

He felt a lurch inside him. Loneliness was a familiar sensation. *Very* familiar. But for some reason right at the moment the notion of it was intolerable. "I don't know…” he croaked.
Her eyes widened a bit, but then softened. *Compassion,* he recognized in them. He didn't know why there was a little voice inside him that protested every observation he made about her. He wondered what it was that had twisted his opinion about her so much, but he decided at least for now to stop listening to that angry little voice.

"All right. I'll stay. Don't worry, I won't go nowhere." She said. "I gotta make a phone call, though. I wanted to wait until you were awake first before I did."

*Who would she call?* He wondered. A name bubbled up from his mind, and he gasped a bit at the rush of emotions that came with it. Dark despair, hopelessness, shame, self-disgust, longing. "*Akane...*" he gasped.

"*No!*" she said suddenly. She grasped the sides of his face and made him look at her. He had a flicker of memory of her doing this before. "*No...*" She said more gently, "I'm gonna call Nabiki and ask her not to say anything until you're clear headed enough to decide what you want her to hear, okay? We can trust her."

Nabiki. That name didn't carry any strong feelings for him, one way or another. "*Okay...*" he said finally. His eyelids drooped, exhausted from fighting the medication.

"Still out of it, huh?" She smiled gently and started easing him back onto the bed, arranging the pillow to help take pressure off his shoulder and arm. He didn't even think to resist, deciding consciousness wasn't as urgent anymore.

She pulled the blanket over him. "You're a *lot* easier to manage like this. Heh, don't worry buddy, you'll be up and about and yelling at me for this in no time." She patted his shoulder. "I'll be right back, okay?"

"*Okay...*" He mumbled sleepily, darkness crept into the edges of his vision and he succumbed once more to sleep. As he drifted off, one last thought occurred to him.

*I forgot to ask her name...*

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The insistent ringing dragged Nabiki unwillingly from sleep. She groaned and and slowly cracked an eye as gradually, comprehension of the sound intruding on her pleasant dreams trickled in.

Unlike Ryouga, awareness came quickly as soon as recognition of the sound reached her. She had trained herself to recognize the distinctive ringtone she had selected for her phone; only a handful of people even had the number, so if she heard that ring tone it was *always* important.

She lunged for her side table and managed to snag the cell phone and bring it to her ear. "Hello?"

"*Nabiki*" Ranma's familiar voice came through. A little subdued, but Nabiki was too relieved to hear from her to care.

"Ranma, I've been worried!" Nabiki rolled onto her back with a sigh. She had figured that it might be a while before Ranma managed to steer Ryouga back to working telephone service but that hadn't made the wait any easier. "Did you manage to corral Ryouga? Do you need train fare or something to get back?"

"*No, uh...*" Ranma sounded *hesitant,* which instantly got Nabiki paying closer attention. "*We actually didn't go THAT far. There been anything about explosions in the news?*"
Nabiki's eyes widened. "Oh no…" Despite not being a martial artist, it paid to have a basic knowledge about the tricks and techniques that were being tossed about, if only to know when to change the odds she was offering or when it was time to use Kuno as a shield. Ryoga's Shi shi hokodan was rather infamous… including his use of it for self-medication. "It was that bad? Are you okay? Is Ryoga…?"

"I'm fine. Just some scrapes and bruises. Ryoga's kinda torn up and doozy as hell on pain meds."
Ranma replied. "He's still not in a good place, though. I told him I'd stay with him so I'll be here until they say he's clear to go home."

"Ranma," Nabiki sighed. "They have people to deal with attempted suicide... you don't have to…"

"I didn't tell them it was… look, I don't even know if that's what it was or if it was just a Shi shi hokodan that got out of control, but what am I supposed to tell them? That he makes giant beams of energy fueled with his depression and that he nearly killed himself with one? They think it was a gas explosion or something. Besides, you think that putting him in restraints would make it better? Wouldn't hold him anyway and wouldn't stop him from blowing up. I just gotta stick with him until he levels out, then we can find a more permanent solution."

"Why not call Akari to come stay with him? Wouldn't that be better for him? Or his Mom? You said she was in town, right?"

"Trust me, it wouldn't be," Ranma replied. "Akari is a pile of guilt for him right now and his Mom is liable to end up lost for another four years if she steps out her front door. Speaking of which, can you check on her for me? Make sure she's got food and stuff, so she can stay put? It's important, trust me."

"Yeah… yeah, I can do that," Nabiki replied. "What about you though, Ranma? There's school today. If you take a hit on your attendance, that's grounds for Himura to boot you off the team. Not to mention your Mom expects you to be present on Sunday for her Fiancee Interview."

"I know. I'm hoping Ryo will be okay to go home to his Mom by Sunday. As for school… Well, if Himura plays that card, then she does, and I play volleyball for her for a bit is all. This is more important."

"More important than a martial arts challenge?" Nabiki felt a smile tugging at the corner of her mouth. "Who are you and what did you do with Ranma Saotome?"

"A good businesswoman has to know how to prioritize, right?"
Ranma bounced back. Nabiki could hear the smirk in her voice.

"Touché," Nabiki replied, pleased she had come back with something from her own book. "I've got your back, Ranma. I'll run interference as best I can at school, and I'll see what I can do to buy you a little more breathing room with your mother. What story do you want me to go with on this?"

"Tell everyone we got in a fight or something… 'Cept Ryoga's Mom. She… uhh... she thinks we're dating." Ranma's tone was sheepish.

"Oh? Is that why you've started with the pet names?" Nabiki asked, grinning.

"What pet names? I haven't called him 'P-chan' in forever."

"You called him 'Ryo', Ranma."

"No I didn't!"
"Should I play back the recording for you?"

"You're RECORDING this!?!"

"I record all the calls on this line."

"Look, i didn't... I mean, it was a slip, okay! It didn't mean anything! Please PLEASE tell me Akane isn't listening to this call?"

Nabiki started giggling. "Calm down, Saotome. She's still in bed. And I'm sure we can work out a suitable payment arrangement. Though you'll have to do better than just yen nowadays."

"... Dinner and a movie?" Ranma replied nervously.

"It's a start." Nabiki examined her nails. "Or if something does happen with you and 'Ryo' get me a few good pics of it. I wouldn't mind a little yaoi in my personal collection."

"WHAT?! I'm not doing anything like that with Ryouga as a GUY!"

"Okay, so you'll be doing it as a girl then?"

"Yes! I mean NO! I mean... NABIKI!"

"Shhh, you're in a hospital zone, dear heart. Keep it down," Nabiki teased. "Is there anything else you need before I go?"

"Some replacement clothes would be nice. Ours kinda got shredded by the blast. Much as I would love otherwise, better stick with girl side stuff for me. I should have some guy-side stuff that'll fit Ryouga, too. Not the jeans, though."

"Mmmmm, sharing clothes too? Sounds like you and Ryo are more serious than Akane thought!"

"Nabiki!"

"I know, I know," Nabiki giggled. "You have to let a girl have some fun now and then. Speaking of Akane though..."

"Better keep her and Ryouga separated for now. She's basically a lit fuse for him."

"Do you want her to know?" Nabiki asked quietly. "I mean, she has to know what happened eventually, but..."

Ranma was silent a moment. "... Yeah. Tell her now, before Ryouga can say not to. She needs to know what happened and deal with it, and if we let Ryouga just try and pretend this is all okay he'll just try this again somewhere I won't be around to pull him out."

"I'll handle my baby sister, you handle your boyfriend." Nabiki agreed.

"He's NOT my... ugh." Ranma groused. "Fine, it's a plan."

"I'll see you this afternoon with a care package then," Nabiki replied. "I'll tell you about how Fiancée's Tea went. For now though..." She glanced at her clock. "I had better get up if I want to get all this ready before school." She paused, suddenly a little uncertain about how to close the call. Finally she just decided to be an adult about it. "... I love you, Ranma. Stay safe, okay?"

Ranma was silent, but Nabiki could hear the hitching of her breath that typically came when she was
"I love you too, Nabiki. I will. And... uhh... give Himura hell for me, okay?"

"Working on it, trust me," Nabiki replied. "Bye." She hesitated a moment, then pressed the 'end call' button.

She sighed and closed her eyes. *Why was the weirdest part of that call trying to end the conversation like a normal boyfriend/girlfriend couple?* She paused a moment mentally. *Aside from the obvious curse-issues.*

To be fair, the curse *wasn't* actually a factor. Nabiki had long decided that Ranma was Ranma was Ranma. But casual expressions of affection were such a loaded weapon in the household that even saying 'I love you' carried with it the weight of a declaration of war.

*We'll have to work on that.* Nabiki decided. *ESPECIALLY with Akane.* She sat up and started a mental checklist of the things she needed to accomplish. It was a disconcertingly long list.

*First... coffee.*

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Nabiki sipped her coffee as she checked the backpack she was loading. Thankfully Akane hadn't woken up yet and though she had agreed Akane needed to know about what happened to Ryouga, she wanted backup from Shampoo or Ukyou before she gave her the news, lest her baby sister run off impulsively to do exactly the wrong thing.

"Too many friends and family have been in the hospital lately," Kasumi said, quietly handing over four packed lunches; one for Nabiki, one for Akane, and one each for Ranma and Ryouga. "Are you sure about what you're doing, Nabiki?"

Nabiki took a deep breath. She had been wondering that herself, but the more she mulled over the situation in her mind, the worse any other option she could conceive of got. "Kasumi, you know how when you put on the cover sheet on a mattress you have to do opposite corners, so that it fits evenly and tightly? And how sometimes it can slip and snap back, and you have to start over?"

Kasumi nodded hesitantly, her brow furrowing. "Yes...?"

"This is kind of like that, only... there are many bed sheets and corners, all at once. And it's hard to tell which corners are opposite. And they snap back *hard.* But... it's the only way to do things to cover it all neatly and evenly - to make sure no one ends up out in the cold at night." She looked at her sister to see if what she said made any sense, suddenly doubting it herself.

Kasumi nodded. "I've always worried about you... Ranma and all of his friends and..." She colored a bit. "... I suppose *lovers* now, isn't it? I had so hoped that as time went on the urgency of this whole situation would fade; that this could become just a silly story you would all tell at some get-together in a few years."

She took a deep breath. "That was naive of me. I want... I want to help more, Nabiki." She looked down at the bento she was holding in her hands. "Cooking meals and making beds isn't enough. It never was."

"Kasumi..." Nabiki blinked, unsure how to respond to her older sister's request.

"Let me talk with Nodoka. I can handle her." Kasumi replied. "She sees me as a fellow housewife rather than a child like you and Akane. I can try and buy you some time as far as her Interview goes."

Nabiki considered that. She still felt a little sheepish trying to explain the whole situation to her sister...
but Kasumi had consistently surprised her with her dogged supportiveness. "All right, if you're willing, that would be a big help." She paused a moment before adding. "We... the, uh... fiancees... have started meeting at a local tea shop to hash things out and strategize for defusing potentially explosive situations... would you like to come the next time we meet? If you're going to help us out, you at least deserve to know how this all works."

"Oh my... Are you suggesting that I join Ranma's harem, Nabiki?"

Nabiki choked on her coffee and was unable to reply as she tried frantically to clear the hot caffeinated beverage from her sinuses.

Kasumi giggled lightly. "On that I'm afraid I will have to pass. It would just be too odd, though I am flattered you thought of me. But I think tea sounds nice. I would love to join you as a guest."

Nabiki gasped and glared at her older sister, still unable to decide for certain if she did such things on purpose or not. She added a few points to her estimation of Kasumi's deviousness and potential mischievousness just to be on the safe side. "I'll... ~koff~ let the girls know."

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When next Ryoga Hibiki stirred, the hazy fog of anaesthetic and painkillers had been replaced with a pounding headache and an all-to-clear memory.

"Oh god... just let it be a bad dream like all the rest. He held his eyes shut against the pounding in his skull, hoping that if he kept them that way, this reality, whatever it was, would fade and he'd wake up in his tent, on his way to see Akane, with everything the way it was supposed to be.

Unfortunately for him, he had indulged in the pleasant numbness and forgetfulness long enough and the price had now come due; a splitting headache and the clarity of sobriety.

He cracked his eyes open, and saw what he had feared, what he had known would be there. The crisp, off-white linens of the hospital bed, the steady beep of monitoring machines and the smell of antiseptic.

Solitude without even the comfort and familiarity of his own tent and sleeping bag. The world was a dark and lonely place.

"Oh, hey, look who's up!" A familiar, infuriating voice came from behind him, towards where he assumed the door was. Not lonely enough!

"Go away, Ranma," Ryoga growled. I can't deal with this. I can't deal with her-HIM right now! I just need a few minutes to myself to get myself up and get this tube out of my arm, and then I can be gone and...

His mind filled with the image of a dream, the one that had been tormenting him in his sleep. He had sought to expel his pain, realized it was too much, and decided to simply accept it, but unlike reality someone had come. Someone had cared... a girl? An illusion. A fantasy, maybe, conjured by whatever last-minute urge had caused him to try and lurch away from the blast and save himself. Some cruel trick of his stubborn survival instinct.

"There's a coffee machine out there that does hot chocolate. Not sure how good it is but it's hot. Well... warm... ish." Ranma's voice was in front of him now.

That's it. I'm going to strangle him, THEN find my way out of here! His eyes snapped open. "Ranma, go awa...!"
His words died in his throat. The girl from his dream was looking at him. Right in close, inches from his face, peering at him with an expression of concern.

"Gah…!" Ryouga tried to scrambled back on the bed, only for his back to flare up in molten pain. He cried out, flailed and managed to force himself into a half sitting position. He stared at her in uncomprehending terror.

"Are you still loopy on those meds?" she asked with Ranma's voice, cocking her head curiously at him. "I kinda liked it better when you were dopey and agreeable."

She has Ranma's voice! WHY DOES SHE HAVE RANMA'S VOICE?!

She's Ranma? WHY DOES RAMNA LOOK LIKE THE GIRL FROM MY DREAM?!

Ryouga stared at her for a few moments more until his heart rate came back down and the initial rush of adrenaline faded enough for him to look closer. It was like one of those visual puzzles, where you had to unfocus your eyes to see the secret hidden by the unfamiliar pattern, except for some reason he couldn't quite get this one.

"Ranma?" He asked uncertainly. "What… what happened to you!"

"I got blown up, that's what!" Ranma scowled at him, but it wasn't right, somehow. It didn't look like how he remembered Ranma's scowl. It looked like a girl scowling.

"No, I mean… why do you look like a girl!?" Ryouga demanded. He blinked and shook his head but the illusion wasn't breaking.

Ranma raised an eyebrow. "... Because I'm a girl, dumbass." She winced the instant she said that. "I mean… damnit Ryouga, you know how this works!"

"That's not how you look when…" Ryouga protested, but then he remembered. Brief flashes, a girl claiming to be his fiancee… a girl in a gym outfit crying because she had lost her ball… another fiancee, this one with brown hair, but the same face… They… they looked like her. But… they were all Ranma, and as soon as I realized that the illusion was gone. I KNOW this is Ranma, so why…? "... Look, just get some hot water and change back, okay?"

"No can do, buddy," Ranma said. She took a sip of her hot chocolate then coughed and spit it out. "... Okay, maybe should have gone for the soda machine…"

"Why not?! Just dump that stupid cup over your head and change back!" Ryouga made a swipe for the cup but his movements were slow and she yanked it out of reach.

"I can't! I'm your fiancee, remember?!" She scowled at him again as she put the cup on the table on the far side of the room, safely out of reach.

"You're what?!" Ryouga stared at her, uncomprehending. Was that part of the magic? "No you're not!"

She turned and stomped over to him and pointed a finger right at his nose. "Yes I am. Thanks to a certain someone putting me on record as their fiancee the last time they were here!"

Ryouga blinked and then the memory came back to him. Getting changed back in the school with no clothes. The firefighters. All the humiliating poking and prodding with no way to get them to release him unless it was into the custody of a next of kin or equivalent. "Oh… this is the same hospital?"
"Closest one to the school. Still a pretty decent hike with heavy slab of knucklehead on your back." She crossed her arms and huffed. It was disconcertingly cute.

He rubbed a hand down his face, then tried to clear the sleep from his eyes and looked again. Nope... still cute. Not good. "Well... can you stop it then?"

She cocked her head. "Stop what?"

"This!" He motioned at her. "This... whatever it is you do when you're trying to fool me that makes you look like... like a girl!"

She looked down at herself then back up at him, scowl returning. "What? You mean look like hell!? Because I do! Because somebody blew me up!"

He winced. He hadn't intended for anyone else to get hurt. Not even Ranma. "Well... could you at least put your hair back in a pigtail?"

Ranma rolled her eyes. "No. No I can't. Not until I get home and get a hot shower and a chance to wash out all the crap from the forest. What's gotten into you, anyway? You still loopy from the meds?" She moved over to the bed and suddenly took his head in her hands, holding him still so she could look in his eyes. "Your eyes aren't crazy dilated like they were before..."

He froze. The memory of her face, tear-streaked and filthy, the pleading in her eyes. The tenuous, timid notion, somehow pushing through all the self-revulsion and despair, that maybe, just maybe, he would actually be missed.

There were way too many intense and confusing feelings associated with that face now; far more than he was ready to deal with. He pulled back, shaking his head as an excuse to break eye contact, to look away. "I'm fine, Ranma!"

"Well geez, sorry for being worried about you, you jackass," she muttered and sank back into the chair next to his bed. Her ill temper faded as quickly as it had come as she settled in. "How's the back?"

Eager to try and dispel the odd awkwardness between them, Ryouga latched onto the topic like a limpet mine. "Hurts like hell. I've had worse..."

"No you haven't."

He scowled at her, careful to keep his gaze indirect and avoid direct eye contact for the moment. That made it easier. "Hey, you didn't see what I had to go through to beat that jerk Lime."

He shuddered a bit, remembering the other fighter's hands around his throat, strength exceeding his own, crushing his windpipe. He remembered the odd calm that had come as his vision darkened, knowing that the Musk Warrior wouldn't stop with unconsciousness. The peace of knowing it was all going to be over soon. And then the despair at knowing he would never see Akane again that had fueled the ki blast that had finally put Lime down.

Akane. That name had been his mantra over the last year, keeping him slogging forward, pushing through fatigue and pain and fear. The face and the smile that he had struggled endlessly to return to, the promise of welcome comfort, love and acceptance, even if it was all wrapped in a humiliating lie. He clenched his fist feeling the tears starting to come again, the bile rising in his throat as he remembered her words... how she had shattered his heart and stripped him of his humanity without even being aware of him.
"Hey! Hey!"

He felt a small hand on his arm. He blinked and looked up, seeing Ranma looking at him with concern and worry. "Don't, Ryouga… wherever you're going in your head, don't go there, okay? You're glowing."

His breath hitched in his throat. Whatever glamor was on Ranma was still in full force, maybe even stronger now. There was a schism forming in his mind, a disconnect between his notion of his rival-sometimes-friend Ranma and this girl who had saved him… who actually cared…

It was just a pleasant illusion but that was okay. It was something; something to cling to that might save him from the darkness. A dream was better anyway, wasn't it? He couldn't fail a dream. Dreams were all he had in the end, after all.

"It's okay," He said finally. "I'm not gonna do that again, I promise." He took a deep breath, wincing as his stitches pulled. "You don't have to worry about me."

"Yeah, I do," Ranma replied crossly.

Ryouga felt a mix of the guilt that came with being a burden to someone mixed with a confusing blend of anger and… happiness. Anger that Ranma was stubbornly refusing to let him be and happiness over the exact same thing.

He rubbed his temples, wishing he could resolve the paradox that was keeping his mind churning in circles. "Do what you want then," he muttered.

Ranma's expression softened. "Look, Ryouga, I know what you're going through…"

"No, you don't!" Ryouga said forcefully. The last thing he wanted was empty pity, especially from a guy who could do no wrong no matter how much of a jerk he was, and who ended up with everyone loving him! The glamor around Ranma, whatever it was, started to fade. He could just about see his old enemy again. That was better. He latched onto that, feeling his fingers curl into a fist. It'd feel good to hit Ranma. Make it his fault again.

"Yeah, I do," Ranma insisted. "I walked through it to get you!"

The anger flickered. "What are you talking about?" Ryouga asked tightly, trying to cling to it.

"You were saturating the area with your ki," she said gently. "I… I felt it. Not just physically. It… it dug at me - kept dragging up all the bad things in my life and making them worse. It kept going around and around in my head and I couldn't make it stop. By the time I got to you… I was almost okay with letting it crush me." She looked down at the floor, suddenly uncertain. Shy, even. "I didn't… Is that what it's like all the time?"

The anger flickered and died instantly. "Not… not always…" He said quietly. "It… today was a bad day."

"You've had other bad days," Ranma replied. It wasn't a question. She was giving him that searching look again, that disconcerting understanding in her eyes.

"Yeah, I've had other bad days," Ryouga grumbled, looking away from her. It was hard to meet her gaze now. There was too much… there now. "I deal with them and move on. This was… this was a hiccup."

"Hell of a hiccup," Ranma murmured. She reached out and took his hand. "Gimme your hand. I
"Want to try something."

"What the hell are you doing!?" He squeaked, eyes wide. He wanted to pull his hand back, but his muscles had frozen.

"Shush. Just lemme concentrate, okay?" She closed her eyes, her brow furrowing for a moment with the effort.

Ryouga felt the warmth from her hand, before the glow was even visible. It seemed to flow up his arm and along his shoulder, then up along his spine into the back of his head. He gasped, feeling a trickle of emotions. Warm, like little golden swirls in the usual black mire, swirling briefly, then vanishing. Comfort, warmth, happiness. Not his, but real nonetheless.

Not his. Ranma’s.

It took Ryouga a second or two to trace back what Ranma was doing. Somehow she had taken what had happened with the _shi shi hokodan_ and inverted it, drawing upon happy memories and feelings and using her ki to inject them into his aura. Right away he knew it shouldn't have worked, his own ki should have rejected it, unless…

*She's my Anchor. That makes the link for it to travel. She... she IS my Anchor...* All at once he realized what a special thing he had wasted on something so petty as revenge on a rival. The darkness closed in again as he found a new reason to revile himself. _I did this... so I could find him... and fight him... over BREAD..._

And now here that rival was, clothed in the illusion of the girl that would likely haunt his dreams for the rest of his life, sharing an... _intimacy_ that he could never know with anyone else. That he could have shared with Akane, with Akari...

It hurt. It was _intolerable_.

"Stop..." Ryouga gasped. It took him a moment to wrench back control of his muscles, to force himself to break the connection. He snatched his hand out of her grasp. "I said _STOP_!"

Ranma gasped as the backlash from the sudden break hit her. She reeled back, disoriented, and caught herself on the armrest of the chair so she didn't topple over. "H-hey! What's the big...!?"

"I don't want your recycled happiness, Saotome!" Ryouga snarled. "If I'm going to get a drip feed of joy, I might as well get it from one of these!" He held up his IV line.

"I... I just wanted to help. I thought..." Ranma stammered. She looked genuinely hurt.

That just made the pain worse. _STOP HAUNTING ME!_ He snarled mentally at the illusory girl in front of him. "Do you think it helps to remind me how much happier you are than me, Ranma? How much better your life is? Does it make you feel better about yourself to remind me how _broken_ I am, that I can't even feel these things?!"

His anger faded as he saw the guilt in her face as she looked away silently. He felt his own miserable pang for having slapped away a hand trying to help him, and for needing that hand in the first place.

*Why am I such a burden?*_ He closed his eyes, and took a few slow breaths. "Just... go home, Ranma. You can't help me."

There was a knock at the door. Ryouga hurriedly arranged the blanket, mindful that the hospital gowns weren't the most dignified dress, as Ranma rubbed at her eyes a bit.
"Come in," Ranma said.

Rather than the nurse Ryouga had been expecting, a doctor came in. he had greying hair and wireframe glasses, and looked familiar. After a moment, he realized it was the doctor that had examined him the last time he had been here.

He smiled at the two of them. "Well, I would say it is nice to see the both of you again, but with the circumstances I imagine it would be better to say it is nice to see you both recovering." He bowed slightly. "I hope you both remember me? Doctor Masamune Hirano."

"I remember," Ryouga said, cautiously.

He smiled at him. "Good. I am… astonished and dismayed at the course of your luck, Mr. Hibiki. While I understand this incident wasn't necessarily related to your navigational difficulties, I was hoping I could take this chance to renew my offer to you both? We've had several cancellations for the MRI equipment and I have some time today so I can fit you in, if you're willing?"

Good. More attention to the broken state of my brain. Ryouga thought sourly. He felt a hand on his arm, and turned to see Ranma looking at him intensely.

"Ryouga, remember your Mom," she said simply.

Ryouga sighed heavily. Just what I need. More faint hope. All right, everything else has had a crack at this curse, might as well give modern medicine a try. "What do I have to do?"

"Not much. This would just be a basic scan, so I'd just need you to lie in the machine for about 45 minutes." He glanced at Ranma. "Your fiancee can accompany you, if you're at all nervous about small spaces. She can even hold your hand if you like."

"I'm fine." Ryouga said quickly, then sheepishly added, "... with small spaces, I mean."

The doctor nodded. "Good, good, then this should be quick. I'll have the nurse come fetch you when we're ready for you. Trust me, Mr. Hibiki, this is a wise choice. Things can only get better from here."

"We'll see," Ryouga replied, unconvinced.

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Nabiki was a little surprised to discover both Ukyou and Shampoo waiting for them at the Tendo Dojo gates, both wearing school uniforms. Ukyou was wearing her typical boy's uniform, as was her preference, and Shampoo was subjecting her girl's uniform to curves that it simply hadn't been designed for.

"I didn't realize you two were coming today!" Akane said, running forward to greet her friends.

Nabiki took a more leisurely route. Not having Ranma with them meant they had gotten out the door with plenty of time - which Nabiki suspected she would need.

"Where Ranma?" Shampoo asked, peering past them and through the gates. "Is not with you?"

"He hasn't gotten back yet from chasing Ryouga," Akane said, a little more sharply than she intended.

"He gave me a call early this morning to let me know where he and Ryouga are," Nabiki added,
earning a surprised look from her sister.

"You didn't say anything about that when we were getting ready!" Akane's voice held a mix of hurt and accusation, though her expression was more confused.

"No, I didn't," Nabiki replied and started to walk nonchalantly towards school.

"Is… it bad?" Akane asked sheepishly. Her jealousy and suspiciousness were subdued by a sense of dread that only came when Nabiki knew she had screwed up.

"Yeah," Nabiki replied, and continued to walk without offering more.

The other girls clustered around her and waited patiently for Nabiki to either spill what she knew or to announce her price.

"They're in the hospital," Nabiki said finally.

"What!?" All three yelped but Nabiki held up a hand to silence them again.

"Ranma's not badly hurt, but Ryouga is pretty torn up," she said. She kept her eyes forward and her voice low. "After finding out how Akane felt about him he apparently fired off a depression-fueled ki blast that he couldn't control and nearly blew himself and Ranma to kingdom come."

Akane stopped walking. Her eyes were wide with horror, her hands over her mouth.

Nabiki turned and waited. She kept her expression carefully neutral. She would comfort Akane if she needed it, but she wouldn't offer it to her just yet. She wanted her baby sister to feel the full impact of what had happened for a bit.

Akane shook her head, her eyes filling with tears. "I didn't… I didn't mean…"

"Is Ryouga okay?!" Ukyou demanded. "How bad? Which hospital is he at!?"

"Furinkan General. He's recovering. Ranma says he should be okay, but he's staying with him because Ryouga apparently really needs a friend right now. Ranma didn't go into details, but apparently Ryouga has had some problems with Akari and even his own mother weighing on him, and this came at a really bad time."

"Can go see?" Shampoo asked.

"Ranma didn't think it'd be a good idea for anyone who was there when all his secrets came tumbling out to come visit just yet. Shampo might be okay, since she has a curse too, but otherwise he suggested we all stay clear for now." She fixed Akane with a stern look as she said that.

Akane just shook her head, hands still over her mouth. Finally she stopped, swallowing. "How do I face him? How could I possibly, after this?"

"We'll figure it out," Ukyou said. She walked over and put a hand on Akane's shoulder. "But you are going to. Ryouga is too big a part of everyone's lives to leave this hanging."

"But… how do I make something like this right?" Akane asked her.

"Apologize first," Ukyou said. "Don't qualify it, just start with 'sorry'. Tell him what you told us; you were trying to find a way around your own issues with boys with him because you wanted to trust him. Even after you found out about the curse. Then… leave it alone a while."
Akane closed her eyes and slumped against Ukyou, signalling a need for comfort that the Okonomiyaki chef provided with a hug.

"I feel like such a terrible person," Akane said, muffled by Ukyou's shoulder. "I keep wondering who else I've been so thoughtless to, without even realizing it. People at school, you all, Kasumi… Ranma goes without saying…"

Shampoo suddenly hugged Akane from behind, earning a startled squeak from the youngest Tendo.

"No can speak for others, but… slate clean with Shampoo." She squeezed gently, showing uncharacteristic restraint. "Start fresh. Akane not bad person. Akane good person who make bad mistake. Can make better."

"But what if I make more?" Akane looked over her shoulder at the Amazon girl.

"Always make more. Is how learn. Great-grandmother say make mistakes is inev… inevit… always happen. So no point in being afraid." She tilted her head and smiled. "Is okay Akane make mistakes. Shampoo still love, and help fix."

Akane blushed. "I… ummm…” She glanced at Ukyou, then back at Shampoo. "You… mean that like a sister, right?"

Shampoo turned her around by the shoulders, and then glanced around quickly, ensuring that there wasn't anyone watching. "Mean like this." She leaned in and, before Akane could protest, kissed her full on the lips.

"Amazon definition of 'sisterhood'," Ukyou commented. "You'd think Akane might have caught on by now."

"I'm not sure she hasn't," Nabiki smirked. "I've been running even odds on this sort of thing happening since they met."

Ukyou coughed to clear her throat and started to fidget uncomfortably.

The kiss had initially started with surprise, moved on to fierce competition, until, slowly, an equilibrium was found; a steady pace that was more comfortable; an almost parallel of their relationship thus far. Finally they broke for air, breathing hard and staring into each other's eyes, a little overwhelmed by where the playful gesture of reassurance had gone.

"I do know a good Love Motel if you two want to get the rest of this out of your system while Ukyou and I head to class," Nabiki said dryly. "Either way we need to get going."

"Nabiki!" Akane blushed and quickly disentangled herself from Shampoo. "Don't make jokes like that!"
Nabiki shrugged. "It's not a joke. I get a spiff every time I refer someone there."

The small group did manage to get moving again though Nabiki noticed that both Akane and Shampoo were considerably subdued and Ukyou was sulking. There were no sparks of conflict or acrimony though so that implied things were stabilizing.

Now if we could just get the Himuras and Nodokas to take a hike, she thought. A common enemy was a nice unifying agent, at least at first, but Nabiki was fairly certain the stresses imposed by all these conflicts were doing far more harm than good at this point.

Sayuri and the other members of the volleyball team were waiting for them at the gates, same as last time.

"Where's Ranma?" Sayuri asked. The whole group was looking nervous. "Don't tell me something happened when that boy ran off?"

"They're okay. It's complicated," Nabiki said. "Ranma should be back by tomorrow."

Hopefully. She added mentally.

"Tomorrow?! We were supposed to practise today!" Sayuri sighed heavily. "Our first game is on Wednesday! How are we ever going to get ready for this if we don't do any training?!"

Shampoo and Ukyou glanced at each other.

"We can help you for today, sugar," Ukyou said.

"That's right, Ukyou is pretty good," Rin said.

" Doesn't change that it's Ranma we're playing with. It's not just practising serves and volleys, we need to figure out team strategies." Sayuri rubbed her forehead. "I guess it's better than nothing though. Thank you."

"Right now we have other problems," Riko said, thumbing towards the gate. "The Horde is back."

"On a Saturday?" Nabiki walked over to the gate and peered through. Sure enough, nearly every male in the school was milling about in the courtyard. "They never used to bother on saturdays!"

"They won't let us past until Akane comes out," Yuka said, scowling. "And with Himura's stupid rule in place, if they so much as tap us we're off the team."

Nabiki's eyes widened. "Uh oh…” She glanced at Akane, then back at the crowd. "They know about the new rule?"

"What wrong?" Shampoo leaned in next to her to look at the crowd.

"Maybe nothing," Nabiki replied. "Hopefully nothing. Just worried they might be just smart enough to do something really dumb."

Akane clenched her fists. "We're not going to find out standing here. Let's just get this over with."

She took a deep breath and strode in through the gates.

Truth be told, Akane was not in the mood to fight. After what had happened with Kuno and Ryoutga, it was getting harder to see the mass of horny teenagers as nothing more than a faceless horde anymore.
Yes, they knew what they were in for. Yes, they had it coming, and yes, what they were after was reprehensible. But was this really the way to deal with it? Beating them down over and over, only to have them rise the next day, so deeply invested in this madness they couldn't stop?

She strode into the courtyard, stopped and waited for the noise of the milling crowd to die down.

"I'm not going to fight you today," Akane announced, raising her head, and staring them down.

"You surrender?" Someone called from within the crowd, and the murmuring resumed.

"No!" Akane cut them off. "I'm not going to fight you because this is pointless!" She gestured to them. "Why are you even doing this anymore? You, Kosuke…" She singled out one in the front. "You used to be in the drama club, right? Before all of this started? You don't go anymore. Is it because I was in it? You used to love acting! Is it really worth giving all of that up, just to try and force me to go out with you?"

The boy shrank back, flustered, skulking back into the crowd.

Good! Good, Akane, strip them of their anonymity! Nabiki silently cheered from the gates as she watched.

"And you, Daiki. You're in my homeroom. You wear a mask when you do this but I can see it in your desk from where you sit." Akane pointed out another one. "You used to have a girlfriend before all this, didn't you? And you, you're Kosei from chemistry. I remember we did a lab together once. You really worked hard on your midterm project last year. Now you're just making bombs to try and knock me out?"

As each boy was singled out, they slowly retreated in humiliation. Others started to drift back of their own accord, unwilling to face public identification.

"I don't want to fight any of you!" Akane said earnestly. "Many of you have never even talked to me before, much less expressed any interest. Is it really that much easier to try and punch me in the face or hit me with a stick than it is to just talk to me?" She put her hand over her heart. "I'm a person. And you… you're all people. And… if I didn't treat you that way, I'm sorry. I know I've hurt people… friends that way recently. So… please, I promise to treat you all like people, even if I can't always give you what you want from me. All I want is for you to do the same." She held out her hand. "Can I ask for that much?"

The murmuring of the crowd increased. More boys sidled away from the crowd, some taking to the sidelines, others retreating shamefully back into the school. However, a core knot remained.

A taller boy in full kendo gear stepped forward, his face obscured by his kendo mask as he levelled a shinai at her. "What is this? Since when does Akane Tendo talk away her problems?"

"How dare you try and beg your way out of this now, like a coward!" He said. Akane could feel the glare from behind his mask. "You've always thought you were better than us! Always looked down on us! You're right, you didn't treat us like people! I was always nice to you, always opened the door for you, always smiled when you came into class, and you never noticed me! I'm better than your stupid jock fiance ever was! I'm smart, I'm polite, I always did what I was supposed to! And none of the girls ever noticed me!" He took a step forward. "This is your fault we have to do this! You and every other stuck-up girl at this lousy school! Well… you're right about one thing! You're not going to fight back! Because if you do, we'll beat up your stupid dyke girlfriends on the volleyball team!"
Then your fiance will belong to Himura!"

The rest of the kendo team stepped forward, as did a fair few other male students.

"First one to pin her gets her for the day," The lead kendoist said over his shoulder to the others. He turned back to Akane. "And if you don't want your girly little boyfriend to become Himura's boyfriend, you're gonna let us win every day. For the rest of the year!"

There was a cheer from the crowd, though it was much smaller. Many other boys were backing away from the group, unwilling to sink to the depths of the core mob. There were still nearly thirty of them, though.

No! Nabiki gripped the wall as her worst fear was realized. They were going to use Himura's new zero-tolerance rule to force her sister into submission.

Akane took a reflexive step back as they started advancing on her, uncertain what to do. She was startled as two figures walked past her on either side, coming to a stop just in front of her. One in a boy's uniform, the other in a girl's. Ukyou and Shampoo.

"Well, I've heard just about enough, haven't you, Shampoo?" Ukyou said, her hand on her hip as she stroked her chin in a nonchalant manner.

"Is good. Finally get to core of problem." Shampoo cracked her knuckles. "Can remove now."

The horde hesitated.

"Y-you think we're scared of you, Kuonji? You're just the same as the rest of these girls! You even think you're a better guy than us!" The lead kendoist cried. "You wanna fight us? You can't stop us all! One of us will get to your little friends!"

"Hard to do that when you're in traction, sugar." Ukyou drew her battle spatula slowly. "Besides, after this, I think me and Shampoo here are going to go and have a chat with Himura's team. Hard to lose a challenge if the opposition is disqualified first, right?"

The kendoist hesitated, seeing his trump card taken from him.

"How bad is allowed to hurt?" Shampoo asked, a grin spreading across her face as she took a ready stance.

"Don't kill them."

"Is all? That not very specific."

Ukyou smirked. "Ever hear the phrase 'You'd be surprised what you can live through'?"

Shampoo raised an eyebrow. "No… but like phrase."

"Good." Ukyou winked at her. "Surprise them."

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Himura watched from the window, sighing in dissatisfaction as the screams of pain rose from the courtyard.

"We… could always have them suspended for…" Sanae winced as there was an audible crack of bone breaking from the courtyard. "... excessive violence?"
Himura shook her head. "From Furinkan? The Principal would never allow it. Enforcing the rule now would just set the expectation that he do it in the future... and that'd spoil his fun." She made a sour face. "Every student who comes to this school signs a waiver for a reason, after all."

"What about... uh... what Kuonji said?" Umeko said nervously, watching the carnage. It was fascinating not only for its brutality, but the casual efficiency the two girls were displaying. Rather than the usual punting or smacking, they were making precise, debilitating strikes. Most of the remaining horde was going to need medical attention, and would probably be out of school for a while. "About coming after us?"

Himura waved off her concern. "I've already submitted the 'corrected' rule. Hana will be doing the announcement over the school intercom by the time they enter the building. I've ensured rather harsh penalties for those attacking any sports team members unprovoked, so you girls shouldn't have to worry."

"They might come after us anyway," Mineko said, toying with a lock of her dyed hair nervously.

"And if they do, their dear Ranma will be horrified by their dishonorable methods of interfering in her challenge and it will create a wedge between them I can exploit," Himura replied casually. "Unlikely... Nabiki is more clever than that, but on the off chance it happens, it will work to my benefit."

"That doesn't help us!" Mineko said, clenching her fists. "The scouts for the Olympic trainers are out at these games! I can't afford to sit out this season with an injury! How will you make your championship run without us!?"

Himura turned, smiled, walked up to the taller girl and patted her cheek. "Mineko, Mineko... Whatever made you think you're not replaceable?" She cocked her head and smiled widely. "I have half a dozen girls training desperately right now to replace you, or any of the team. You're from a family with no background or connections and there is the little matter of that drug test you failed that I covered up for you. Don't make the mistake of overestimating your importance to me. You need me far more than I need you."

Mineko's breath hitched in her throat.

Himura drew her hand away, trailing a finger along Mineko's jaw as she turned. "Just do as you're told, play well, and all will work out for you. Leave the rest to me."

"You did this on purpose..." Umeko said softly. "You painted a target on us to see if you could goad Ranma's entourage into doing something he'd disapprove of."

"Now, now, Umeko-chan, no need to be so paranoid," Himura replied. "It was merely a poorly worded bylaw. That's all. Now, enough dallying. We should all get to class. I would rather not get detention. After all, the Principal was so nice to allow me to organize an official visit to the hospital on behalf of the student council." She smiled. "I am quite looking forward to seeing how our little Ranma-chan is doing, and wishing her a speedy recovery."

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Woo! I'm on a roll!

First, on the question that's liable to come up - School on Saturday.

This was common in Japan during Ranma's original run. In the early 2000's (Which is where I've set this) it was supposedly abolished or scaled back, but started to make comeback a few years later. I'm
not having a lot of luck getting a CONCLUSIVE answer on it though, so… screw it. I'm gonna run with what the last few Persona games say. I apologize if I got this wrong.

I think that's about the only thing I actually have a defense for. There's plenty of OTHER stuff in here to crucify me for.
"... In addition to the usual morning announcements, your Student Council wishes to make public an amendment to the previously posted 'Zero Tolerance' policy enacted for all members of competitive sports teams. Due to several abuses, the bylaw has been amended; Sports Team members shall be removed from the team roster should they be found to have engaged in physical altercations with other students, as before. However, exceptions shall be made in cases of self-defense or for unprovoked attacks on said club members. Club-sanctioned events such as official martial arts challenge matches shall continue to be exempt, however Student Council President Kuno's open and ongoing challenge regarding Akane Tendo has been rescinded until further notice, due to concerns about possible injury. On an unrelated note, those students with a free period in the morning are requested to keep the front courtyard clear until lunchtime to facilitate the efforts of medical professionals working in the area…"

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"Do you think it's over?" Akane pulled her knees up to her chest, leaning back against the tree as she stared at a blade of grass she was turning over in her fingers.

"Depends on if and when Kuno comes back, I guess," Ukyou replied. "I wouldn't hold out too much hope that something doesn't take its place, though. Remember when I showed up in a girl's uniform and they started chasing me down?" The Okonomiyaki chef sighed and plucked at her boy's uniform jacket. "There's something deeply wrong with the guys at this school."

Nabiki looked up and smiled as she spotted the ones she had been waiting for. "Maybe not all of them." She stood up and walked over to meet Hiroshi and Daisuke as they approached.

"Hey boss." Daisuke said. He looked around, a little nervous. "You sure it's okay for us to meet out in the open like this?"

Nabiki shrugged. "Himura already knows you work for me. 'Plausible deniability' covers official reprisals, but she's not dumb. She'd be more suspicious if we didn't meet up now and then. Fortunately, she doesn't take you two very seriously."

"Do you think it's the tutus?" Hiroshi asked.

"Of course not," Daisuke replied. "Tutus are very serious business."

Nabiki smiled in spite of herself. "Well, do you have anything for me?"

"Himura has done a pretty good job of controlling most of the common sources of info," Daisuke said. "School newspaper, computer club, yearbook staff… just about anyone with any real access has at least a few of Himura's cronies in with them."

Nabiki's expression soured. "Yeah, I know. Because they used to be my cronies. Took me forever to put that network together and Hana just handed it over for a piece of the pie we already owned. I'd be impressed with Himura's salesmanship if she were more interested in trading in yen rather than people's souls."

"Всегда… All of the usual biases remain, including snubbing some of the less reputable sources," Hiroshi continued. He pulled an envelope out of his bag and handed it to her. "We sent the good stuff to that post office box you gave us, but this should give you some idea what we're getting."
Nabiki pulled out several photographs. Most were taken at odd angles, either from on high, as though near the ceiling, or from a position about 4 feet off the ground. They were from a number of different classes, including some that showed Himura and her 'elites' and a few more of Hana taking her own pictures in various places on and off campus.

"You didn't take these," Nabiki said, examining them carefully. They were printouts rather than usual photographic stock like she used. Printouts from digital images. High resolution though. No noticeable blurring; taken in low-light conditions with no flash. Whoever took these had a steady hand and experience with tweaking aperture settings. "In fact there's only one person in this school who could."

"We'll leave his name out of it, then," Daisuke said with a smirk.

"Is he reliable, though?" Nabiki turned over a picture in her hand. The paper was quality - not cheap. The photographer was definitely trying to impress.

"The current status quo kinda left him unemployed," Hiroshi said. "Seems he got a fair bit of work from Kuno."

"I know. He was actually my major competition for that market," Nabiki replied dryly. "If he had any composition skills he might have actually been a threat to my bottom line. But he was always good with the investigative work."

"Himura doesn't even acknowledge he exists," Hiroshi continued. "So he's more than happy to take what he can get."

"He's not the only source, though," Daisuke added. "We've got another potential photographer outside of the school we're looking into. Aaaand… We might have someone inside Hana's inner circle who's sympathetic."

"Good. Work that especially quietly. Get me their name through secure channels. If Hana paid attention to anything I taught her she'll be expecting leaks, so be careful not to burn our guy." Nabiki considered. "That's a good start, well done."

"Actually…" Daisuke rubbed the back of his head.

"We've got one more," Hiroshi smirked, nudging Daisuke in the ribs with his elbow. "Don't be so modest, player!"

"I'm really not proud of this," Daisuke said miserably.

Nabiki raised an eyebrow and waited.

"Daisuke has been going to our dear Coach Olga for some extra-curricular lessons in Russian," Hiroshi said.

"Meaning I've been going through my Russian language learning kit with her and she's been saying 'da!' whenever I ask a question," Daisuke muttered.

"She's actually been picking up some of the language without having to admit she doesn't speak it," Hiroshi explained. "So Daisuke here has become her 'little dove'."

"Please don't use that name," Daisuke whimpered.

"That's right! What has she started calling you now instead? Ролюбка?" Hiroshi crossed his arms.
"Means the same thing," Daisuke muttered.

"Hey, I'm not one to judge the love between a high school student and a mentally-ill woman in her 40's,,,"

Daisuke sighed in frustration. "I took one for the team, okay? But we now know Olga isn't really in the 'inner circle' of all this, like the Principal. She's basically just doing her job."

"And slightly addled," Hiroshi added.

"... And that," Daisuke admitted.

"And very lonely."

"Dude, stop."

Nabiki rubbed her chin. "Good. Keep up with the language lessons."

Daisuke's jaw dropped. "What?! Why!?"

"We need an advocate within the athletics department," Nabiki replied. "So… congrats. Keep making her happy."

"But… but she's started talking about setting up candles for our lessons! And last time she brought in a record player to play music! And I think she's started to wear perfume!" Daisuke whined.

"High school is all about experiences, buddy," Hiroshi clapped him on the back. "Hey, remember when she accidentally crushed that football helmet between her thighs?"

"My choices have become to die a virgin or die from a crushed pelvis," Daisuke moaned. "All I wanted this year was to find a normal girlfriend."

"Well…" Hiroshi gestured towards the outdoor volleyball court. "There's always…"


"Keep me posted on new developments, then," Nabiki said, noticing a familiar white-robed figure riding up on a bicycle. "With Himura and the school, not Daisuke's love life. Unless it's relevant of course."

With Shampoo now enrolled at Furinkan, her usual delivery duties had been delegated to the other employee of the Nekohanten - Mousse.

Mindful of his nearsightedness and the fact that everyone was wearing identical uniforms and colors, Nabiki waved to him in the hopes of catching his attention. Sure enough, she saw the flash of sunlight reflected off his thick spectacles as he turned the bike and started accelerating towards her.

When he got close enough for her to see his expression of rapt excitement and anticipation and the fact that his glasses were pushed up on top of his head, Nabiki realized her mistake.

"I'm here my darling Shampoo!"

Mousse leapt from the bike, using a very similar technique to what Shampoo typically used for her high speed glomptackles, his trajectory unerringly on target for Nabiki despite his poor eyesight. One arm was outstretched as if to embrace, as the other continued to balance the metal carrier box in a show of delivery professionalism that would have impressed Nabiki at any other less personally
perilous moment.

Nabiki threw up her arms to shield herself and braced for impact, unsure how she was going to survive being struck by the much larger and much more *ballistic* Amazon male without serious injury. She closed her eyes tight and waited to be flattened.

After a few heartbeats more of consciousness than she was expecting, she cracked open an eye and risked looking.

Shampoo was standing next to her. In one hand she held the metal delivery box. Her foot was extended in a high, straight kick, which currently had it firmly planted against Mousse's face and was apparently what had halted his momentum.

"How many times Shampoo tell stupid Mousse? Wear glasses when doing deliveries!"

Mouse mumbled something which might have been 'Yes, Shampoo' or might have been 'I think I have a brain hemorrhage'; it was hard to tell around Shampoo's shoe. Then he dropped to the ground where he remained, twitching slightly.

"Should eat now, yes?" Shampoo said brightly to Nabiki. "Not want to get cold." She hefted the box and walked back to the tree, stepping over Mousse's crumpled form.

Nabiki gave Mousse a sympathetic look before following.

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"You know… this is probably going to be used against me at some point… but that was actually pretty good, Shampoo." Ukyou put her bowl and chopsticks down, sighing in satisfaction.

"Not bad thing have something other than okonomiyaki now and then," Shampoo said. "Get new ideas to try."

"That could be said for Ramen too," Akane pointed out.

Shampoo shrugged. "Is true. Good to try new things."

"There's actually that new donburi place that opened up nearby I've been wanting to try," Ukyou said thoughtfully. "Every time I walk by there, something smells amazing."

"Maybe we could all go together!" Akane beamed.

"As long as you're paying," Nabiki replied, absently writing notes in her little black ledger.

Shampoo smirked and sidled up to Nabiki, giving her a seductive look. "Maybe will if Nabiki make worth while?"

Nabiki didn't even pause in her writing. "That would run you considerably more than lunch at a donburi place, pussycat."

Shampoo's smile simply widened. "How much?"

Nabiki stopped writing. She blinked and glanced at Shampoo.

"How much?" Shampoo repeated, a mischievous twinkle in her eye.

"More than you could afford, trust me," Nabiki replied dryly, though it was obvious she was a little
off balance. Not that she hadn't been asked such questions before, but generally it came from hormonal teenage boys, or leering older men.

"Might be surprised. Give number?" Shampoo pressed, undeterred. She sidled a bit closer, and Nabiki felt her confident and coolly uninterested facade wobble a bit as Shampoo nearly was sitting in her lap.

Nabiki opened her mouth but for once didn't have a decent reply.

"Or is some things not willing to sell?" Shampoo purred. She moved forward a little more, slipping her arms around Nabiki's neck. "Good. Should be priceless, no? Mean more when finally won." Her nose was barely centimeters from Nabiki's own.

A pair of chopsticks bapped Shampoo on the back of the head.

"No seductions during school hours," Akane said authoritatively as she returned to her ramen. "We draw too much attention as it is."

Shampoo huffed, still practically in Nabiki's lap. "Shampoo think Akane jealous."

In response, Akane merely paused to point at something behind Shampoo with her chopsticks, then resumed eating.

The other three girls looked in the directions she had indicated. Mousse lay there. He had apparently regained consciousness just in time to see Shampoo's display in front of him and immediately collapse again from the sudden blood loss when the spike in his blood pressure caused a rather impressive nosebleed.

Shampoo sighed. "Mousse no hentai."

Akane paused in her eating again and pointed with her chopsticks several more times, indicating a number of similar sights; small clusters of male students, some of whom had succumbed as Mousse had while others were still watching, rapt.

"Welcome to being Furinkan's newest male fantasy, Shampoo," Ukyou said.

Shampoo shrugged, and then shifted, actually sitting down directly in Nabiki's lap now and curling up, laying her head on her shoulder. "Can watch all they want. Is not for them."

Nabiki sighed as a few more boys in the distance collapsed. "Well, there goes years of carefully cultivated image."

"Oh please," Akane snorted, finishing her bowl. "You were hardly ever exempt from the male gaze, Nabiki. You just did a better job of convincing them all you were unattainable." She raised an eyebrow as she glanced at her sister and the affectionate Amazon currently using her as a seat. "I don't see anything here that'll change that notion."

"Doesn't work that way here, sis," Nabiki said. She casually looped one arm around Shampoo and used it to hold her book as she continued writing as if the situation were completely normal. "The hard core head cases here don't care about things like 'preferences'. It was the risk of financial and social oblivion that I convinced them would come from any sort of show of affection towards me. I had to make a few 'examples' my first year here."

Ukyou raised an eyebrow. "You made yourself a social pariah to get them to leave you alone?"
"Well, I kind of already was. All through middle school I was... awkward. Most of them thought I was a dork," Nabiki admitted. "Then puberty hit and all the boys who made fun of me suddenly wanted a different sort of 'fun'. I saw how ridiculous everyone acted because of it and... I just didn't want any part of it. So I opted out - played the Ice Queen. I made sure I always had something someone wanted so I was too valuable to dismiss. And then... well, I used what I observed to make life uncomfortable for those who didn't take the hint. I figured I'd wait for that sort of thing until college when everyone had grown up a little. If I ever did." She tried to focus on her notes but was finding it increasingly difficult to keep her train of thought on its tracks.

It might have had something to do with the looks she was getting from the others, or the fact that Shampoo was hugging her tighter now.

"Ukyou and Akane go help girls with volleyball?" Shampoo asked quietly. "Want talk to Nabiki alone."

Akane and Ukyou shared a glance, then nodded and stood.

"Take Mousse with," Shampoo added. "Tell to get back to work."

The two girls nodded, then walked back over to the white robed martial artist. Ukyou grabbed him by the collar and started dragging him over to the volleyball courts.

"I know what you're doing, Shampoo," Nabiki said, resuming her note taking. "I'm not lonely, or 'wounded', or needing to be rescued from anything."

"Mmmhmmmm," Shampoo replied quietly. She simply remained where she was, holding her.

"There isn't any need to 'thaw' the Ice Queen. Ranma's already been doing that. I just maintain the 'game face' for the benefit of Himura and the rest of the school."

"Mmmhmmmm."

Nabiki looked down at the girl curled against her and sighed. "I'm not going to win this argument, am I?"

"Nnnnh."

Nabiki paused a moment, then put down her book. She wrapped her arms around Shampoo and hugged back. "You Amazons are a persistent lot."

"Survival trait," Shampoo replied.

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Ukyou paused as Mousse stirred. She stopped dragging him and let him lie on the grass as she walked around and squatted next to him, Akane on his other side. "Hey, Mousse, you awake now?"

"My... darling... Shampoo... is that...?"

"Nope," Akane said quickly, pushing his glasses back down over his eyes as he blinked.

"... Oh. Hello Ukyou Kuonji," he said. Slowly he sat up, dabbing at his nose. He produced a handkerchief out of nowhere to clean off the blood and blow his nose. "Well... that was embarrassing and undignified. Did Shampoo...?"

"Yup," Ukyou said.
"Oh," Mousse sighed, crestfallen. "I apologize for my behaviour. It's unseemly for Amazon males to react that way to bonding between females. I appear to have picked up some bad habits from my time in Japan." He stood and bowed to them both in turn. "Please accept my most sincere apologies."

"It's okay, sugar. We know you get a bit loopy around Shampoo," Ukyou straightened and brushed herself off. "It'd be best if we gave them some privacy though."

Mousse quickly brought the handkerchief back to his nose. "I… see."

Akane rolled her eyes. "Come on, maybe volleyball will take your mind off of it."

"Volleyball…?" Mousse replied, confused.

"Yeah, Ra… the girl's team is practicing for their first game this Wednesday. They're even skipping lunch for it," Ukyou said, carefully editing out mention of Ranma owing to Mousse' typical bad reaction to it. "At the very least they could use a warm body to lob balls for them."

Mousse adjusted his glasses before tucking his hands into his robes. "I'm not very familiar with the game, but I will attempt to render what assistance I can."


As they approached the outdoor courts, they could see Sayuri was directing some kind of choreography. At her order, Yuka tossed a ball in the air, then as Riko crouched, making a basket with her hands, Rin ran towards her.

"What are they doing?" Akane asked, cocking her head.

"Isn't that some sort of gymnastics?" Ukyou replied. "Maybe cheerleading?"

Rin stepped into Riko's clasped hands. Riko stood and lifted as hard as she could while Rin leapt skywards, the boost giving the diminutive girl quite a bit of height as she rose to meet the descending ball.

Ukyou's eyes widened in recognition. "Oh crap-hit the deck!"

She dove for cover and Akane followed suit, though not really sure why. Mousse simply watched, uncertain what was going on.

Rin's strike hit the ball with the report of a gunshot. There was a moment where time seemed to slow as physics tried to catch up with the ball suddenly having more force applied to it in a shorter time than the laws of momentum were entirely comfortable with. Time snapped back to normal speed and the sand on the far side of the court exploded as if a mortar had gone off.

Ukyou and Akane covered their heads, blinded by the cloud of sand.

Rin dropped back to the court. For a moment it looked like she was going to stick the landing but then her left foot slipped out from under her. She yelped and started to tumble backwards, arms windmilling frantically.

A pair of strong hands caught her before she could hit the ground.

The dust cleared. Ukyou and Akane looked up, coughing and rubbing the sand from their eyes. The other girls were doing much the same.
"Rin, are you okay?!" Riko asked. She darted forward before she realized someone else had already caught the girl. She looked up, blinked, and her eyes widened as the gears turned in her head. "Uh-oh…"

Rin looked up at her saviour. A pair of spectacles glinted in the light, the blue-green eyes behind them regarding her curiously. Long dark hair fell about his face, somehow still perfectly straight and smooth despite the explosion and what had to have been a burst of motion on his part.

"Are you all right, miss?"

Sayuri and Yuka saw the situation and immediately braced for the impending Rinsplosion.

Rin stared up at him a moment. Her eyes widened a bit. Then there was a shift in her expression, almost as though she had forgotten what she was going to say. She smiled pleasantly. "Oh, yes! Thank you."

Mousse lifted her up onto her feet, then slipped his hands back into the sleeves of his robes. "You're quite welcome, Miss…?"

"Rin. Rin Ito." Rin smiled and offered her hand. "Pleased to meet you…?"

"Mu Su," Mousse replied, taking her hand and clasping it a moment. "That was quite the impressive move. I haven't seen acrobatics mixed in with volleyball before."

Rin smiled and bowed. "Thank you! We are trying several new ideas, borrowing from martial arts, gymnastics and cheerleading. I am still working on my landings though."

Yuka and Sayuri watched, confused.

"No Rinsplosion?" Yuka asked, brow furrowing in confusion.

"I guess not?" Sayuri replied, equally at a loss.

"Your landing sounded awkward. I thought it best to intervene. Please forgive me for being presumptuous." Mousse bowed.

"Not at all!" Rin replied. "That's impressive, that you could tell that just by listening."

"When you have poor eyesight you learn to compensate," Mousse replied. "I learned how during my time with the circus. My knife-throwing teacher was actually completely blind."

"Really? I've never met anyone from the circus!"

"I learned a lot from them. Especially acrobatics. You actually did quite well on your launch, but I suspect the force you put into that remarkable strike of yours threw your balance off, so you landed with your center of gravity behind your feet."

"Oh, that does make sense!"

"Ukyou Kuonji and Akane Tendo asked me to assist them in helping your team with your training. If you like I could give you a few pointers? I know little about volleyball, but acrobatics I have some knowledge of."

"Oh, that would be wonderful!"

Ukyou sidled up to Sayuri, confused by their perplexed and amazed expressions. "What's with you
two?"

"Oh, uh…" Sayuri blinked and glanced at Ukyou. "Nothing… I guess? Just…" She looked back at Rin and cocked her head. "Expecting more of a reaction from Rin I suppose."

Ukyou folded her arms. "What, because Mousse is a martial artist?"

Yuka shook her head. "No, no, it's more like we were expecting…"

At that moment Riko turned, equally confused and took a step back towards the group and bumped directly into Ukyou. She looked up and her eyes widened as a blush spread across her cheeks and she backpedalled away frantically, slipped and fell on her butt. "Aaaaah! I'm sorry I didn't see you! I didn't mean to bump into you!"

"... Something more like that, yeah," Yuka finished, smirking.

"Everything okay, Riko?" Ukyou asked, walking over and offering her hand to the girl.

Riko's cheeks burned as she accepted it, letting Ukyou pull her up. "Fine! It's all fine! I just…"

"Riko is a big fan of your work, Ukyou," Yuka said, a very Nabiki-seque smirk crossing her lips.

"Oh! You like Okonomiyaki?" Ukyou beamed at Riko, who was fidgeting with embarrassment.

"Oh, not that work," Yuka added. "She was very impressed with that oral presentation you gave a few days ago."

"Yuka, I will destroy everything you love...!" Riko snarled at the other girl.

"What… Oh! You mean that passage I read in English class?" Ukyou said. "I didn't think it was all that special… I mean I know I messed up a few words, and my accent is still pretty terrible." She chuckled and rubbed the back of her head.

"Oh, trust me, the feeling you put into it really impressed her," Yuka continued. "She even expressed an interest in you repeating your performance for her."

Riko was beet red by this point, head down and trembling in mortification.

"Oh? Well, uh… sure, if I can even remember how it went," Ukyou beamed. "Anything to support the volleyball team, right?"

"I'm sure she'd be fine if you improvised something." Yuka patted her on the back. She leaned over and whispered in Riko's ear. "This is for my diet. Next time keep your horribly, horribly delicious figure-destroyers to yourself!"

Riko glared daggers of humiliating rage at her but stayed silent.

Mousse had just finished doing a standing blackflip for Rin, and was going over how he had landed and indicating to her how he positioned his center of gravity, and she was nodding attentively.

"... If you keep that in mind, your landings should be much smoother," Mousse finished, and then straightened.

"Oh, thank you!" Rin said, smiling. "This is going to be so useful!"

Mousse smiled a little bashfully. "It was my pleasure. It's… nice to be able to be of assistance."
Especially to an appreciative audience."

Rin nodded. "Oh, will you be coming to the game? I would love for you to be able to see all our hard work in action!"

Mousse raised an eyebrow. "Really? I'm not actually a student here…"

"Oh that's fine! You live in the community, right? The games are open to any Nerima residents who want to cheer their local team on as long as there are seats available."

Mousse smiled. It was one of the most genuine smiles he had worn since coming to Nerima. "I'd… be honored. Thank you. I will be there if at all possible."

"Oh good!" Rin clapped.

Mousse pulled back his sleeve, checking a wristwatch that hadn't been on his wrist a moment before. "I had best be getting back before the Elder makes me clean out the grease trap with a toothbrush again."

"Oh… that doesn't sound fun at all," Rin replied sympathetically.

"Especially since she makes me use my toothbrush."

"... Oh."

He straightened and bowed. "I look forward to seeing you soon, Rin Ito. Good luck with your training, and with your upcoming game." He straightened and waved before he turned and leapt up onto a fencepost and then from there off to a nearby rooftop.

Rin simply waved, that same pleasant smile fixed on her face as she watched him go.

"Oh wow, not even a 'squee' for roofhopping," Sayuri said, raising an eyebrow.

Yuka walked up beside Rin and patted her shoulder. "I guess our little Rin is growing up, huh?"

Rin froze in place. There was an almost audible 'pop' as something intangible yet vitally important suddenly re-established itself. Rin turned her head jerkily towards Yuka, her pleasant smile twisting into a manic grin as she started trembling.

Yuka's eyes went wide in a split second realization of the situation. "Oh no…"

"EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE... EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE"

"Ow, ow, ow, ear drums, ow…" Yuka whimpered, holding her hands over her ears. The rest of them were similarly doubled over trying to block out the extended, transsonic squee.

Rin was on her knees in the sand, holding herself, rocking and mumbling. "He's so pretty and he does martial arts and he's nice and he wanted to help me and he's from the circus - the CIRCUS! - and he has such beautiful eyes and HE KNOWS MY NAME!"

"Ow? Explain?" Ukyou asked Sayuri as she rubbed her ears.

"Don't ask me! That was new," Sayuri replied. She walked over to Rin and knelt next to her. "Rin? Rin, are you okay?"

Rin was hyperventilating, her face beat red as she mumbled what sounded like a lot of nonsense
and/or something about marriage plans. Occasionally she would lapse into a fit of hysterical giggling.

"I think we broke her…" Riko said mournfully, kneeling in front of Rin and waving a hand in front of her unseeing eyes.

Yuka attempted to clear the ringing from her ears with her finger. She considered Rin a moment then spoke up. "Oh, hey Ranma. We weren't expecting you here today!"

Rin blinked and looked up suddenly, snapping back to reality. "S-senpai?!” She looked around frantically for a moment before she realized Ranma wasn't actually there. With whatever spell that had gripped her broken she seemed to deflate a little, clutching her temples and flopping onto her back in the sand. "Ooooh… I have a headache…"

"What was that all about?" Akane asked, kneeling next to Rin's prone form.

"Rin gets… enthusiastic about some things," Sayuri said sheepishly. "Never that bad before though."

"What actually happened?" Yuka asked. "You were totally normal with him until he left. Then… technicolor freakout."

Rin rubbed her forehead. "S-Sometimes when I get too excited, I kind of zone out. I sort of go on autopilot for a while until I calm down a little. Then I usually need a nap."

"That freakout was you calming down!?" Akane boggled.

"You know how sometimes something happens and you just stand there stunned for a bit before you can talk or say or do anything?" Rin said sheepishly. "That was kinda what happened, except when it happens to me I keep talking and doing stuff."

"So… you Rinned so hard you couldn't even Rin?" Yuka asked.

"I… w-when did I become a verb?" Rin looked up at the other girl.

"Well, that's good to know," Sayuri sighed. "Don't get our star player wet and don't get our other star player too excited." She helped Rin sit up, brushing sand off her back.

"It's… It hasn't h-happened since elementary school," Rin said sheepishly.

"Puberty is rough, huh?" Yuka quipped.

Rin blushed and covered her face. "Ohmygodhe'ssopretty…"

"Yuka, don't help," Sayuri said sternly. "Are… you going to be okay, Rin? Around Mousse I mean?"

Rin nodded, though she kept her face covered. "He doesn't come to the school often, right? M-maybe… I can slowly get used to being around him." She hunched down a little. "Eeeeeeeeee…"

"How slowly?" Yuka asked. "'Cuz you invited him to our game on Wednesday and he seemed really intent on being there."

Rin's eyes widened and abruptly went glassy. She stood up, smiled pleasantly and said, "Well, we should get back to practice, right?" She nodded and walked over to the other side of the court to retrieve her volleyball.
She managed to get all of four paces before she fell over and started twitching.

"Now I have a headache…" Sayuri muttered, rubbing her forehead.

Ryouga wasn't much for watching television or movies, much less indulge in much science fiction, but he had to admit the machine he was being introduced to certainly seemed like something straight out of some futuristic space drama and the explanation of what it did and how it worked did nothing to dispel the illusion.

The MRI machine was a large, pristine white toroid with a long cot attached to a slide-rail to pass it through the center of the machine. Futuristic looking controls and lights dotted the surface and next to the machine was a windowed booth with more displays and computer equipment than he had ever seen in one place. There was an ever present humming from a multitude of fans and electronics as well as an overriding, barely restrained power emanating from the toroid itself.

Ryouga was finding a lot of his bravado evaporating.

"So… uhh… this is all safe, right?" He said nervously. "No weird radiation side effects?"

The technician laughed. "No radiation at all. It's all magnetic. As long as you don't take any metal in there you're fine."

"And if I did?" Ryouga asked nervously. He was fairly certain he had no metal on him but he was suddenly mindful of that 5 yen coin he had swallowed when he was five.

"Well, it'd mess up the scan," the technician shrugged. "We're just doing your head today so as long as you're not wearing any jewelry nor have any metal plates in your head, you'll be fine."

Ranma stood on her tiptoes and tapped her knuckles against Ryouga's skull. "Nope. Solid granite as always."

"Ranmaaaa…" Ryouga growled under his breath, but the technician laughed.

"I certainly hope not. Granite is radioactive. That'd really mess up the scan." The technician chuckled and guided them inside. "Now, I understand your back is pretty tender, so you can lay on your side or your front, whichever is more comfortable. You're going to hear some banging while you're in there… it's kinda like a washing machine full of tennis balls. That's normal. We have ear plugs for you if you need them. Also there is a mic right by your head so if you feel any discomfort or need anything just speak up and we'll hear you clear as day."

Ryouga nodded and settled onto the cot on his side. He looked up and realized the hole in the center of the machine was a lot tighter than he had originally thought. He looked up and saw Dr. Hirano through the glass of the booth as the technician fussed with the machines. If this is so safe, why does he need to be in a separate room?

He noticed Ranma pulling up a chair next to the machine. She was eying it nervously as well, now that she could hear the ominous hum from it.

"You don't have to be in here, you know," Ryouga said.

"Someone has to make sure you don't chicken out," Ranma shot back with a smirk.

Ryouga snorted but, oddly, felt a little better. "Well, don't come crying to me if you get your insides
magnetically scrambled or something. I'm the only one that needs to be in here."

"Heh, you say that like you think I'm afraid or something," Ranma said - then visibly jumped as there was a ~thump~ from the machine. The cot started to slide in. Thankfully, only his head needed to be fully inside but that was still tremendously disconcerting.

"All right, please hold as still as you can, Mr. Hibiki. We're going to take the first set of images, which will take a few minutes." The doctor's voice came over the speaker next to his head, tinny and distant. "You're going to hear some noises but don't worry, they're perfectly normal."

'Perfectly normal' was apparently doctor-speak for loud. The rattling and thumping grew louder and Ryoga couldn't help but imagine he'd just stuck his head inside of a rock polishing machine. It was a struggle to avoid reflexive twitching as more thumps sounded near his ear.

Nothing else happened for a few minutes. Ryoga was expecting some sort of sensation, a tingling, a heat, something, but there was nothing except that incessant noise. The urge to scratch his nose became intense and his mind started to swirl with darker thoughts beginning to intrude.

What if they DO find something? He thought. What if it's a tumor or something? Or worse? What if it's something that's going to get worse as time goes on? What if this thing MAKES it worse? He started to breath a little more heavily. I shouldn't have done this. This was a bad idea! I should tell them to stop!

"All right, that's the first set. Take a breath, scratch your nose, stretch if you need to."

Ryoga opened his eyes. He was about to say something, tell them to call it off and let him out. He was ready to force his way out if they refused!

Then he felt slender fingers slip around his and a warm hand grasping his own.

His breathing calmed, the surprise taking the wind out of the sails of his panic. He should have been repelled, should have shouted at Ranma to let go, should have snatched his hand back. But instead he just squeezed back and held on as he closed his eyes again.

Right now the rivalry didn't matter. Appearances didn't matter. Pride didn't even really matter. This wasn't something he knew how to endure or fight. He couldn't run away from it. He didn't have control. And that was something he didn't want to be alone with.

Oddly enough, he got the feeling Ranma knew that. Idly he wondered if there was anyone else who would be able to pick up on it like that.

He could still sense Ranma's ki through the link, now that he was aware it was there. Ranma wasn't 'pushing' like before but he could still sense it. It was an odd sensation, like colors for emotions, colors that didn't correspond to anything his eyes could see. He saw Ranma's bravado, of course, but it was thin and patchy; Her defenses were down for once. Just beneath that surface there was boredom but with a tension to it... like the kind of monotony one had to endure while waiting for a battle to begin. There was... worry? Yes... some was due to the alien environment, the strange machinery and the situation, but there was more there. Worry... concern... fear; uncertainty not just from this situation but something that ran much deeper. The confidence he'd expected to be there simply wasn't; Instead... there was fatigue and, beneath that - buried deep, something familiar. Black, sticky and cloying, like frigid mud. Depression.
Ryouga gently squeezed those fingers. He could feel the calluses, the strength in them, the tenacity. They were not fragile fingers despite their appearance. But there was something fragile there for certain. He found himself unconsciously sharing his own nervousness with her, his own fear and that sense of reassurance he got from her presence.

It was odd. The fear and nervousness drained from him but it didn't seem to go anywhere. It seemed to flow into the place where their ki was mixing, between the palms of their hands, and just... dissolve. Likewise he could feel her own tension ease, that his blind attempt at reassurance was actually having an effect.

It was getting hard to reconcile all of this new information with his conception of who or what Ranma was.

He didn't even notice the next few sets, his attention focused almost wholly on this new set of perceptions. When the doctor called a halt almost half an hour later, Ryouga was a bit startled to feel the cot drawing back out of the machine.

Ranma drew her hand back self-consciously, breaking the link. Ryouga felt a brief pang of loss as the link winked out but he shook his head, clearing his meditative reverie and focusing on the Doctor.

"Is there something wrong?" Ranma asked. "I thought it was supposed to take longer than this?"

"It is. Actually... we're just discussing, but there's something odd about the images we're getting. Nothing bad medically, of course," he quickly reassured them. "In fact, Mr. Hibiki appears to have a perfectly healthy brain. But we think we might have a calibration issue. Please relax a few minutes. If you need anything, such as a drink or a bathroom break..."

"Bathroom would be nice, actually," Ryouga said, though it was more that he wanted to clear his head. Things were very crowded and confused in there right now.

"Certainly. Just to your left and down the hall. It's right at the T intersection."

"Thanks." Ryouga hopped off the bed and walked through the door, turning left and walking down the hallway. Sure enough, the bathrooms were there and clearly marked. They were the universal type, a single toilet and sink in a large room meant to accommodate wheelchairs or other bulky equipment. He stepped inside with a sigh and locked the door behind him. He walked over to the sink and looked at his face in the mirror.

There were still a mass of bruises there, scabbed over scrapes and bags under his eyes. He definitely looked like he had seen Hell.

What are you doing, Hibiki? he wondered. He desperately wished he could splash cold water on his face but he was forced to settle for slightly warm to avoid triggering his curse. Holding hands with Ranma? Sticking my head in a big magnet, hoping that it'll fix my problems when it couldn't do ANYTHING for... he winced and trailed off. I should be finding my way back to Akari. I should accept Akane's feelings, move on with my life and devote myself to the person who really, truly cares about me. I...

He felt a throb of guilt. The sounds of her screams as the giant animal had born down on her. He hadn't even been able to see her face, tumbling and confused as a pathetic little black piglet.

Who am I kidding? he thought miserably, staring at the surface of the water. A single curse maybe he could manage. Maybe he could even turn it into an advantage as the other Jusenkyo sufferers had,
(though he struggled to imagine what advantages the body and skills of a little black piglet conferred) but two? One that left him physically helpless and the other that made him unable to find help. It was a wonder the combination hadn't killed him yet. It had certainly come close a few times.

*How many times have I tried to cure my Jusenkyo curse?* he thought, looking up at the mirror. *Even if that was fruitless, I tried! How can I do any less if there's even a CHANCE of curing this? What is the alternative? To just… be alone for the rest of my life so no one gets hurt?*

Some dark part of him answered, something deep in the cold, black mud.

*Yessss…*

He squeezed his eyes shut. *No, not going to listen to this.*

*You always do. You run, because you know they'll eventually get tired of you. They'll get sick of you being a burden. That's why your parents left you behind. That's why Akane can't even see you as anything more than a pet; an ANIMAL. That's why Akari will start to hate you. That's why you couldn't stay with Anna. That's why you run.*

*Because you know I'm right.*

The worst part was, it wasn't some demon or figment or derangement. It was just *him. His* voice. Things he believed deep down. Cold, acidic truths he couldn't refute.

His gaze fell, the old familiar coldness overcoming him again. *The world is a dark and lonely place.*

Except… He glanced at his hand. *Ranma cares.*

The voice was silent for a moment. Ryousga clung to that memory of what he had sensed through the link. *Doesn't she?* He demanded.

*You are lost. You are going to open that door and have no idea where you are.*

Ryouga felt an icy blade in his chest as he realized it was true. What had for a moment been so clear, so simple, was gone. He *had* known where he was, for just a brief moment, and now that it was gone it made the confusion all the more terrifying.

He looked to the door… it was the door he came in through, right? There only *was* one door… right? He turned around and was facing another door. Or was it the same door? He couldn't tell anymore!

*Open the door. Go back to wandering. It's better this way.*

He reached for the doorknob then hesitated. "M-maybe if I wait, Ranma will find me…"

*No one is looking for you. She'll be relieved you're gone. No one is on the other side of that door for you. Open it. Step out. You don't belong here.*

He felt the fear, the sudden panic and the uncertainty all drain away. This was normal. This he understood. He could deal with being lost. He could deal with being alone. He couldn't keep wishing for something better if nothing existed for him.

*This is reality. Deal with it. Open the door.*

He sighed, reached out and turned the doorknob. After another pause he pushed open the door and
stepped forward into the emptiness and unknown.

… And was nearly bowled over by a frantic redhead.

"Ryouga!" She yelped, catching herself as realized she had just blundered into her quarry. "Oh thank god! I thought you'd be in Russia by now!"

He blinked at her owlishly, having trouble comprehending the situation.

"You dope, you know you get lost if you try and walk down a hallway in your own house!" She seemed out of breath, her hands clinging to the robe he was wearing over his medical gown. She seemed almost worried he might vanish if she didn't keep hold of him. She paused and looked around him. "Wow… you actually found the bathroom. The right bathroom even."

He felt a surge of anger rise at this and was about to lash out at her for the insult when he paused. He rewound events in his mind as a startling realization came to him. "I knew where it was…"

Ranma looked up at him and cocked her head. "Well, yeah, the Doctor told you, but usually that doesn't help much…"

"No!" He grabbed her shoulders, his expression intense. "Don't you see? For a little while I knew where I was!"

"In the hospital?" She cocked her head, confused.

"Not just the hospital! I knew which room I was in, where it was relative to the bathroom. I knew how to get from one to the other! It was easy even! I didn't even have to think!" He was breathing hard now. He closed his eyes, focusing. "It's gone now, but… but for a minute…"

"Do you think it was the machine?" Ranma's eyes widened. "Could it be that easy? We just stick your head in a big magnet for a while and you're cured?!"

"I dunno… I dunno, but… for a while…" He started to smile, looking down at her. "I… do you know how to get back? Please tell me you know how to get back! We have to tell the doctor!"

A smile spread across her face and for the moment Ryouga didn't bother to censor the thought that she was beautiful. "Of course, dummy. It's just down the hall like ten feet this way. Come on."

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"... Yes, but this has to be wrong. The first set shows all this activity in the entorhinal cortex and then every subsequent set shows it lessened. It has to be static interference or something else causing a false reading." Dr. Hirano and the technician were deep in discussion, bent over a computer screen in the booth when Ranma and Ryouga re-entered.

"I know, I know, but I checked and rechecked and there's nothing obvious wrong. We just did a full spec on this system," the technician protested. "Maybe a penny got into the chamber and then fell out afterwards?"

"Awfully perfectly positioned given the problem we're checking for…" Hirano noted, rubbing his chin.

"Hey Doc?" Ranma piped up. "Umm… something just happened."

Hirano looked up in surprise. "Something happened? What?"
Ryouga fidgeted. "Ummm… just now. When I went to the bathroom. I mean, when you gave me
directions and I walked to the bathroom!" He quickly clarified. "I didn't get lost. I.. I knew where I
was and where I was going."

Hirano raised an eyebrow then walked over to Ryouga. He fished a penlight out of his shirt pocket
and stepped in closer, using the light to check the responsiveness of his irises. "And this isn't your
usual experience with your disorientation?"

"No. Normally… normally it's all scrambled," Ryouga said, standing still as the doctor examined
him. "I think I'm going straight but I get all turned around and I can't make sense of right or left even
though I know what they are… but this time I actually could! For… a little while."

"For a little while? So this is a temporary effect. Did anything change? Did you do anything
differently? Eat or drink anything recently?"

"The only thing different was he put his head in your machine," Ranma said. "Could that have done
it?"

The doctor put away his light, his brow furrowing. "It shouldn't. That's really the point of an MRI; It
would be useless as a diagnostic tool if it changed the area we were examining while we examined
it." He stroked his chin.

"Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle?" the technician offered helpfully.

"On a cellular level? That's preposterous," Hirano replied, shooting him an annoyed look. "It's more
likely some kind of malfunction causing the magnetic fields to somehow be more disruptive than
they should be."

"I promise you Doc, this beast is functioning 100% perfectly" the technician replied.

"Are you willing to testify that at my malpractice hearing?"

"Wouldn't be the first time. Err… at a malpractice hearing. I don't mean to imply that…"

"Yes, yes, yes…" Hirano waved him off irritably.

"We were wondering if you could put him through it again," Ranma said. "See if it has the same
effect?"

The doctor coughed and took off his glasses, polishing them with a kerchief from his pocket. "I'm
certain that's inadvisable, at least until we understand what exactly is going on here and what is
causing this reaction. You have to understand, the MRI is not supposed to cause changes to the
tissues it scans under any circumstances. That it could possibly be responsible for such a noticeable
shift in neurological activity in the brain indicates…"

"Doc, please!" Ryouga said, stepping forward and clenching his fist. "I gotta know… if this is a cure
or even just gives us a place to start…!"

Doctor Hirano closed his eyes. Slowly he put his glasses back on. "Mr Hibiki, without knowing
more about what is happening, you could be risking serious brain damage, permanent disability or
neurological issues, or even death. I can't in good conscience…"

"Doc, I am telling you, it's not the MRI." The technician said in frustration. "How else are you gonna
know what's going on in his head if not with an MRI? And all the other units are booked solid. If
magnets are really causing this, the kid's gonna drop dead the next time he walks by a scrapyard
crane anyway. If he's willing to go another round to see what's up, get him to sign a waiver and save the hospital a few million dollars in rebuild costs and rescheduling, willya?"

The Doctor glared at him. "My primary motivation is not the hospital's bottom line! Something that has earned me the ire of the Director more than once." He crossed his arms. "It is true that the only tool available for determining the cause of this is the thing that may be causing it… we could also be dealing with a placebo effect, or…" He massaged the bridge of his nose.

"Doc, please!" Ryouga said.

"Alright… alright," the doctor said finally. "This… bothers me on a professional and personal level. I fear I may be straining the spirit of the Hippocratic Oath even if the technicalities are satisfied. But…" He sighed and smiled. "I can see this means a lot to both of you. So long as you understand the risks… we will proceed." He glared at the technician. "But we are not doing release forms. I am accepting responsibility for this personally."

"Thank you!" Ryouga cried and practically ran to the MRI, Ranma right behind him.

"You're freaking out over nothing, Doc," the technician said. "I'm telling you, it's not the machine."

45 minutes and three scans later, the mood was considerably more somber.

"See? Baseline hasn't wavered from the first set we took." The technician pointed at the screen. "The Beast is in perfect working order. She just hiccuped or something."

"That does seem to be the case…" Hirano said, visibly rubbing his chin from behind the booth glass. "Mr. Hibiki, do you feel any different?"

"No…" Ryouga's voice was flat, even, but it did nothing to mask the disappointment.

Ranma felt her heart sink at Ryouga's dejected look. The Lost Boy's face was sinking back into that mask of resigned emptiness that he wore far too frequently.

"All right. We'll proceed with the original plan then. Don't lose hope, Mr. Hibiki! We're still getting VERY good data on the potential source of your problem. Gradually understanding the problem will lead to a much greater chance of a consistent and reliable treatment or even a cure than any accidental 'miracle cure' ever could."

"Yeah…" Ryouga said softly, settling himself again.

Ranma reached out and took his hand again. His fingers curled around hers and squeezed gratefully.

This wasn't normal behaviour for her. She knew that. It had taken every ounce of her will to hold Akane's hand not too long ago. Feelings weren't manly. Sharing them certainly wasn't. And yet… here she was. Ranma normally had the empathy and perceptiveness of a brick but after having literally walked through Ryouga's pain it was increasingly difficult to ignore it. And she was learning just how much power there was in simply acknowledging someone else's feelings.

Of course, being linked to someone so you could actually perceive their emotions added a dimension to it.

Ranma had always been somewhat envious of Ryouga's ki abilities. For all of her efforts and training, the Lost Boy could always outclass her in the sheer power he could produce. She had
adapted, varied her tactics, learned to manipulate and adjust, but she just couldn't match the staggering reservoir Ryouga seemed to pull from. She had never quite understood why until now.

She could see the link between Ki and Emotion now. One didn't create the other, they were both the same thing. It was fascinating but at the same time… it showed her the price Ryouga was paying for his power. She wondered how much of that was her fault.

But more than that she could see depth and complexity there she hadn't even imagined. She got the sense that she had badly underestimated just how much there actually was to another person's heart. It set off pangs of guilt when she imagined Akane or Shampoo or Ukyou or Nabiki with that same complexity and what havoc her thoughtlessness might be causing within it. She wasn't any closer to understanding other people, but at least she now understood why. She had a glimpse of the scope of the problem.

And then… there were the bright moments. The shy flickers of brighter emotion, the deep calm when he was relaxed and at peace and most of all, that brief moment when the dark sea had parted, just for a bit, when the hope of a cure had briefly been within their grasp. Ranma had glimpsed something more beyond all of the depression, loneliness and anger, but it had gotten shut away quickly. She wanted to see it again.

She wondered what he saw in return. It was strange - the notion that someone might be able to tell what she was feeling better than she could. Emotions had always been confusing. Anger was easy, humiliation, confidence… simple, fast, strong feelings. But was that all that was there? Or was she complex and messy like Ryouga and didn't even know it? She wondered if there was a way to ask him without things getting awkward.

Not that things aren't already awkward, Ranma thought. She wondered about the weird jumble of emotional color that happened whenever she squeezed Ryouga's hand. It didn't feel like hatred, though Ranma had to admit she wasn't exactly sure what hatred would feel like. Whatever it was was confused, complex and tangled. But it was better than the black mire.

"Hold on… there it is again!" Doctor Hirano said over the intercom. "Suppression of the chaotic activity in the entorhinal cortex!"

"Everything else is coming up normal. I don't know what's causing it, Doc."

"It doesn't seem to be impacting any other regions of the brain, but something is very obviously causing a change. Shut it down, we'll have to put the machine out of commission until we can verify..."

Ranma's eyes widened as something clicked. She looked down at her hand. It changed. It changed when I held Ryouga's hand! But… why? Me touching Ryouga never had any sort of weird effect before… She ran through the options. Not until the Shi shi hokodan... Maybe that did something? The link was different after that. More open. And then... then... "Doc, wait!"

"...Is something wrong, Ms. Saotome?"

"I think… I think I might know what's causing this change you keep seeing. It's not the machine. Can we do one more set of pictures?"

Ryouga sat up slowly, giving her a quizzical look. He tried to take his hand back, but she merely held it more firmly, earning an even more confused look. Thankfully, he didn't fight her any further on it.
"... I don't see what you could possibly be doing in there to cause this, but... all right. Let us know when you're ready."

Ranma nodded then caught Ryouga's gaze and held it. She swallowed nervously.

*Why am I nervous?* she thought, suddenly feeling hesitant. "Hey, Ryouga? I know what's doing this." She held up their clasped hands. "It's me. It's *us*. It's... whatever this link thing is now. It's when we do that Ki-sharing or feeling-sharing or whatever it is we can do now."

Ryouga stared at her a moment before comprehension slowly dawned on his face. Oddly enough, she felt it too; a brighter, more active color of emotion emerging from the jumble. *So THAT'S what that 'aha!' moment looks like...* She thought, momentarily distracted.

"So... why don't we see what happens if we open it up all the way?" Ranma said. "Mebbe we can just blast that stupid direction curse out of you!"

Before Ryouga spoke, his emotional mix changed, a darker, but still warm, color shot through with cooler colors and twisted... confused? No, *conflicted*. "Ranma..." he said, glancing at the booth, then back at her. She noticed there was a slight blush on his cheeks. "Think about what you're suggesting for a second!"

She cocked her head a moment, though something was twanging in the back of her head, like a small voice she couldn't quite hear. "What? You don't want to get rid of the curse?"

"Of course I do!" Ryouga hissed. "But..." He fidgeted. "You're talking about a lot of emotion!"

"So? It's just like a Ki blast. Not even that," Ranma replied.

Ryouga took a deep breath. He closed his eyes. She could feel his emotional 'sea' churn for a bit then grow calmer as he centered himself. "Ranma... this... link we have... It's not something I ever should have made. It's..." He blushed. "It's intimate. It's a personal thing. It was bad enough when it was just letting me home in on you, but now...?" He opened his eyes. She could almost see a reflection of the uncertainty that she could sense through the physical contact. "Isn't this... wrong, somehow? You... you're not... *I'm* not..." his emotions started to churn again, grow more chaotic.

Ranma instinctively reached out, soothing the chaos. Which she had been doing the entire time, without even thinking about it.

Ryouga's eyes widened.

"S-sorry! I just..." Ranma realized all at once what she had been doing; She had been getting very familiar with someone else's emotions. She had been getting very familiar with *Ryouga's* emotions. And she had been sending him a drip-feed of her own to keep him calm and optimistic. She felt a surge of panic and embarrassment... and then something warm calmed her, the tightness in her chest from the rush of self-consciousness fading.

She gave Ryouga a startled look. "Did you...?"

"I... It was a reflex..." Ryouga said. He swallowed. "Okay... so... we're keeping each other from freaking out about this?"

Ranma looked down at their hands. "So... you're seeing what I'm feeling too, right? Colors that kinda aren't colors, movement and alla that, right?"

Ryouga nodded slowly.
"And… we're not close enough to know this much about each other, are we," Ranma continued.

"Why are you saying it like it's a question!?" Ryouta hissed. "Nobody is supposed to know this much about someone else!"

"I'm… kinda not in the right headspace, okay?" Ranma growled back. "I've spent the last half an hour zoned out trying to sort out the pretty colors and getting an IV of whatever the hell you've been dribbling back in return!"

Ryouta took a deep breath. "Look… just do it then. Don't think about it. When we let go we'll freak out then, but if it cures the curse it'll be worth it and I'll be okay with it."

"You sure about that?" Ranma asked.

"No. I'm probably going to flip out and try and kill you," Ryouta replied with a playful smirk.

Ranma smiled back, deciding without thinking about it that she much preferred that sort of smile from him than his usual nasty, superior grin.

That did interesting things to Ryouta's emotions. The dark mire receded and warm, bright colours surged up suddenly from underneath, swirling together along with a few more of the conflicted and other cooler color emotions, but overwhelmingly warm. She felt an odd surge inside and she wondered if it was the same or not; but it was something she could use. Focusing like she did for her Moko Takabisha, she drew on that surge, gathered it and projected it through the link.

Ryouta's eyes widened again and suddenly Ranma discovered what doing that did.

Pump water from one relatively full tank into another. Do this while the second tank is also connected to an overflow pipe that runs to the first.

Everything churned. The black mire mixed with all the other complex confusion of emotional colors and flowed back across the link as emotion-laden ki sloshed between them like a violently tilting tub of water.

The muddy mass of feelings crashed through Ranma's formerly warm fuzzy emotion and seemed to claw deep. It was shot through with the cloying, sticky coldness of Ryouta's depression and it sank deep and fast, plowing through Ranma's defenses before she was ready and penetrated the surface layers of bright and positive emotions into the dark place Ranma dared not look.

Ranma sucked in a desperate breath, shuddered and, very softly, mewed.

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"No… No Ranma, stay with me!" Ryouta scrambled to try and get the chaotic rush of emotions under control, closing his eyes and focusing on steadying his breathing. There were more than just emotions now. Images flickered across as well. Darkness but not emptiness. Mud and cold and damp mixed with burning, itching pain and terrible, terrible yowling. The crunch of bones as starving, feral beasts turned on each other and the pain as they clawed and fought to climb up to escape. A saturation of utterly animalistic terror and death.

For a six year old it would be impossible to endure. Had been impossible.

But Ryouta Hibiki wasn't six years old and he was not without experience or defences.

No, let me have it, Ranma! Ryouta grit his teeth. He could feel invisible claws from Ranma's fingers
starting to dig into his hand. In a moment they would pop out fully and he would likely lose the appendage altogether.

He opened himself to the fear that had been churned up, the images and terror that erupted from the place where Ranma had buried them and gave them a place to go. Fear. Shame. Despair. These were nothing new to him. What's more, it wasn't even *his*. It was the terror of a helpless child but seen from the perspective of someone who wasn't helpless.

But there was something else in there, something that made it so unbearable. Something loomed in the dark; something that the cats were actually there to protect from Ranma - to keep her from going further and finding it.

The wave ended and with a desperate strength, he felt Ranma push it all back down, struggling desperately to force these things back into their places, like an overpacked closet that was threatening to disgorge an avalanche of old shoe boxes and dirty laundry.

"... *otome? Ms. Saotome? Are you ready?*

Ryouga's vision cleared. He looked into Ranma's eyes which were thankfully clear and not glassy like her neko-ken state, though she was shaking and breathing hard.

"That was a bad idea…" she whimpered softly.

"Yeah, it was," Ryouga replied. "Ranma, what *was* that?"

"You *know* what it was!" She hissed back with a scowl.

"No, there was something *else*. There was more to it. Something *under* the neko-ken stuff." Ryouga frowned, the images that had come through already fading and uncertain, slipping away like a dream did after waking.

"I don't know what you're talking about and neither do you," Ranma muttered. "Look, can we do this so I can stop holding your hand already?"

Ryouga nodded guiltily. Ranma was right; this was *way* more than anyone should know about someone else. He laid back down on the cot.

He gave her one last uncertain look as the cot started to slide back into the MRI torus. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Stop sounding like such a *girl*, Ryouga," Ranma muttered.

But she kept holding his hand.

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Kasumi rapped on the door. The frame was freshly painted and the door brand new, more of a western style of wood clad in aluminum. There were still piles of building supplies in the yard, covered with tarps to protect them from the weather, as well as tools scattered around. In some places she could see the fresh wood still bare, waiting for a coat of paint, and the newer, unweathered sections of the wall surrounding the yard.

The door opened and Nodoka beamed as she saw the younger woman. "Kasumi! What a wonderful surprise! I wasn't expecting you at all! Come in, come in!" She stepped back, inviting Kasumi inside.
Kasumi smiled pleasantly, nodding. She stepped inside and slipped off her shoes. "The house looks wonderful!"

Nodoka beamed. "Isn't it? The insurance money didn't stretch quite as far as I had hoped but I think the rest we can manage on our own. I'll make us some tea and then we can talk." She motioned Kasumi to follow her inside gestured for her to sit at the table while she glided smoothly into the small kitchen.

Kasumi knelt gracefully on the cushion and let out a breath she hadn't realized she had been holding. She busied herself with smoothing out her skirt to dispel some of her nervousness.

Nodoka returned in short order with a full tea set and a plate of small biscuit on a tray. She set it down in the middle of the table, poured hot tea into a cup for Kasumi and then sat down with her own. "So! What brings you here today, my dear?"

"Well, it was concerning the meeting you were planning to have with Ranma's fiancees tomorrow," Kasumi began carefully. "I was wondering if you would consider postponing?"

Nodoka raised an eyebrow. "Whatever for, dear? Is Akane not ready yet?"

Kasumi took a sip of tea to give herself pause to consider her words. "Akane and Nabiki have both been working hard to be ready. In fact, as I understand it, all the girls are. However, Ranma has had something of an altercation with a rival…"

"Is this that Himura girl again?" Nodoka scowled.

Kasumi shook her head. "No, this was with Ryouga Hibiki, actually."

"Oh, good!" Nodoka smiled, seemingly relieved. "That boy is a much more suitable challenge for Ranma. They will be good friends when they get old, just like Soun and Genma, I am sure." She sipped her tea then frowned. "This new tea set… the tea just doesn't taste right, does it? I do miss my old one. Modern earthenware just isn't the same."

"Actually, about Ryouga. He… has a bit of difficulty with directions. He has been known to get lost very easily. In fact, it appears Ranma chased him until he had gotten them both quite lost." Kasumi knew she was telling half-truths having gotten the actual story from Nabiki, but she also knew the complicated nature of the situation would likely not sit well. "Ranma contacted us early this morning and is on his way back but… might be delayed. We thought… perhaps it might be best to postpone, just in case?"

Nodoka paused, considering. "Normally, yes. What is an omiai without the groom? But… this is not a typical omiai. The girls are already well acquainted with Ranma so introductions are not necessary. I would prefer my son be present, of course, but I am also pleased he is pursuing more fruitful challenges such as this. I would rather get the matter underway and meet these girls for myself." She looked at her teacup. "You understand, don't you Kasumi?"

"I… believe so," Kasumi said after a moment.

"This must seem so silly to you. A mother meddling in the affairs of her young son when he quite obviously has no trouble attracting prospective mates on his own," she sighed. "In fact, I am quite proud of him. Such fierce loyalty from so many wonderful girls!"

"They are loyal to him," Kasumi admitted. "In fact, I do know they have recently come to an… 'arrangement' of sorts among themselves to allow the matter to be more peacefully decided between them. Perhaps you could allow the matter to be worked out among them naturally?"
Nodoka took another sip of tea, her expression thoughtful. "That is a tremendously tempting idea," she said finally. "I would dearly love to allow him to play a little more and enjoy this wild and unrestricted time in his life. Perhaps he would decide the matter by providing me a grandchild, hmmm?" She smiled at the thought. "But… We tried things this way for over a year, did we not? And over that time the matter only became more acrimonious and chaotic and the introduction of… unsuitable matches has begun to make the situation less benign."

"'Unsuitable matches'… you mean my sister, Nabiki," Kasumi said flatly, the smile leaving her face.

Nodoka’s expression became apologetic. "Do not mistake me, Kasumi. Nabiki is a wonderful girl. Intelligent, driven, worldly… she is in every way the picture of a modern woman. But… even you must see that it is those very traits that make her an unworkable match for my Ranma. I know that at the moment there is a spark of passion between them, a physical attraction I can wholly understand. But… should the engagement be allowed to proceed between them… they would undoubtedly be miserable. They are… of two different worlds and each needs and deserves someone who can support and guide them on their destinies in those worlds."

"And you do not believe they can be that for each other?" Kasumi asked.

Nodoka took a deep breath. "Kasumi… when I married Genma, it came with a price. It was necessary to put aside my own ambitions and dreams to support him; this was a price I understood from the start and one that I accepted and do not regret to this day. Genma is a driven man… driven to develop his art, to expand it and to restore our tarnished house and name to their former glory. We are an old family, of samurai lineage, but we have fallen far since those days. His task, and the task Ranma inherits from him, can brook no competing drives. Nabiki…" She paused to sip her tea. "... Nabiki I do not believe could make such a sacrifice, or if she did, she would come to regret it. Such bitterness and envy would tear down what little we have rebuilt. Ranma must have a wife who shares his passion for the art, who understands it and can support him selflessly and tirelessly. She must understand the sacrifices demanded of her and make them…” She hesitated, her hand shaking slightly as she put her teacup down. "... make any sacrifice demanded of her."

"Don't you regret that one sacrifice, Auntie?" Kasumi asked softly.

Nodoka inhaled sharply, recovering. "No… No, of course not. It was necessary, and the results prove that. Genma brought me a Man amongst Men to reward my patience and trust in him. Now it is my turn to see to the next leg of our son's journey towards restoring our family name and honor."

"Even though he came back cursed? And with such a long list of debts his father has tasked him to repay?" Kasumi asked quietly. She was pushing, she knew.

"The curse is merely a test. A temporary thing." Nodoka waved it off. "Once this matter is settled Ranma can devote time to curing it. All the more reason to settle this matter quickly." She inclined her head towards Kasumi. "But… not too quickly. I intend to take my time selecting the proper match. Don't fret Kasumi, I am acting with haste but I shall not be hasty."

"Then… perhaps I can suggest holding the interviews at the Tendo Dojo?" Kasumi said finally. "We do have more space and it would allow you to focus on the matter of the interviews while I manage the hospitality."

Nodoka smiled. "I had hoped, my dear, but I did not feel I had the right to ask, given what is at stake. Thank you." She nodded in a small bow. "Yes, I think we will. Our home is… not large and my son has quite the entourage!"

Kasumi allowed herself a smile. "He does at that."
They were silent a moment. Kasumi finally worked up the courage to broach the question that had been bothering her. "What will happen… after? Once the marriage is done and Ranma's curse is lifted?"

Nodoka smiled. A distant look entered her eyes. "My son and his wife will have a child. Then, they will leave on a training journey to further perfect the art and I will raise their child in their absence."

Kasumi raised an eyebrow. "Wouldn't… they wish to raise their child themselves?"

"Of course not. Raising a child would be far too much of a distraction from the Art," Nodoka replied. "I sacrificed my chance to raise my own child for Ranma's sake. I… spent fourteen years staring at an empty cradle every day so that he might be strong. Now that he is… I am owed this." Her voice wavered a bit and her eyes grew distant.

"... I am owed this."

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Between the lunch break and a free period at the end of the day, the team had actually made decent progress.

Ukyou spun the volleyball on her fingertip. "Well, if you guys keep this up, I think you might just be ready for your first game." She caught the ball in her hand.

"Not without Ranma we won't," Sayuri said, chewing on her thumb, eyes distant as she thought hard. "Random chance has a nasty tendency to drag Ranma away at the worst times."

"Senpai will be there!" Rin said, clenching her fists and nodding vigorously. "She wouldn't miss the game!"

Sayuri sighed. "That's kind of what I'm worried about. Ranma will be there for the game but not for practise. Everything we're doing here and now will be moot if we can't coordinate, and Himura and the Principal are probably going to expect Ranma to try and one-man-band the game and improvise around not knowing what she's doing. That's not to mention what would happen if a rival or something pops out of the woodwork to drag him off for half the game. It'd be nice to have a backup."

"Ukyou is pretty good. Himura already tried to recruit her for the girl's team. Why not get her on our bench? That way we have a backup and if Ranma is there one of us can just sit out." Riko suggested.

Ukyou tossed the ball to Sayuri. "No can do, sugar. Same reason why I said 'no' to Himura and the boy's team. I'm not allowed to play competitively."

They all paused to look at her.

"Why not?" Sayuri asked.

Ukyou took deep breath. "A few years ago a girl played for her school's team. She was good, too. Loved the sport. Except… she wasn't born a girl."

"You mean… she had a curse? Like senpai?" Rin asked.

Ukyou shook her head. "No, sugar. The old fashioned way. The one with social stigma and awkwardness and body image issues and hormone therapy and surgery when she came of age and maybe, maybe some measure of acceptance after it all if she was lucky. She was… transitioning."
"Oh," Rin said softly.

"She had managed to get on hormones early on, had a doctor guiding her, and a family that accepted her so she was doing pretty well. Most of the kids at her school knew and didn't care. Her registration said 'girl'… but her birth records said 'boy'. When the regulatory commission found out, her team was disqualified from competition. Not only that, there was a lot of nastiness around it, accusations of cheating and people whom she didn't even know began harassing her because what she was had been made public…” She hung her head. "It was ugly."

"Did you know her?" Sayuri asked.

"I knew of her," Ukyou replied. "She and I are kinda part of the same community after all." Ukyou plucked at her jacket. "I'm lucky, I guess. I'm okay with what I am. I'm okay with my gender, I'm just not really satisfied with the clothes selection that comes with it." She chuckled softly. "But then they implemented new rules. Now the regulatory board checks for discrepancies between what a player is registered as, and what their birth records say, and automatically disqualifies anyone where they don't match up. Right now my registration says 'boy' but my birth records say 'girl' so I'd get kicked off either team. I could fix it, but that would screw up my transcripts from the boy's school I used to attend, not to mention all of the night courses I've registered for as a boy. Besides that, I'm listed on the family register as being male."

Sayuri stared at her a moment. "But… What about Ranma?"

"Senpai is a girl!" Rin stated confidently.

"But Ranma's birth records would be for a boy!" Yuka finished, smacking her fist into her palm.

"Then… we're sunk?" Riko said. "There's no way Ranma can play!"

"But then there'd be no way Ranma could play for Himura, either," Sayuri chewed on her thumb again. "There's no way Himura could have missed this, is there?"

"She knows," Ukyou replied. "She offered to 'fix' my registration so I could play last time she approached me."

"That doesn't make any sense," Yuka said. "Why go through all of this if Ranma can't play anyway?"

"Could she have changed the birth records?" Riko asked nervously.

Ukyou shook her head. "The mother or father can request changes to the family register, but the birth records themselves are permanent documents on file with the government. You could list Ranma as a girl on the family register but it'd still show him being born male. And if all of that stuff doesn't agree? The regulatory commission disqualifies the player."

"You think Himura has the kind of connections to change something like that?" Yuka asked, looking a little nervous.

Ukyou shook her head. "I seriously doubt it. That's basically the power to make people appear or disappear. If that was something that a high schooler could use so she could win at volleyball, you wouldn't have people taking the names of babies who died just after being born to change their identities." At the quizzical looks, she sighed. "Look, I know a fair bit about this stuff for… personal reasons, okay? I may have looked into it."

"I thought you were okay with what you are?" Rin asked quietly.
Ukyou reached over and ruffled Rin's hair. "I am, sugar. But I wasn't always. That wasn't even really about my gender, it was about being hurt and angry and thinking I had to be something different to be good enough." She smiled. "Then someone told me I was good enough, just as I was, and for once I believed it. I'm glad that I did."

"So that still leaves us with the question of what Himura is up to," Sayuri said.

"I think we're looking too high-level at this. I think she's got someone on the Regulatory Commission in her pocket," Yuka said finally.

"That makes a lot more sense," Sayuri nodded. "Maybe we can ask Hiroshi and Daisuke to look into it for us? They're on that detective kick after all."

Yuka smirked. "It might even give us a last resort way to ruin her fun. If she happens to win her challenge with Ranma it'd be a damn shame if her star player was suddenly off the team because they rechecked and found out she was a guy."

"Or the volleyball team was disqualified entirely," Sayuri nodded. "I'd hate to do that, but... It'd be so satisfying."

"Couldn't she do that to us if we won?" Rin asked quietly.

Everyone paused.

"I wasn't even thinking of that," Sayuri said. "I guess I'm still not sure we can."

"So? We play for now, worry about it later." Riko suggested. "We can't know anything for sure until Hiroshi and Daisuke check the Regulatory Commission, right?"

"We still need a backup in case Ranma gets sidetracked," Yuka pointed out.

Sayuri looked up, noticing a group of figures approaching. Nabiki, Akane and Shampoo, all getting out of their final classes. Spotting Akane, Sayuri suddenly had an idea.

"You know... Akane plays volleyball," she said. "How do you think she'd look in a red wig?"

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"This is very interesting..." Doctor Hirano scrolled through the different images in each set. "I am at a loss to determine what it means but it is very interesting. The anomalous activity in the entorhinal cortex is almost completely suppressed. And you say that you are noticing a definite change in your perceptions, Mr. Hibiki?"

Ryouga nodded, sitting on the cot. He felt a bit self conscious because Ranma was still holding his hand and seemed unwilling to relinquish it despite her sullen demeanor.

Ryouga nodded. He could almost visualize the hospital now. He remembered how they had come from several floors above on the elevator, which route they had taken... he was fairly certain he could make it back to their room, and the technician had confirmed his mental 'route' was accurate.

It also meant he could remember previous routes too... suddenly all his wanderings made sense... of a sort. There were still gaps, jumps he couldn't quite explain, but at the very least he knew which way the Tendo Dojo was.

Not that I actually NEED that information anymore, he thought, his mood darkening somewhat.
He felt a gentle squeeze of his hand.

He blinked and glanced at Ranma. She wasn't looking at him but he had definitely felt it. Is she still watching my emotions through the link? he wondered. He had been trying not to 'peek' himself, realizing he was on a dangerous road.

"And... holding your fiancee's hand has never had this effect before?" He said, addressing the question to both of them.

"Well..." Ranma finally spoke up. "We... uhh... I tried something different while we were stuck in our hospital room. To... make Ryo feel better. I tried ki sharing with him."

Doctor Hirano raised an eyebrow, confused a moment, then blinked and nodded. "Ah, yes. That's a... hmmm... Shinto thing? Yes, well..." He took off his glasses and started polishing them. "While I respect your beliefs, and I realize they are quite real to you, I'm afraid that in the interests of your medical well-being I must insist we pursue all scientific avenues of explanation. I have seen many so called 'miracles' attributed to faith-healing, only for said effect to merely be..."

Ranma sighed, held up her left hand and concentrated for a moment, summoning a small but bright ball of ki.

Doctor Hirano's glasses dropped from suddenly nerveless fingers.

"Look! Science!" Ranma said brightly.

The Doctor knelt quickly, scrambling for his glasses and managing to put them on with shaking fingers. He stood up, staring at the sphere of ki suspended a few inches above Ranma's palm. "What... is this some sort of trick?"

"Of some sort." Ranma said with a smirk. "Using ki."

"That's not possible," Hirano said flatly, though he was still staring, fascinated, as he walked around it a bit. He extended his hand and looked at Ranma. "Is it safe to touch?"

"Not unless you wanna end up embedded in the wall," Ryouga said quickly.

"It has physical properties?!" He withdrew his hand, staring at it. "That's not... I mean, there is nothing is known science that can..." He scowled, pulled out his penlight and held it dangling over the sphere, giving Ranma a quizzical look.

She simply quirked an eyebrow and shrugged.

Hirano let go of the penlight and snapped his hand back. He almost wasn't fast enough; as soon as the penlight touched the golden glowing surface of the orb, it was propelled violently back upwards to embed itself in the foam tile of the drop ceiling with a ~crack.~

"Oh my..." He said softly. "I presume there are... less destructive applications for this?"

Ranma let the sphere dissipate. "Oh, tons. Me'n Ryo even came up with a few."

"Such as..." The Doctor took off his glasses and waved them at their still clasped hands.

Ranma glanced down and blushed. "Yeah, that..." she said quietly. Her hand twitched...

... And she still didn't let go.
Okay, something's up. I'm peeking! Ryouga thought. It was still a little odd… and easier than it should have been - like comparing peering through a fist-sized hole in a door to peeking through the keyhole. He set that aside for the moment and tried to make sense of the abstract jumble that made up her emotions.

Dark. Spikey. Erratic. Fear. He realized he should have guessed simply by feeling her heart rate through her palm, which was elevated. *She's afraid? Afraid of what?*

"This is…” The Doctor put his glasses on again, only to take them off to clean them in a nervous cycle. "I'm not entirely sure *what* to make of this, but the implications…!” He sighed.

"So… is this a cure?” Ryouga asked hopefully, for the moment putting aside ponderings about Ranma's state of mind.

Hirano sighed. "It certainly appears to be a treatment, though the efficacy of it has yet to be tested." He rubbed his chin. "You are presenting me with what is potentially a whole new branch of *physics*. Without the input of someone who both understands this… this… *phenomenon*, and who possesses the requisite medical degree to relate it to modern medical terms and practises… Well… we could be looking at *years* of study."

Ryouga's heart fell and he immediately felt a responding squeeze. *Goddamnit Ranma, get out of my head! You're confusing me enough WITHOUT this!*

But this time Ranma had more than just physical reassurance. "Actually Doc… I know a guy."

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"So… when are you gonna let go of my hand?” Ryouga asked.

They had finished speaking with Doctor Hirano and made a follow up appointment for the next Saturday after school hours. Ranma was confident she could get Dr. Tofu to join them and Dr. Hirano assured them he could get more time on the MRI scanner.

Then Ryouga had been given another examination by a nurse who, after changing his dressing and making sure his stitches were in good shape, had declared him sound to be discharged early, so long as 'there's someone home to look after him,' she had said with a meaningful look at Ranma.

They had returned to their room, collected what things they had and were waiting for Nabiki to arrive with a change of clothes.

*All* without Ranma releasing her death grip on his hand.

"Can't your fiancee hold your hand if she wants to?” Ranma batted her eyelashes at him in a fairly decent, if somewhat strained, attempt at being cutsey, which normally would have been enough to get Ryouga flustered.

Ryouga just continued to stare at her, his expression neutral. He knew better now.

Ranma's big-eyed mournful expression quickly melted into one of annoyance. "L-look, I've got my reasons, okay? The Doc doesn't think is is a full cure, but mebbe if we get you 'charged up' enough it'll let you find your way around for a few days. Just… don't make this weird."

"Way too late for that, Ranma,” Ryouga said dryly. "Why are you afraid?"

"Afraid?! I'm not afraid of anything!” Ranma shot back.
"You're afraid of one thing," Ryouga corrected. "And right now you're afraid like there's one in the room with us."

"Get outta my head, you creeper!" She snarled.

"You first," Ryouga said, again, staying calm. Part of him was enjoying this, having an insider's view of all the chinks in Ranma's armor. "Every time my mood has dipped, you squeeze my hand."

"You don't need a stupid link for that!" Ranma argued. "You are the most obvious sulk in all of Japan! Even when it doesn't make you glow!"

"Then you don't need to be holding my hand, do you?" Ryouga said finally.

"I told you…!"

"Don't do me any favors, Saotome."

"See if I don't!"

"Then go ahead and let go!"

Ranma glared at him then held up their clasped hands. Her fingers slacked a moment as if she meant to drop his hand in disgust but almost instantly her scowl became an expression of worry and her fingers clamped tighter.

"N-not… not yet…” she said softly. "Just… give me a few more minutes, okay?"

"I will if you tell me what's going on," Ryouga said, giving her a hard stare. He slowly started to relax his own fingers.

"The cat didn't go all the way back in, okay?!" Ranma said quickly. She gripped his hand more tightly, and put her other hand over it.

Ryouga immediately tightened his grip. "What?"

"When… when the c-c-c… the you know what almost got out… when I tried to do that emotional 'push'… I almost lost it. I should have lost it. I was… it was out. But you stopped it somehow. I don't know what you did but you stopped it and I tried to put it back in but I can still feel it in there… like… like it's watching me… like the lid isn't on all the way… and if I let go now…” She was starting to hyperventilate.

Ryouga clasped his other hand over hers. She looked up at him in surprise.

"All right."

"What do you mean 'all right'?!" She demanded.

"I mean, you've been keeping my lid on for the last couple of days. So… all right."

Her breathing slowed as she blinked at him, not seeming to comprehend. But he had already relaxed and was just looking back at her, waiting.

She ducked her head, blushing. "Just so we're clear, I don't like having you in my head, okay? It's crowded enough in there."

Ryouga took the hint. He opened himself to the link again. That same fear was swirling around but
he didn't sense that… that *whatever* it was that was buried somewhere deep in Ranma's mind. He focused and let a little of his own ki trickle over then could sense the spikes of fear slowly eroding.

She closed her eyes and her breathing steadied, her grip becoming a little less fierce.

Ryouga chuckled softly. "Look at us."

"W-what?" Ranma asked. Her emotional colors changed again, shifting to something very like but not actually pink and seemed to start trying to twist in behind themselves.

"Here we are, supposedly the two guys vying to be the strongest martial artists in Japan, always trying to beat the other into submission… and we can't even keep the crap in our own heads from taking us out."

Her emotions shifted again. Warmer, but calmer, more at peace. The fear was receding, and her emotional 'sea' was calming. She smiled, laughing a little herself.

It would be very, *very* easy to let himself forget. Or even to let it just *not matter*. And wouldn't that make me just as bad as Akane? Ryouga thought, his eyes dropping to the small hand held in his. *Pretend that she's a girl with a guy curse, that somehow all of this actually means anything, that this isn't just a guy in a girl suit, unintentionally putting out signals that mean different things in this context because he's a social mess?* His eyes clouded. *Or worse… prove Akane right. That everything I felt that I thought was love was just… the feelings of a lonely, scared pet pig yearning for an owner. He snuck a glance at Ranma again. She was looking at him, her eyes slightly unfocused, most likely 'reading' his emotions right back. Or do I pretend none of this happened because it's confusing an uncomfortable? What sort of hypocrite do I want to be?"

"Why are you feeling guilty?" she asked, cocking her head. "And… sad? Not quite sad… what's that word for it… Sad, but also resigned…"

"Melancholy," Ryouga supplied. "You're getting uncomfortably good at this emotion reading thing."

"Call it self preservation. You being unhappy tends to be make trouble for me," she smirked. "Seriously though, what's wrong? I mean… we're actually this close to curing your curse! Maybe this means there's hope for getting rid of the Jusenkyo one too!"

Ryouga felt an odd pang about that. Not for his own curse… if he could cure the curse by crushing the life out of P-chan's wretched little body with his bare hands he'd do it without a moment's hesitation. But…

*Admit it, you hypocrite. You'd miss her,* he thought, glancing at her again and letting his gaze drop shyly. *You're ALREADY as bad as Akane."

"You're feeling guilty again. C'mon… *spill.*" She nudged his leg with her foot.

"You're surprised thinking about the curse… *either one…* doesn't come with some guilt?" He deflected.

There was a knock at the door. The nurse peeked her head in, smiling as she saw the two of them holding hands. "Sorry to intrude but you have a guest. A young lady here to see you?"

"Oh, that's probably Nabiki." Ranma said. "I asked her to come with a change of clothes so we can get out of here." She nodded to the nurse. "Send her in."
"So… how much is this gonna cost me?" Ryōga asked as the nurse closed the door once more.

"Hey, Nabiki isn't that bad anymore!" Ranma protested. "Besides… uhh… this one is on my tab."

Ryōga smirked. "Thought she already had a controlling interest on your soul?"

"I… I'm not saying she doesn't…" Ranma blushed sheepishly, rubbing the back of her head. "But this time… well, you wouldn't happen to know any good Italian restaurants, would you? Don't think Ramen is gonna cut it…"

"Uh… well, I do actually, but…"

"Let me guess. It's in Italy?"

"Actually… I think it's New York? Manhattan is in New York, right?"

"I cannot wait until we fully cure this directional curse thing so you can explain to me in exact detail how you manage to 'accidentally' cross the Pacific Ocean when you go out to the corner store to buy milk."

"So… uhh… we should…?" Ryōga held up their clasped hands.

Ranma blinked. She looked nervous a moment, took a deep breath and then pulled her hand away.

It was like having a blanket pulled off on a chilly morning. His perception of her winked out abruptly and he was alone. The sense of companionship had been so subtle while there, yet so pervasive that once it was removed, the absence was… harrowing. It was only once the world was once more a dark and lonely place that he realized, for a short while, it hadn't been.

"Just… just so we're clear…" Ranma said, rubbing her hand. "Don't tell anyone about this, okay?"

He was going to respond but the door swung open. They turned to greet Nabiki, but came up short as someone different entered. She was a girl Ryōga didn't recognize, with long blonde hair, immaculate and straight in a way only a very expensive hairdresser could accomplish. She wore a Furinkan girl's uniform but her accessories included a few tasteful but valuable-looking pieces of jewelry and shoes that were definitely a designer brand. She had a basket in her hand, wrapped in colored plastic with a bow on it, like one of those 'get well' packages.

"Himura. What are you doing here?" Ranma asked coldly, masking her surprise with contempt.

So THAT'S Himura? Ryōga thought. He had never actually seen her before. She had the poise and confidence of someone who was objectively beautiful and knew it. Her eyes quickly scanned the room, and the two of them in a way that told him she was very quickly gathering information. Her gaze paused on him and she smiled a bit in a way that made him feel very uncomfortable, like she had just had a wonderful idea upon seeing him. Then she focused her attention on Ranma.

"Ranma! I am so glad to see you doing so well!" Himura clapped her hands. "As soon as I heard you were in the hospital, I made sure to organize a little 'get well' present for you." She held out the basket, beaming. "Here. From the students and faculty of Furinkan High!"

"What do you want, Himura?" Ranma replied dryly, not even looking at the basket.

Himura pouted, putting the basket on the foot of the bed. "Ranma… I am a little hurt! I understand we are currently in the middle of a challenge between the two of us, but I didn't realize it was the cause of so much acrimony!" She put her hand on her hip and sighed, shaking her head. "I learned as
much from Nabiki but I had hoped… no, no, this was my fault." She sighed again, clasped her hands in front of her waist and bowed deeply. "Please accept my apologies."

Ranma quirked an eyebrow. "What is this?"

Himura straightened and smiled brightly. "It's an attempt to make amends, of course! While I understand there must be a certain… tension between our camps for the sake of a good challenge, I want to try and ensure that there is respect as well. That is how it's supposed to work, right Mr. Hibiki?" She looked at Ryouga a moment and gave him a conspiratorial wink, as if the two of them were in on something.

"You blackmailed me into this challenge," Ranma said coldly. "With pictures you stole. You changed my gender on my registration at school and got the Principal on board to force me to attend school as a girl. You threatened me with expulsion and criminal charges."

"Would you have accepted my challenge otherwise?" Himura asked, her smile wavering a bit.

"I don't know. You never asked," Ranma replied.

Himura took a deep breath and closed her eyes. Her expression changed, the bright smile dropping. When she opened her eyes again she looked genuinely apologetic. "You're right. I allowed my enthusiasm and desire to make our school excel cloud my better judgement. I am sorry if you feel unfairly treated. But you must understand I am doing all of this for the betterment of all students. Including you." She smiled again. "Just look at you! You are socializing! Participating in an organized sports team, rather than just showing off in gym class! You're contributing! And you've been so selflessly lifting up a group a girls into the limelight with you who… well, let's be honest… never would have had the opportunity otherwise! All of the teachers have noticed! Ms. Hinako was telling me how pleased she was that you were no longer a delinquent! All of this because I gave you a little 'push'." She cocked her head. "Isn't that worth a little consideration in all this?"

"Somehow I doubt all of this was done for my sake," Ranma replied.

Himura's smile flickered, some sort of amusement coloring her expression for a moment at Ranma's words. She leaned forward, closer to the redhead. "That's where you're wrong, Ranma. I've always had the best interests of all the students at Furinkan at heart. It's only now that I have the position to fulfill that wish and perhaps if things had been different I could have done better for you, but the past is the past and we cannot change it. Perhaps when you are a senior you'll understand these things. There are things you don't know. Trust me when I say that one day soon you will realize that I have been doing all of this for your own good." She straightened, her smile becoming sad, almost wistful. "But… I can see you hate me right now. That's all right. I refuse to hate you Ranma Saotome, because you are a student of Furinkan and, no matter how much you might dislike me, you are my responsibility." Her expression grew more serious. "To that end, despite missing a day of school without calling to advise the office, I've convinced the Principal to conditionally forgive your absence, provided your attendance and conduct at school remain good. He wanted to use this excuse to suspend you and end our challenge immediately, but I talked him out of it. I do very much want to see you play. Please don't disappoint me." She turned towards the door and her eyes flicked back to Ryouga, the nastiness more evident in her smirk this time. "And… please invite your fiance along? I promise to be discrete with regards to your other… admirers. I would love to get to know Mr. Hibiki and the whole story between you two better. Ta-ta!" with that she slipped out of the room.

"You know… I thought Kodachi disturbed me," Ranma said, staring at the door.

Ryouga tried to sort out exactly what had just happened. Something about that girl
was deeply unsettling, like it was unsafe for her to be aware of your existence. "What was that all about?"

"She's letting me know she has more ammo to use against me," Ranma said with a scowl.

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Himura slipped into the back seat of the limousine. She shuddered, closing her eyes and hugging herself while she regained her composure. Hospitals made her feel unclean. Visiting one in a day was bad enough, but today she had a second trip to make.

*Ranma WOULD do this on a weekend,* she thought angrily. She briefly considered skipping the second visit but she knew that there were certain expectations of her and shirking them would lead to uncomfortable questions from her grandfather.

"Shall we continue to the nursing home, madame?" The driver asked.

"Yes, yes, of course," Himura replied. She opened a small compartment in the center console of the seat and withdrew a pair of white gloves. She couldn't afford such obvious affectations when dealing with Nabiki or any of her sharp-eyed friends but at least now she could have some freedom from having to actually sully her hands.

The drive was uneventful. Soon enough they were pulling into the grounds and rolling up the long, curving driveway between rows of cherry trees. The lawn was green and immaculately manicured with large beds of colorful flowers framing a large, single-floor building made of stained wood and marble. It could have been a country club or a prestigious private school. Naturally it wasn't any of those things.

She got out of the car and flexed her fingers within the gloves Already she could feel the filth, the grime and the sickness coating her hands, and she hadn't even entered the facility. At least the public hospital was honest about what it was and didn't try and make you feel guilty for being repulsed.

She walked up the steps and the large double doors opened automatically. The woman at the reception desk smiled, recognizing her immediately.

"Miss Himura! Right on time as usual," She stood and walked around the desk, prepared to escort her inside.

"Thank you," Himura held up a hand. "An escort isn't necessary; I know the way. Is my mother with him?"

The receptionist nodded. "As always. She hardly leaves his side. If I might say, your mother's devotion is quite inspirational and she has been endlessly eager to contribute to the health and comfort of our residents. Often we have to remind her that she is a guest here and not an employee!"

She bowed. "As ever, we are honored to have any member of your family with us."

Himura ignored the gesture and continued through the doors. She wasn't intending to be rude; there was no benefit to it. But she felt the need to move on before her mask slipped and she was unable to keep her expression pleasant and neutral. *Yes. Always devoted. Always the good housewife,* she thought bitterly, her lip curling a bit. She rubbed the fabric of her gloves between her fingers and shuddered again. *I hate this place so much.*

She walked through the public area. Residents in wheelchairs were propped up in front of televisions or by windows. Through the large open panes of glass she could see a patio to the rear of the building with other residents, some were mobile, more or less, while others were tended by a small
army of nurses and orderlies. *All* of them were helpless to some degree. Dependent, like atrophied leeches clinging to the side of some greater creature, they did nothing more than feed on the vitality of the fitter creatures consigned to attend them - until, inevitably, they sloughed off this life like a patch of dead skin.

*I would rather die than exist like that,* Himura thought as she continued into the hallway. Here the illusion of style and sophistication broke down further, unable to bear up under the brunt of residents who could not see to their own hygiene or even properly use the bathroom. Lilac, potpourri and bleach struggled in vain against the stench of decay, excrement and sweat-soaked filth. She felt it invade her body with every breath, polluting her. She hesitated a moment, then steeled herself to continue.

The door was at the far end of the hall - a corner suite which, of course, put it as far away as it could be, through the the longest possible gauntlet of decay. Another small crime to add to his list; another tiny addendum to the compendium of crimes for which he deserved to suffer.

She reached the door and knocked politely. She could have simply entered; she had the key; but there was a ceremony to such things; a script that needed to be followed and an image to maintain for rest of the world.

The door opened. A middle-aged woman in a kimono stood there, dark hair shot through with grey and tied up in a bun. She looked far older than her years, her eyes sunken and lifeless, surrounded by lines of worry and stress. For a moment her eyes brightened upon seeing her. "Himura… come in!" she motioned for the girl to enter and closed the door behind her.

"Hello, mother," Himura said flatly.

Her mother scurried over to the small kitchen area of the apartment. The room was spacious and boasted a view of the lush green grounds of the nursing home that the vast majority of the teeming masses of Japan, crammed into their tiny apartments with no windows at all, could scarcely comprehend. To the left was a door that lead to a bedroom and the main area dedicated an obscene amount of space to a bright, airy living room.

In the middle of it, a man sat motionless in a wheelchair. His head was slumped to the side, his eyes sightless and dull and a little drool ran down his slack jaw. Tubes and wires from a compact monitoring system built into the chair ran to various places under his clothes. He would twitch occasionally but was otherwise still and did not respond to her entry.

"Your father is so pleased to see you!" her mother said as she busied herself making tea. "You can see it in his eyes. He's getting better, you know… he almost managed to speak last week! The physiotherapist tells me he is responding extremely well to treatment. Perhaps… perhaps soon we can bring him home, and…"

"Mother," Himura said quietly, cutting her off. "There was a new flower in the beds. I noticed it as we drove up. I'm not familiar with the cultivar. Could you go ask the staff about it for me?"

Her mother paused, about to pour a cup of tea and her hand trembled as she looked at her daughter. "Himura, I'm sure they haven't…"

"Mother. Please," Himura repeated in the same even tone. "Go ask the staff about the flowers for me."

The older woman hesitated then shakily put the teapot down. She made her way to the door and paused. "You're… you're not going to hurt him again, are you?"
Himura was silent a moment, staring out the window. Her mother had actually started to turn the handle before she replied.

"Would that be so bad?" Himura asked without turning. "Would it really be so terrible if you were finally free of this?"

Her mother didn't reply and there was a soft click behind her as the door closed. Himura glanced over her shoulder and saw that she was alone.

"Coward," she muttered under her breath. "You always did choose him over me though, didn't you?" She turned back to the man in the chair and walked forward slowly. "But then again… at least this way you've finally stopped hitting her, haven't you, father?"

She stopped a few feet away from him. There was a small putrid noise as his slack bowels emptied into the tube leading to his colostomy bag and she wrinkled her nose in disgust.

"This suits you. It truly does - an appearance to match your soul." As always, she examined him carefully, making note of every change, every small degradation - cataloging his slow but inevitable decline. "Grandfather feels that it's important I remind myself of you - that you are a consequence of my actions. I haven't decided yet if he is disappointed that I did it, or that I didn't take the one last swing needed to finish it."

"Mother seems to think that you are still in there. Aware. Alive. I don't think she realizes the horror she wishes on you. But I do… and I hope she is right. I hope you can see all that has happened to you - all that is happening to you. I want you to be aware." She was shaking now. The memories were coming back… the memories always came back. The memories of how he would come into her room at night - of her mother in the doorway, seeing, but closing the door slowly and leaving her to suffer. And then, the face of the one who had always comforted her afterwards.

"It was never enough, was it?" She felt the old rage rising in her. "All you had to do was sit back, get fat and have everything you ever wanted. But it wasn't enough. You had to take what we had, too." She clenched her fist. "You spent… so long working to destroy Naoki. So very long. And yet you couldn't do it. Even after that truck did the job for you, it still wasn't enough. And after you couldn't make him give up, when you couldn't take that from him, you took him from me."

"I could end it now," she whispered in his ear. "No one would miss you. Not even mother. To her you are just a duty that she fulfills because she lacks the imagination to do or be anything else. I could end all of this right now, and be free of you forever."

She pulled her hand away. The catatonic man gasped and sucked in a wheezing breath.

"But that's not enough," She straightened. "Not enough by half. Not enough for Naoki, and not enough for me. I have so much more I need to take from you first." She started to pace around his wheelchair. "I'm going to be the athlete you never were. The one you wouldn't allow Naoki to be. And then, when they offer me the prize you lusted after for so long, I'm going to hang it here, in front of you, on that wall, so that you always see it." She continued walking. "I am going to take the company that was your birthright, and I will have your wealth and your power. And when they are
mine, I will scrub all traces of you from the Tanaka registries, until there is no evidence you ever existed. I will send mother away and I will leave you in the care of strangers who won't even know your name, or who you were. They will only know you as you are now… a putrid mass of slack flesh that only exists to stink and secrete and rot!" She finally came back around to the front of his chair and stared him in the eyes. "And then… only then... will I allow you to die."

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This chapter is a little shorter than the other ones, but this felt like a natural place for the break to fall. I am already a good ways into the next update, and have been burying my poor proofreader with work. Without proper management, I am a walking crime against grammar and tense.

Himura's backstory has been outlined for some time. You'll get more of it later on, but as someone pointed out, without it she is flat and uninteresting. I hope this gives her a little more depth. As it's not really a spoiler as much as it is I just didn't have a good spot to state it plainly: Naoki is the name of Himura's eldest brother. The rest hopefully you get from the context.

For those who don't like the Ranma x Ryouga stuff, I apologize. There is a purpose to it that is beyond just more romantic tangles, I promise.

I suppose you could call this fic 'Fridge Logic: A Ranma Fanfiction' for the number of rabbit holes I'm diving into. I probably should update the fic description, but I don't exactly know what to put there that would fit in the character limit and be at all accurate. Suggestions?
"So she just left? Without asking for anything?" Nabiki asked as they walked, deep in thought.

Ranma was walking next to her, hands clasped behind her head. She was wearing a loose blouse and pair of slacks that Nabiki had decided were gender-neutral enough to be mentally comfortable as well as mindful of the girl's bruised and battered body. Ryouga was next to Ranma, the stiffness of his gait betraying how sore he must obviously be, even if he was stoically refusing to complain. She had found an old sweatshirt in Ranma's drawer that looked like it had never been touched, and was probably too big for him, though it seemed to fit Ryouga fine. The pants were a pair of Ranma's old, loose training slacks - worn but serviceable - and wouldn't be missed if Ryouga didn't give them back.

"Yeah. Just wanted to 'make sure we were doing okay'. Tried to sell me a line about having 'my best interests at heart'," Ranma scoffed. "I get enough of that bullcrap from Pops."

"Probably an excuse to gather info. Plus there are appearances she's concerned with. She probably had to verify you were actually in the hospital to get the Principal to back off on trying to disqualify you," Nabiki said. She was thinking about her own encounter with Himura and trying to piece together a better understanding of the girl.

"Don't tell me you think she actually did me a favor!" Ranma asked skeptically.

"No, of course not," Nabiki waved that off, still thinking. "Just conflicting objectives. The Principal wants you beaten and humiliated so he can chalk up a 'win' and force you to acknowledge it. Himura wants you to be her secret weapon so she can blow out the Volleyball competition and win the Championship. She doesn't get anything if you get disqualified."

"I heard she's got some ties to the Yakuza, too?" Ryouga said. "I wonder why they're interested in all this?"

"I don't think they are. Not this specifically, anyway." Nabiki said. "It's more a case where they've decided that I'm Himura's rival and they want to see how she handles taking me down and winning the 'prize'."

Ranma scowled. "You know, that's probably the most insulting thing about all of this. I'm just the prize. She goes to all the trouble to force me into acceptin' her challenge and she won't even respect me as a rival!"

"It's a different kind of playing field, Ranma," Nabiki said. "It's more like chess. You're the King, the most important piece on the board, and at the same time you're the Queen, the most powerful piece on the board. The game is over if you get captured or we manage to exhaust her attempts to capture you. She's playing in the games so she's a piece on the board herself, but she's also the one moving all of the pawns around on her side."

"And now she knows about Ryouga and the fiance cover story," Ranma sighed. "She seemed real interested in that."

"Hard to tell if it's something she actually thinks she can use or not," Nabiki muttered. "Himura likes to let you know when she knows one of your secrets, whether it actually gives her leverage or not. It makes people nervous and paranoid."

"But you like to do that too, don't you?" Ryouga pointed out.
"Yes, of course I do. It works," Nabiki replied. She gave him a smirk. "How else am I going to keep a bunch of of martial artists - any one of whom could wreck a building with a flick of their finger - in line?"

Ranma scowled. "Why can't you mercenary types fight fair?"

"Oh, it's entirely fair, Ranma. It's just a different game with different rules. Now this..." she cupped Ranma's chin and, before the redhead could protest, leaned in and kissed her on the lips - holding the kiss just a long enough to get past the initial stiffness of surprise then pulling away just as Ranma started to respond, "... is cheating."

"I... uh..." Ranma stammered, suddenly going red and ducking her head. "... M-mebbe a little cheating is okay..."

Nabiki looked up, and noticed Ryouga was blushing as well and seeming to look at anything but the two of them. "Just as long as it's cheating, and not cheating, Ranma," Nabiki added, giving Ryouga a meaningful look. "Your dance card is full."

Ranma and Ryouga suddenly exchanged a worried glance.

"I-I-I don't know what you're implying!" Ryouga laughed in that nervous, manic way.

"We wouldn't ever... It's not like that, Nabiki!" Ranma frantically waved her arms, her face now as red as her hair.

Nabiki shrugged nonchalantly. "Oh, no, you and 'Ryo' are fine. Like I told you before, I just want pictures. Guy-guy preferred, but I'll accept whatever."

"Nabiki!" Ranma balled up her fists though she was still absolutely glowing red with embarrassment. Ryouga had simply stopped responding, his brain having decided that it had had enough for the day and switching off to leave him standing, slack-jawed, staring at nothing.

Ranma noticed Ryouga was gone for the day. She grabbed his arm and dragged him, unresisting, to catch up. "Great! Now you broke him!"

"Well, that's his problem, isn't it?" Nabiki smirked over her shoulder at them. "He's going to have to get used to it at some point. If I can't extort people, I need to have my fun somehow!"

Ranma snorted. "You shouldn't joke about stuff like that!"

"Who was joking? I'm dead serious."

"Auuugh!"

Nabiki chuckled and continued to walk. Akane takes this WAY too seriously. If anything ever ACTUALLY happened between those two they'd combust from the awkward.

Ranma and Ryouga were still stewing in mortified silence by the time they reached the front door of the Hibiki residence.

The house looked considerably more lived in now, with the flower beds at relieved of some of their overgrowth and the lawn trimmed. The mailbox had been emptied of its accumulation of old mail, and the walkway had been swept.

"Your Mom has been busy," Ranma said.
"I gave her a call to let her know we were coming," Nabiki added. "She wasn't terribly happy to get the news second-hand but I explained you were still kind of loopy on the pain meds. Which was true enough at the time based on what Ranma told me. She might be suspicious if you act too coherent so… Just act natural?" Nabiki smirked at the last bit.

"Funny," Ryouga muttered as he walked up to the door. He noticed the doorframe had been cleaned as well as he knocked.

The door opened to reveal Mrs. Hibiki. She was still wearing her black checkered yellow scarf, but she her clothes were less road worn and newer-looking. "Ryouga!" She darted forward and hugged him.

"Augh… the stitches! Watch the stitches, Mom!" Ryouga squawked, though from his smile it was clear he wasn't too concerned. She quickly released him, looking a little sheepish. She peered over his shoulder. "Your back…?"

"It'll be fine in a few days," Ryouga said. "I'm just a little stiff, that's all."

"Yes, well, I'll be wanting a second opinion on that," She said sternly, then smiled, holding him by the shoulders. "You're too much like your grandfather! Never complaining about all the bumps and bruises and aches and pains. I was always so worried you'd hurt yourself and not tell us as a child." She let him go and turned to Ranma, giving her a swift and unexpected hug as well. She released the reeling redhead and gave her a cursory look over, her careful eye noting all of the fading bruises and healing scrapes on her face and arms. "I get the feeling you're almost as bad, young lady! I hope, at least, I can trust you two to tattle on each other if one of you is hurting and won't say anything?" She stepped back and put her hands on her hips but she wasn't able to maintain her stern demeanor. "I am so glad you are both safe!" Impulsively, she gave them each another quick hug.

Finally, she noticed Nabiki. "Oh! Oh I'm sorry dear, I've been rude!"

Nabiki smiled. "Not at all, ma'am. I'm Nabiki Tendo. We spoke on the phone earlier?"

"Oh! Yes, of course!" She bowed. "Thank you so much for looking after my son and his… the corner of her mouth quirked upwards. "... rival. I understand your family has been looking after Ranma here for some time? Oh, but this isn't the place to talk, come in, come in!" She stepped back and waved them through the door.

Bemused, Nabiki accepted the invitation, followed by Ranma and Ryouga, both of whom were subdued, unaccustomed to such overt displays of parental affection.

Nabiki noticed the older woman had a spool of twine on a loop on her belt, and as she walked back inside, she was reeling the string in. The line stretched into the house, through the living room, and appeared to stretch back into what she assumed was the kitchen in the back.

She's literally tied herself to the house to avoid getting lost, Nabiki realized. She wondered what that was like - to be unable to find your way in your own home?

"The neighbors have been tremendously helpful," Mrs. Hibiki said as she lead them into the living room with it's large, western-style couch. "They moved in three years ago and didn't think anyone lived here. I had to tell them we were away overseas. True enough… I think." She motioned them to sit. "They don't have any children of their own. They were happy to pick up some groceries for me, so the fridge is stocked up for once. And I finally got the gas back on. Let me go make you all some tea." She followed her string back into the kitchen. "You would not believe all the static they gave me over the account. I'll have to talk to your father about putting it in my name so we can avoid that
hassle in the future.

Ryouga winced. Nabiki briefly wondered why a parental disagreement over which name was on the bills would be cause for discomfort but that was quickly supplanted by a much more interesting mystery. Ranma had almost immediately responded to the subtle cue and had gently taken the Lost Boy's hand.

Well then, what's this? Nabiki masked her reaction and quietly analyzed what she was seeing. Ranma was gauging Ryouga's emotional state and responding to it, but that wasn't entirely unexpected as Ryouga's emotions had proven they could be volatile in the worst ways possible. But this response had been subtle, automatic and damn near unconscious on her part; like it was a practised reflex.

And sure enough, Ryouga was responding - the tension in his shoulder muscles and face easing and his eyes flicking to her. There was even a small smile on his face though it vanished quickly as she released his hand.

It was about as profoundly out of character for Ranma and Ryouga's relationship as she could imagine. Even when they were playing up the role for the benefit of others, there was a consistency to their awkward attempts to mimic the behaviour of a couple that reflected their usual rivalry and friendship; brash, loud, obvious, clumsy and overreactive.

This had been subtle, empathetic and unconscious - even intimate. It was something that simply hadn't been there two days ago.

Nabiki wished she could pull Ranma aside and get the story of what had actually happened from her, but for now she simply observed.

Mrs. Hibiki returned with a tray and set it down on the western-style coffee table. There was the usual teapot and four cups as well as a plate of cookies. "I know you both must be famished, what with hospital food being the way it is. Hopefully this will tide you over until dinner… will you and Ms. Tendo be staying, Ranma?"

"Call me Nabiki, please." Nabiki smiled again. "I'll leave that to Ranma, though I should give Kasumi a call if we're staying."

Ranma ducked her head guiltily. "I… really should get home. I know the Tendos and my parents are worried about me."

Nabiki's eyes narrowed at the mention of Ranma's parents. It was unconscious, reflexive, a momentary twinge of distaste and cynicism about the likelihood of either of Ranma's parents showing any significant concern about Ranma when their own interests weren't involved. She could feel herself doing even as she tried to catch herself. In that same moment, she noticed Ryouga's mom watching her and she saw the same thing.

She doesn't approve of Ranma's parents either, Nabiki realized. She was checking to see how I reacted to that comment too. I wonder what Ranma told her about them? The need to grill Ranma for some answers was becoming all the more urgent.

"I understand," Mrs. Hibiki nodded. "But don't think you're off the hook! There is no expiry on a Hibiki promise! Some night you have to let me cook for you. Both of you." She glanced at Nabiki
and gave her a subtle wink.

She's sharp, Nabiki realized. She would need to be careful around her. But then again she might also be a useful ally, especially if Himura started to sniff around.

"There is a favor I was hoping I could ask before I let you go, however." She sat down and started to pour tea for them. "Unless Ryoga has asked already?" She glanced at her son who's sheepish look was sufficient reply. "Well, that's understandable - you two had quite the ordeal, didn't you?" She sighed. "It may have been presumptuous of me, but after discussing it with Ryoga, I decided it would be best to enroll him at Furinkan."

"That's… why I was there yesterday. I was looking for Ranma," Ryoga said, rubbing the back of his head. "I was… uh… I was hoping…"

"Would you be so kind as to walk my son to school in the mornings?" Mrs. Hibiki clasped her hands. "An education is so important and it's terrible he's missed out. I know he's worked hard to keep up but… one can only do so much on their own. Plus… he really should be with others his own age. You helped him before in Middle School, so…"

"We'd be happy to," Nabiki said quickly. "Ryouga is a good friend to my family. Me or my sister would be happy to help even if Ranma has other commitments."

Ryoga blanched a little at the mention of Akane and Ranma at least had the sense to look guilty.

"Oh, is he?" Mrs. Hibiki sighed, closing her eyes in relief. "It is so reassuring to know Ryo has friends to rely on. You understand his 'problem', I assume?"

"Oh, yes," Nabiki gave Ryoga a stern look. "We know all about Ryoga's curse."

"Good. It's an imposition, I know, especially to ask of a girl I barely know and a family I don't know. But… this is more important than pride." She bowed slightly. "Thank you Ms. Tendo. Nabiki."

Nabiki inclined her head in return. "We take in a lot of strays at the Tendo dojo. It wouldn't do to turn away one of Ranma's close friends, would it?" She picked up the cup of tea. "In fact, it would be good if Ryoga stayed in closer touch with us. Ranma was counting on him to help with her volleyball team's training. Perhaps we could borrow him a few nights a week?"

"I don't see why not!" Mrs. Hibiki beamed. "It would be good for him to get involved and meet people. I know how hard that can be when transferring to a new school mid-stream like this." She noticed her son's mortified expression. She reached over and patted his knee. "I'm sure in time you'll find a club of your own to join, Ryo. it might be a little embarrassing to be surrounded by a bunch of girls like this, but being helpful to others is really the best way to make friends."

"I… yeah…" Ryoga laughed nervously.

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Ranma sipped her tea. Mrs. Hibiki was currently regaling Nabiki with stories of Ryoga's childhood, much to Ryoga's chagrin, and Nabiki was laughing and joking pleasantly and seemed quite enthralled with the conversation.

It made Ranma wonder if she had imagined that searching look Nabiki had given her. Ryoga's mother had mentioned his father again in that casual way, maintaining the fiction that he was alive and well and due home any time. Ryoga knew it was for her own benefit, to help her maintain whatever mental gymnastics she was doing to try and keep her directional curse manageable. But it
had hurt him; she had seen him flinch and without thinking she had squeezed his hand and sent him a brief reassurance through the link.

There was a pretty good chance Nabiki had caught it but she had no idea what the Middle Tendo was thinking. Nabiki wasn't prone to getting the wrong idea like Akane but she also wasn't the sort to just dismiss what she saw.

Ranma wished she had talked to Nabiki about the whole matter with Ryouga before, but there simply hadn't been time. It didn't help that Ranma wasn't entirely sure how she felt about it all herself. The events of the last 48 hours had completely changed her relationship with Ryouga, probably irrevocably.

*It would have been nice to get some time to breathe in all this,* She thought glumly. *A week or two alone in the woods, away from everyone? Not like that's an option. And now I'm gonna be seeing Ryo… RYOUGA… every day? I need some time AWAY from him to sort this out. Being around him is just gonna be more… CONFUSING.*

"Well… I should let both of you get home before it gets too dark out," Mrs. Hibiki said, glancing out the window. She sighed and put her teacup down. "It is so easy to lose track of time when you have company over. I would dearly love it if you would come again, Nabiki. And please extend the same invitation to the rest of your family. I am in need of resocializing myself after all this time!" She started packing up the tray as Nabiki gathered her things.

"Ranma, would you mind helping me in the kitchen for a moment?" she asked, straightening with the tray balanced on one hand, and her guide string in the other.

"Hmm? Uh, sure…" Ranma stood up. She felt Nabiki's eyes on the back of her head as they walked to the kitchen. On the way, Mrs. Hibiki drew the slack in her string back onto the spool at her hip. In the kitchen, Ranma could see she had tied it to the stove.

Mrs. Hibiki put the tray down. "Just put some wrap on the leftover cookies if you could, dear? Leave them out and I'll put them away later." She busied herself with emptying and rinsing the teapot.

Ranma wondered why that required her help but did as asked, fishing out the plastic wrap and covering the plate of cookies.

"Ranma," Mrs. Hibiki said, almost casually, "Is everything alright at home?"

"I… uh… well, yeah. The Tendos are great, and…"

"I don't mean the Tendos, dear. I mean at home." She turned, folding her hands in front of her. "Please forgive me. I have been gone for a long time, and my social graces are not quite… 'copacetic' would be the term my husband would use, I think." She smiled. "I know that my own family is less than perfect and I have a lot to answer for as Ryo's mother. But… I…" She sighed and fidgeted. "I can see Nabiki is quite *fiercely* protective of you. And… I see some of my fears confirmed in her eyes. I know you trust the Tendos. I just want you to know that… if you ever need a place to go… You are welcome here; at any time, no matter the circumstances. You are Ryouga's Anchor, so you are family." She finished and took a deep breath. "There. It is always awkward to say things like that."

"I…” Ranma suddenly felt small, for some reason. Guilty. *Sure, her father was bad, but…* "It's okay, Mrs. Hibiki. I'm fine. And home is fine too! I'm… I'm sorry if I gave you the wrong idea about…”

She put a hand on her shoulder, smiled and shook her head. Somehow that simple gesture had the
power to silence Ranma. "No need, dear. I will say and think no more on it. But just remember, Hibiki promises have no expiry."

"I… okay…” Ranma felt off-balance for some reason. "But… you don't have to worry. I mean, I can take care of myself!"

She nodded. "I know. But remember that people aren't meant to be self-contained. Even if we can see to all our own needs, we always need someone else. Don't be alone if you don't need to be." She squeezed lightly, then let go of Ranma's shoulder. "Now let's get you back to your Nabiki so she can stop glaring at my kitchen and driving herself crazy wondering what we're talking about, hmm?"

Ranma followed her back out, careful to step over the twine Mrs. Hibiki was trailing behind her. Nabiki was, in fact, staring intently at the entrance to the kitchen, her school bag over her shoulder.

"Thank you for coming, both of you. And thank you especially, Nabiki for helping out Ryo." Mrs. Hibiki bowed. "I will have those borrowed clothes washed and pressed for you on Monday. Do be careful on the walk home?"

"We will. Thank you for the tea." Nabiki bowed and Ranma followed suit, remembering her manners at the last minute.

Ranma glanced at Ryouga, seeing that he looked as unbalanced as she felt. He probably had to sit there with Nabiki glaring past him the whole time, she thought. He caught her gaze, and they exchanged a sympathetic look.

"Don't forget the doctor's instructions, Ryo," Ranma said to him. "And we've got an appointment with him next Saturday after school."

He nodded. "Right. See you Monday, I guess."

She nodded and followed Nabiki out the door into the cool evening air.

The sun was just setting, casting long shadows as it dipped down between the skyscrapers of Tokyo. They walked along the road in silence for a bit, though Ranma knew it was just a matter of time before one of them broached the subject. She decided it might as well be her.

"I've… got a lot to tell you about what's been going on," Ranma said quietly.

"Yes. You do," Nabiki replied. She didn't look at her; just kept walking, eyes straight ahead.

"It's nothing bad, honest!" Ranma said, feeling a writhing uncertainty in her gut. "It's got nothing to do with Himura, or the Fiancées, or… or… Well, it's just…"

She stopped and turned on the redhead, glaring at her. "No, Ranma, it's not 'just' anything! You can't keep stuff like this from me right now because Himura will make it part of her game! And she is at least as good at finding your dirty laundry as I was, maybe better." She ran her fingers through her hair, frustrated. "If there's something going on between you and Ryouga…"

"There's nothing going on!" Ranma said hotly.

Nabiki stared at her a moment then folded her arms. "If there is something going on between you and Ryo, no matter what it is, then you need to tell me."

Ranma winced. She shook her head. "You're just like Akane… If you'd just listen…!"
Nabiki remained silent. She stayed silent as Ranma trailed off. After a few more moments, she raised an eyebrow.

"I..." Ranma's face flushed. She realized that she had never known what to say after that part. No one had given her the chance. "Okay... Okay. It's... it's not what you think. It's a lot weirder than that. It's got to do with Ryouga's curse. Not the Jusenkyo one, the family one."

Nabiki raised both eyebrows then held up a finger. "On second thought, Ranma... I think I could use a cup of tea. I know a quiet place we can talk without inviting any awkward questions. Let's continue this conversation there."

Ranma gave her a skeptical look. "Are there any tea shops even open at this time of day?"

Nabiki cracked a smile, her ever-knowing smirk. "I have a feeling this one is."

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"So... this is free?" Ranma asked skeptically as the odd man in the woman's kimono poured the steaming liquid into her cup.

"Of course!" Jiro smiled his big, toothy smile. "Just let me know if I guess your variety correctly." He frowned a bit. "I admit, for the first time, I feel a bit torn with this one. But I'm sure that - at least for right now - this is your blend."

"I mean... tea is tea, right?" Ranma gave Nabiki an uncertain look but she simply sipped casually from her own cup.

"You would be surprised. Honestly, you would!" Jiro said cheerfully, unfazed by Ranma's dismissiveness. "But... that is always for the customer to judge, yes? All I ask is if you let me know afterwards."

Ranma shrugged. "Sure. I just don't think I'm the sort to have a 'brand', y'know?" She picked up the teacup, sniffed it curiously, then took a sip.

Her eyes widened. The taste was very floral, with a delicate sweetness to it. It was light, almost playful, and refreshing. It had none of the bitterness or weight of the usual green or black teas she'd had. The flavor was complex. She took another sip, and another... and each time it was a little different. Before she knew it she had drained her cup.

"Well... I would call that a resounding 'maybe'?" Jiro beamed and refilled Ranma's cup. "Malawi White. You have excellent taste, my dear. I will leave you two alone for a while then. Call if you need anything."

Nabiki smirked. "We never need to with you, Jiro. The cup is always full when we want it to be." She held own cup up.

"As it should be." Jiro folded his hands into his kimono sleeves and bowed, gliding smoothly away.

"That..." Ranma regarded her teacup, a little nonplussed. "That was odd. I mean, not really even a blip compared to the stuff I deal with sometimes, but..." She looked around. "Is... it okay to talk about this stuff here?"

"I believe this may be the most private place in all of Japan," Nabiki replied. "Just a hunch, of course. But it's served us well so far." She leaned forward, resting her arms on the table. "All right, so... what is going on, Saotome?"
Ranma took another sip of her tea. It was a weird thought that her tastebuds had chosen something that seemed to be so high class. "Okay… so… Ryoga's lack of a sense of direction? It… well, it's probably closer to an actual curse. There's a smart Doctor at the hospital still trying to figure it all out for us, but it's ki based, I think… or at least ki affects it. So normally this would mean that any member of the Hibiki family would be totally lost their entire lives, doomed to wander forever. Except… they can pick one person to be what they call an 'Anchor'. Kinda like… that one person they can always find, even if they don't know how. It's gotta be someone important to 'em… it takes a lot of emotion to make the link - though the link doesn't necessarily go both ways - and they can only do it once."

Nabiki considered a moment. She closed her eyes and took a sip of her tea and sighed. "So, Ryoga linked with you." She opened her eyes a moment later, looking dissatisfied. "Why you, though? I'd have figured he'd link to Akane."

"He thought he had too," Ranma said. "Or… at least he convinced himself he had. But he did it before he ever met her, when we were having our bread feud. I don't even think he really knew he did it. He just got so focused on tracking me down that it kinda… happened."

Nabiki quirked an eyebrow. "Why do I get the feeling 'it kinda happened' is going to pop up a lot in this story?"

Ranma blushed and sulked a bit. "Look, if you're gonna make jokes…!"

"No, no…" Nabiki reached out and patted her arm. "I'm sorry. Go on; so he linked to you because of your rivalry. That can happen?"

Ranma nodded. "Mrs. Hibiki says there have been times - and it usually sucks because it's a permanent thing. So if they pick someone they hate, they're doomed to keep finding them over and over."

"Good thing Ryoga doesn't hate you then," Nabiki said quietly. Her eyes were searching, as if she were checking for a response.

"He did," Ranma said. "Or… I dunno, I thought he did. He was angry, for sure. Now he's just… confused." She trailed off, realizing she was going to need to explain those sorts of insights. "I'll… that'll make more sense in a minute, trust me." She took a breath, trying to organize her thoughts. "So… I didn't even know about any of this until recently. Mrs. Hibiki told me. It didn't seem like this link was anything more than a homing signal or something for him. At least not until he tried that Shi shi hokodan."

"Something changed?" Nabiki asked, listening intently.

"Yeah. I think it was because I was trying to push through it to get to him. It… opened the link up. I started being able to feel the emotions that were fuelling it all. It was…" She shook her head. "It was overwhelming. It was killing him. I think it woulda killed me if I had been in it any longer. I managed to get him clear of the blast but we got pretty torn up."

"But the link stayed open?"

Ranma nodded. "Now, anytime I touch him I can… not really see but sense his emotional… color, I guess? Shape? It doesn't really match up to anything real-world. And he can sense mine." She fidgeted a bit. "He was kinda out of it and I was worried he'd slip and blow a hole in the hospital or something if he got upset. So I… started to use the link to… well… send good emotions to him. And it kinda worked."
Ranma shook her head. "Not for good. It… uhh… The Doctor called it a treatment. It suppresses the direction curse for a while, but it comes back. We figured… 'Hey, if a little of it fixes it for a little while, maybe a lot…?"

Nabiki sighed. "So you tried to dump a lot of emotion into Ryouga all at once. I'm guessing that went poorly."

Ranma nodded. "Not like you'd think. Not, like, Shi shi hokodan. Ryouga was actually fine. It messed me up." She shook her head. "There was… some kind of… backwash I guess? And it got in deep in my head and stirred up…” She took a deep breath. "I almost went into the Neko-ken."

"I'd call that 'poorly', yes," Nabiki shuddered.

"Ryouga kept me from going all the way under but I was… it was awake." She shuddered. "I couldn't stand being alone in my own head for a while. And the link was wide open. So… so I just held on. And so did he. For… for a few hours."

Nabiki was quiet a moment. "So… how much can you read from each other now?"

Ranma shook her head. "Not a lot yet. Feelings. I think when the Neko-ken almost popped Ryouga got some images too. But… we had to kind of figure out what we were sensing actually meant. Like learning to read." She slumped a bit. "I think we realized after a bit we were each learning way more about another person than we ought to know. But ever after we finally let go… I'm like… attuned to his feelings, you know? And I just respond without thinking."

"And what he feels towards you now is… confusion," Nabiki said softly.

"I think so," Ranma nodded. "There's flashes of annoyance, sometimes embarrassment… a few other things I don't know how to read yet." She felt a little heat rise in her cheeks, not really knowing why.

"And how do you feel about him?" She asked in that same low tone.

"I… He's Ryouga, you know? He's…" She struggled to articulate what really didn't have words. "I don't know… I mean, I know how I should feel, but… everything is all… mixed up, and… and I've been a girl for way too long and…"

"In other words… confused." Nabiki finished.

"I'm a guy!" Ranma said sharply, though her anger faded quickly. "I just wanna go home, take a hot bath and be away from him so this'll all settle down and I can figure it out," she finished miserably.

Nabiki reached out and clasped her hand. Ranma looked up in surprise.

"Ranma… it's okay to be confused. This is…” She shook her head. "You've managed to combine biological and gender issues that no one has ever had to experience with a level of emotional intimacy shared with someone else that's straight out of a science fiction novel."
"That makes me feel loads better, thanks Nabiki," Ranma muttered.

"When you decide to take every relationship option in a dating sim all at once, you get a little sass, Ranma Saotome," Nabiki replied saucily. "Look, what I'm trying to say is... thank you for telling me about this. And... It's okay. Whatever you end up feeling when this all settles out, that's okay too. But I can't read your emotions, so... I need you to tell me, okay?"

"You seem to read me pretty well," Ranma said.

"I'm a good guesser. But that's all it really is," Nabiki insisted.

Ranma turned her teacup on the saucer, pushing the handle with her finger. "I don't want to feel confused about Ryouga. I really don't want to feel confused about Ryouga. I'd be happier if this was a love potion or some kinda cursed ring or some other magical thingie because with those at least you know what it is you're feeling, even if it's horrifying. This is just... it's..."

"Real?" Nabiki asked.

Ranma squeezed her eyes shut. "I'd rather not use that word for it. I'm probably going to go home, turn back into a guy, snap back to normal and throw myself off a bridge."

"And if you don't, you can get me my picture," Nabiki replied.

"I can't believe you're still on that," Ranma muttered.

"I'm deadly serious, Ranma. If I have to massage Ryouga into this mess, I want my yaoi photoshoot."

"Don't... don't say 'massage Ryouga' please..."

Jiro glided back into view, having gotten right up to Ranma without the redhead ever perceiving him, yet without the start that normally accompanied that sort of thing. The odd man managed somehow to be the opposite of threatening. "I do hope I'm not interrupting but there is one more tradition I have, if you'll indulge me?" He held up a large, flat box. "I always ask first time customers to pick themselves out a teacup that I can use to serve them if and when they come back."

"Just a way to reassure them I really do remember them."

Nabiki nodded and held up her teacup. Ranma realized that her cup was different than the plain white one she had been drinking from; It was covered in an artful minimalist depiction of what looked like a beach.

"That's... not really necessary," Ranma said as she looked inside the box at the plethora of cups. She'd just pick one at random and...

She stopped. She caught a brief glimpse of something on one of the cups. She reached in, searching carefully, and drew out a cup. It was sturdy, unlike Nabiki's delicate, western-styled teacup - something Ranma would probably pack for a training journey. But its surface had been carefully and lovingly painted with a depiction of a multitude of pools that had what looked like sticks or poles rising up out of them. It was abstract enough that it could have been intended to be several things but, to Ranma's eye, there was only one thing it could be.

"Jusenkyo," she breathed, turning it over in her hand.

Jiro smiled, and picked the box back up. "It will be clean and ready for you the next time you visit. Whenever that is." Jiro accepted the cup back from Ranma and bowed, quietly retreating to whatever
parts of the tea shop he vanished into.

Ranma tried to watch him go but at some point she simply lost track of him, despite the shop being devoid of other patrons. "How does he do that?" She asked softly.

"Professionalism," Nabiki quipped, draining her cup.

"We're home!"

Kasumi started at the announcement, not having heard the door open. She slipped with the knife she was using to cut the vegetables, narrowly avoiding nicking herself and dropped the knife to the floor.

"Kasumi, are you okay?" Akane darted in to check as Kasumi cradled her hand.

"I'm fine… I… could you wash the knife for me, Akane?" Kasumi forced a smile and stepped out of the kitchen to greet whomever had just come in.

It was hard to keep the mask on at the moment.

What she saw didn't make it much better. Nabiki was there, with that slightly distant look she wore when she was pondering a complex problem - a look she had been wearing a lot lately. Behind her was Ranma - a haggard, battered Ranma, her hair in disarray and an unsettled expression on her face, like she, too, was doing some heavy thinking.

Kasumi decided the mask could go to hell for once. Without a word she walked up to Ranma and gave her a hug.

"K-Kasumi?" Ranma yelped, surprised.

"I'm sorry, Ranma, I was just worried," Kasumi said, though she held on for another few moments before releasing her. She smiled at the girl and managed to get her mask of back into place, but she allowed her genuine concern and relief to show through.

"You must be tired and you definitely look like you could use a bath. The furo is free. If you need help in there, I'm sure Akane would be happy to join you." Kasumi knew allowing them to bathe together was definitely improper but Ranma's injuries took priority. She was also fairly certain they already had bathed together and propriety was wearing thin as of late anyway.

Ranma shook her head quickly. "I can manage, Kasumi. But thank you. I could really really use a good long soak though. Call me when dinner is ready?"

"Of course," Kasumi nodded. "You've had a rough week, haven't you?"

"You don't know the half of it," Ranma said, the exhaustion creeping into her voice. She slipped past the eldest Tendo and down the hallway towards the bathing area.

Kasumi watched her go. That's what scares me, Ranma. She took a breath and then turned to Nabiki, who she noticed was also watching Ranma with a pensive look.

"Nabiki… we need to talk."

The sensation of the change hitting was nothing short of glorious.
His wounds stung from the warm water, his aches briefly reminded him of their presence, but the sense of relief at finally being able to return to his true form and escape all of the strangeness that came from being a girl was so tangible as to almost be a physical thing.

He sighed, refilling the bucket with warm water and dumping it over his head again before pulling at his loose hair to separate the strands and let the water rinse away as much as it could. It was fortunate that he didn't need the dragon whisker anymore.

He picked up a bottle of shampoo and started to work on washing a couple of days and an explosion's worth of grime and dirt from his hair. He focused on the washing and nothing else for the time being, letting his mind slip into a kind of zen-like focus.

Once he was satisfied he was clean, he slipped into the warm tub. His cuts and scrapes stung a little but then the soothing warmth eased the pain away. He sighed and allowed himself to face the fact that his triumphant return to his male form hadn't really changed anything.

It wasn't a pressure point or a magic ladle that was forcing him to be a girl these days. It was life. It was like the world was conspiring to force him to choose to be a girl, using his own willpower and stubbornness against him. But it wasn't content with just the physical form, either.

Certain memories were affected by which form he was in. If the experience was intensely linked to being a guy or a girl, then when he remembered it in the other form, there was an odd aura of detachment to it. It was a good way to compartmentalize some of the more… questionable things he had done as a girl. But now? So many of his memories had that odd quality to them.

It kinda made sense in some cases. Being… aroused as a girl didn't map over when he was a guy and vice versa so the memories of those moments from one form got a bit… abstract when remembered in the other. There had only been a very few notable times that had happened before the weekend trip with Nabiki. The most prominent and disturbing had been when Mikado Sanzenin had kissed his girl side.

It had been repulsive but it was repulsive for different reasons depending on which form he was in. It was the first time his girl and guy sides had reacted differently to the same thing and it had contributed greatly to his resulting freakout. But it had been a relatively isolated thing.

Now his memory was littered with disconnects. Not just the kisses - sometimes very ordinary things - reactions to things that didn't match up with his guy side. Minute, momentary things, like the taste of ice cream or the reaction to a story one of the girls told her his girl side was more and more noticeably processing all these things in a different way.

Which lead to the current problem: Ryouga Hibiki was all kinds of abstract.

To be fair, there was some of that with the girls too. Both his sides were attracted to them but he was noticing it was in different ways. Ukyou had been the most noticeable difference after that kiss in the hallway. But it had been manageable because both sides had at least agreed 'Cute girl = Good'.

But now?

It was at least reassuring to know he wasn't attracted to Ryouga as a guy. But… it just cinched the fact that his girl side very definitely was.

I just need to avoid him. Or make sure I'm a guy when he's around. Give myself a chance to… to get it out of my system, he thought, sinking lower into the water. Maybe work on patching things up between him and Akari so he doesn't… LOOK at me that way. He rubbed his hand self-
consciously. And I should avoid touching him.

It's not going to be that simple.

It ABSOLUTELY is! Ranma retorted to the small voice in his head. He briefly wondered why his mental devil's advocate suddenly sounded like his girl side. I mean what other option is there? It's not like he's into guys either so how could it possibly work? Not like I could just be a girl for him!

Why not?

Because! Because... I'd have to be a guy some of the time! He thumped the back of his head against the wall, trying to rattle the voice out.

So? Who says you have to sleep with him as a guy? You know how you figured it would go with Akane, when you thought she was strictly into guys. You already had it planned out. You were even looking at the prices on electric kettles so you could keep one by the bed, just in case!

THAT'S DIFFERENT! He squeezed his eyes shut. I was trying to get cured so I could AVOID that, because... because she deserved better! Because...

That wasn't what she wanted, though. Getting cured would have been a disaster.

That's Akane! Ryouga isn't the same... we know that for a fact! He was starting to wish that something would happen to distract him; perhaps Shampoo might ambush him in the bath or Akane could run in and mallet him, or even Mousse could jump through the window to challenge him... something.

A glass of water is a lot easier to keep beside the bed.

I am NOT thinking about this. He started humming to himself to try and drown it out. I don't WANT to think about this! YOU just want me to think about this because YOU'RE the one who wants to play his fiancee!

I'm YOU, dumbass! It's still you even if you're thinking with a different brain! And you're just freaking out because you don't want to admit that once you get past all of the girl-brain stuff you STILL care about him!

Guys aren't supposed to care about...!

About what? About anyone else unless there's babymaking involved? What about Sayuri and Yuka and Riko and Rin? ESPECIALLY Rin. They care about YOU, but they don't wanna go anywhere near the horizontal mambo with you! Rin thinks of you as a GIRL!

That's different! That's because they're girls! Ranma felt himself edging towards something dangerous in his mind. And guys... and guys aren't...

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"Dad, why was Ucchan running after the cart?" Ranma asked, chewing on a slightly overdone okonomiyaki. It was the last of the batter than had been stored in the cart and despite it being the Kuonji recipe, Genma wasn't able to prepare it nearly as well.

"That's not anything you need to concern yourself with, boy," Genma growled quietly. He continued to root through the yattai for anything valuable, though they had already stripped the cart of most of the sellable goods it had contained.
"Maybe we can ask him to make us more stuff for the cart?" Ranma said, finishing off his meal.

Genma sighed and closed the compartment door. "Ranma, I need you to forget about Ukyou."

"But why?" Ranma said, "Ucchan is my friend! He's fun to spar with, an' he cooks good, an'..."

"Ranma!" Genma said sharply, standing up and to loom over the boy. Ranma shrank back a bit.

"Listen to me," Genma said sternly. "There are no such thing as 'friends', Ranma. Not for you. You can't afford to allow yourself to become attached to anyone." He knelt in front of him, his expression softening. "Everyone in this world wants something from you, Ranma. Especially you. You're special. They want to take that specialness for themselves. Dilute it. They fool you, to make you care about them, just so they can take from you. You can't let them. A true man amongst men doesn't need anyone. You can fool them all you want, play around, make them think you care, but you must keep your heart hard and pure."

"B-but..." Ranma looked at the ground. "But Ucchan and I made this sauce and I gotta come back in ten years and see..."

"No!" Genma said angrily. As the boy recoiled he relented a bit. "No, Ranma. You can never see Ucchan again. You have a destiny and Ukyou can't be part of it. Trust me, boy, I know what's best. Leave friendships and feelings for the little girls. You are a man and it's time you started to act like one!" He paused and reached up and took a lock of Ranma's hair between his thumb and forefinger. A scowl crossed his face. "We'll have to find something better to use on your hair. This is already washing out." His face became sour, like whenever Ranma did something that was going to cost him money. "Come on, I need to do something with it before anyone sees it like this. Then we're going to train! If you've enough idle energy to waste it on worrying about others, then obviously you need a reminder that you should worry about yourself and the Art more!"

That was the last Ranma saw of the yattai, and the last time Ukyou was ever mentioned.

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Ranma shuddered. Another thing he had forgotten about. He couldn't clearly remember what happened after but the sick, cold feeling told him that he learned not to talk about Ukyou or friends the hard way.

He closed his eyes. The old man was an idiot, but... he had taught Ranma everything. Ranma owed him for all the sacrifices he made raising him and as much as he might be selfish and shortsighted... was Ranma really willing to just dismiss something Genma had worked so hard to instill into him? Wasn't it arrogant of him to just ignore it because he didn't like it or it was inconvenient?

Ryouga needs you.

Ranma winced.

He needed you before, too. Are you gonna let the old man drag you away again, like he always does? You know where that leads.

Pops... wants the best for me. He means well...! Ranma struggled weakly against the traitorous thoughts.

When has he ever delivered?

I... a good son is supposed to be grateful... WOULD be grateful for all he's done!
When is the only time he EVER says you're a good son?

When I do what he wants.

And is that what you are? Meek and obedient?

No!

So? What are you gonna do?

… Alright. I'll stick by Ryouga. I mean, he's done the same for me, right? Regardless what Pops says, friends do that, right? It doesn't mean I care about him THAT WAY, okay?

Okay.

So… that's it? He realized he was breathing hard and had clenched his jaw. He forced himself to relax and settle back into the water. No more confusion about Ryouga, right?

You tell me.

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"I'm guessing from how off-balance you are that the meeting with Nodoka didn't go well?" Nabiki said as Kasumi poured her a cup of tea. Akane sat across from her, shooting worried glances down the hall in the direction of the furo.

"Is it that obvious?" Kasumi sighed, sitting down with her own cup, a little more heavily than with her typical grace. For Kasumi it was basically the equivalent of flopping.

"Only because we know you so well," Akane reassured her. "So… you couldn't get the omiai postponed?"

Kasumi shook her head. "No. In fact, when I said that Ranma might not be able to attend she seemed almost… happy. In fact, she told me she didn't feel it was really necessary for him to be present."

"What!? How can you have an omiai without the groom!?!" Nabiki protested.

"She feels that since Ranma is already well-acquainted with the girls, an introduction phase isn't necessary," Kasumi said. She was fidgeting, which told Nabiki that there was something more wrong.

"Shouldn't Ranma be there to have input on it, though?" Akane said. "I mean… part of the omiai is to make sure they least like each other!"

"And Dad and Mr. Saotome really paid a lot of attention to that for yours," Nabiki said dryly.

"Auntie Saotome seemed to feel… Ranma might choose... incorrectly if it were left to his own preferences," Kasumi said at last, her voice quiet and flat.

Nabiki scowled. "'Incorrectly' meaning me."

"She feels that the best choice to be Ranma's wife would be a martial artist like him. She feels the… sacrifices you would have to make to support him…" Kasumi continued quietly.

"You know what? I'm sick of other people deciding what sacrifices me or Ranma do or don't have to make!" Nabiki growled. "How does she know? It's not like Ranma is anything like Genma or liable
to do things the same way! He hasn't even decided for himself what he wants to do! But if anyone is in a position to help him apply that potential of his...!

Kasumi held up a hand. "Nabiki, I'm not arguing that." She gave her sister a weak smile. "You have been unquestionably good for Ranma. And... somewhat ironically, all of his relationships." She spared a glance to Akane. "But Auntie... but Nodoka does not see it that way. And she has a very specific plan for Ranma's future... and that is the problem."

Akane put a hand on Kasumi's arm. "Kasumi? What is it? What's wrong?"

Kasumi took a breath. "She... Nodoka... has decided that once she has made the selection, Ranma will be married immediately. She seems to expect this will happen with some haste. As well as... She wishes for Ranma to father a child as soon as possible. At which point... At which point he and his wife will leave on a training journey of... indeterminate length and leave the child to be raised by Genma and Nodoka."

"What... like... babysit?" Akane said nervously but she could already see in Kasumi's downcast eyes and the increasing incoherent outrage building in Nabiki's that this wasn't the case.

"To be raised as their own," Kasumi clarified. "She... she sees it as a reward... compensation for having to give up Ranma all those years ago."

"So that's what this is all about," Nabiki said tightly. She was tapping her finger on the table with nervous energy and shaking with barely suppressed fury. "That's why the sudden urgency to fix the engagement issue. That's why the insistence on a wife who's a martial artist. That's why Ranma gets no say. Because Mother Saotome has baby rabies."

"Nabiki... I do think it's more complex than that..." Kasumi cautioned.

Nabiki was in full rant mode and wasn't listening. "I wonder if she saw a baby at the mall and thought 'You know what? That son of mine is all old and ugly now and I really feel I got gypped on the 'cute stroller phase' of his life. I should trade him in on a new baby!"

"Why would she think any of Ranma's fiancées would be okay with that?" Akane asked, horrified.

"Because she did it so why not?" Nabiki threw her hands up in the air. She got up and started pacing, chewing her thumb as she started muttering under her breath.

"Nabiki, sit down and calm down," Kasumi said sternly.

"You can't expect me to be okay with..." Nabiki started, but Kasumi cut her off with an uncharacteristic glare.

"No, I do not expect you to be okay with this. In fact I would be very disturbed if you were!" Kasumi stared her sister down as she slowly sank back into her seat, wide-eyed at Kasumi's sudden authoritative tone.

"However," Kasumi continued, more gently, "the situation is delicate and surrendering to your outrage isn't going to help. Nodoka sees this as a matter of manliness. The definition of that has always been left up to her and I expect she will more than likely misuse that authority to get Ranma to acquiesce to her wishes. That places not only Ranma's life on the line but his father's as well."

"Which means it's more than just his honor at stake," Nabiki said slowly, getting her temper under control as she started to process things tactically. "It's also the life of his father, so he's not likely to skip out on the contract even if we could convince him his honor isn't worth his life."
"He should just leave the stupid old panda to it," Akane growled softly.

"Akane?" Nabiki blinked, surprised at the venom in her sister's tone.

"Genma doesn't deserve Ranma's concern. He's a rotten father and this is his contract. He had no right to drag a… a baby into it!" She folded her arms. "Besides… we all know Genma would never actually go through with it! He doesn't have the honor needed to pay his bar tab, much less commit seppuku!"

"Ranma believes otherwise and that's all that matters in this case," Kasumi cautioned her.

Nabiki considered a moment. "The root of the problem is that Nodoka is the one defining what 'manly' means and there's no set condition of the contract to be fulfilled successfully… just that if Ranma ever fails to meet her standard of what a 'man amongst men' is, the seppuku clause kicks in."

"Do we actually know that for sure?" Akane asked. She glanced at the both of them. "I mean, I don't think any of us have ever gotten more than a brief glance at it, have we?"

Kasumi shook her head. "Nodoka carries it with her at all times."

"Do you think Genma might have a copy of it?" Nabiki asked Akane.

Akane considered. "I… don't know. But he keeps a lot of random stuff in his pack."

"It might be worth a look. Even if he doesn't we might get some better idea of the scope of it… a letter or something…" Nabiki glanced at Kasumi. "He didn't happen to leave his pack here, did he?"

A small, uncharacteristically sly smile appeared on Kasumi's face. "He may have asked me to look after it for him… just in case he and Father need to go off on an 'emergency training mission'. Apparently Nodoka has been objecting to his sneaking off while there is work to do." She took a sip of her tea. "Of course it would be improper for me to tell you it's in the hall closet upstairs just outside of Ranma's room, hidden underneath the spare blankets so that Nodoka doesn't find it here."

Nabiki smirked. "Why Kasumi… you're beginning to make me think being sneaky might actually run in the family!"

"I haven't the foggiest notion what you mean, Nabiki," Kasumi sipped her tea.

Nabiki beamed. "I'm so proud…"

"C'mon, let's go check it out. We don't know when he and Dad will be back." Akane stood up and motioned Nabiki to follow. "We… probably shouldn't tell Ranma, either."

"Agreed. Not until we find something worthwhile." Nabiki followed her as they headed up the stairs and down the hall towards the guest room and the linen closet at the end.

"So… Your opinion of Genma Saotome has taken a nosedive," Nabiki noted as Akane opened the closet and started digging through the pile of blankets and sheets.

Akane tossed a blanket aside with a little more force than absolutely necessary, found the pack and hauled it out. "The man is odious, self-centered, self-important, chauvinistic, and heartless." They dragged the pack into Akane's room and closed the door behind them. Akane dumped it on the floor in disgust, as if touching it had soiled her hands. Given how old, worn and stained it was, the unclean feeling might not have been entirely psychosomatic.
Nabiki raised an eyebrow and undid the straps holding the top closed. "He really didn't hold back in the training, did he? You have to admit, though, it was effective."

Akane sat down on the floor, crossing her legs and her arms in a pose that was unintentionally very reminiscent of Ranma's signature sulk. "Yeah it was effective, because otherwise it would have killed me. It was like... teaching someone to read by giving them a book and then burning them with a hot brand until they managed to get through the first chapter."

Nabiki looked at her sister as she fished out a couple of old pairs of old, stained, once-white training gis and set them aside. "You could have always called it off if it was that bad."

"I could have... but I wanted to beat him," she said. She got a distant look in her eyes, not unlike the one Kasumi had shown when she had made her revelations about Nodoka. "And... And he kept telling me at what age he'd put Ranma through the same training - 11 years old for this, 7 for that... and all of this 'training' was basically torture. At that age, Ranma wouldn't have had the option to just stop. He wouldn't have had anywhere to go. So... I kept at it."

"So you got good so you could dish it back out. I can see how bullying as a form of training might work for someone determined like you, but most people it'd just break their spirit. Ranma is pretty incredible for simply surviving that much less coming out halfway sane." She fished out a few miscellaneous items from the pack. "Ugh... how old is this toothbrush? And what is this, hair dye? Why on earth would he have hair dye? That's some seriously wishful thinking there, Genma Saotome!"

"Might have been from before he lost it all - that bottle looks like it's been in there a while." Akane peered in herself and pulled out a bundle of old maps. She unfolded one to study it. "Wow, look at this..." She opened it up fully and laid it out on the floor. "He's got routes mapped all over the place. Think this was the one he and Ranma took?"

Nabiki looked over at the mess of drawn lines and illegible notes. "The maps are certainly old enough, but I wouldn't have figured Genma for planning things out that far in advance." She frowned then reached into her pocket and pulled out a small camera. "Keep searching, I just want to get a few snaps of these for later. Might be educational to actually figure out where Ranma and Genma have been."

Akane continued digging as her sister started taking pictures of the maps, one by one. The pack was almost empty now. Akane frowned and lifted it up, patting it. It felt too heavy still to be empty. She reached back in and started to feel around inside and finally found a concealed flap hiding a zipper. She opened it up and pulled out a bundle of papers tied up with a string.

"Oooh, was that the lovely sound of paydirt being struck that I just heard?" Nabiki looked up and grinned, plunking back down as Akane started to untie the bundle.

"It was in a hidden compartment so safe to say it's got things Genma doesn't want anyone else to see." Akane started to parcel out the papers. There was a wide assortment, from ancient looking parchments to faded but relatively modern sheets, to a whole pile of letters.

Nabiki started to pluck items from the pile. The first was a sheet of notes, but in some sort of cryptic shorthand that she couldn't make sense of. She put that aside and picked up an envelope, before hearing Akane gasp.

"I found it..." Akane said softly, her tone like that of someone who had seen a ghost.

"The contract?"
"No…” Akane held up a worn, dog-eared training manual. The faded title of it read 'Neko Ken'

Nabiki scowled. "He would still have that. Keep it. Might have something useful in there to help us get Ranma over the cat phobia later and I don't want him having that thing." She started setting aside papers and snapping pictures of them before putting them in the discard pile. "Let me know if you find anything else obviously bad." Nabiki could see most of the papers so far were training notes of some sort but they all seemed to reference other things, many of which weren't present. She did find a few referencing the Neko-ken. "Hey Akane, anything in your training involve being tied in in a mud pit?"

"Yeah, why?"

Nabiki handed her the sheet after taking a picture. "Seems he got the idea after Ranma escaped one of his 'sessions' of Neko-ken training."

"'Boy got out of pit again. Bindings on arms too loose, got one free. Might be good training later. Going to try tighter bindings, weights on lid for pit. Maybe tuna this time?'" Akane read. "How many times did he put Ranma in that pit?!"

Nabiki found another page close to the previous one. "More than once. Here's another one. ”'Having trouble finding enough cats. Might have to postpone. Possible to use something else?' … and then he's got an outline of that hornet's nest training he had Ranma do."

"You mean he did this over and over while they travelled?" Akane asked, snatching the paper out of Nabiki's hand and reading it.

"Until Ranma finally snapped and it got too dangerous. He just said 'spring of Ranma's sixth year'." She continued to fish out papers and photograph them, promising herself she would go over the copies with a fine tooth comb later. She picked up an envelope and pulled out a folded piece of paper. She opened it to find a handwritten letter.

"'Dear Genma, I hope this letter finds you and Ranma well. I received your last letter and I am glad to hear Ranma's training is progressing well. Yadda yadda yadda…’" She skimmed through it. "Whole lot of daily minutiae stuff. Nodoka must have been bored out of her mind. Nothing useful, though."

"I… wouldn't say that," Akane said, staring at the back of the sheet of paper.

Nabiki frowned at her sister's reaction then flipped over the letter.

"'I, Genma Saotome, do solemnly swear that I will train my son, Ranma Saotome, to be a man amongst men…?'" Her eyes widened.

The paper the letter was written on was a copy of the Seppuku contract. It was a rough, smudgey copy, the kind you'd get from the ancient, overworked photocopiers at a public library or school. Some of it was hard to read due to the poor quality of the copy, but it was definitely a copy of the original, down to the handprints all over the bottom right quarter.

"She wrote the letter on a copy of the contract? Hold on…” Nabiki opened another letter, ignoring the contents for the moment and flipping it over. Sure enough, it was another poor quality photocopy of the seppuku contract. "She was using these as stationery?!"

"No wonder Genma was so certain she was deadly serious about enforcing the contract and didn't even try and weasel his way out of it…” Akane opened another letter, finding another copy of the contract. "... She never let him forget it."
"Swinging that katana about didn't hurt either. Just a little yandere, Auntie Nodoka?" Nabiki scoffed. She looked through a few more letters to find the clearest copy of the contract and took a picture of it. "Honestly… you really have to work at it to be this screwed up."

"Could just as easily have been our family," Akane said quietly. "I mean… Dad and Genma were like brothers, right? Training with Happosai and getting into all the trouble Happosai gets them into now."

"I guess Mom was what made the difference between settling down as a Martial Arts instructor with your own dojo and wandering Asia for 14 years psychologically scarring your infant son," Nabiki said, then pause and winced. "I just made Nodoka's argument for her, didn't I?"

"Grandma didn't make the choice for Dad," Akane asserted.

"Yeah… but…" Nabiki paused, staring at another handwritten note, more recent, where Nodoka was talking about anticipating the return of her husband and child. "What if there's a kernel of truth to it? That the one Ranma chooses might not be the right one for him? What if it's just as important that he marry someone who will support and guide him like Mom did Dad?"

"Well… if that's true…" Akane plucked the letter from her grasp and turned it over, revealing the Seppuku contract, "do you think the person who wrote this, or the person who fully intends to enforce this, are the right ones to decide that? If Nodoka Saotome was the 'wrong choice' for Genma, then she's absolutely the wrong choice to pick who's right for Ranma!"

Nabiki raised an eyebrow and grinned. "Today seems to be my day for being proud of my sisters." She reached out and ruffled Akane's hair, then went back to laying out the rest of what they found in the pack on her bed and snapping pictures. She intended to have a complete record of everything that was in it.

"Okay." She took a deep breath, knowing they were pushing their luck as far as time went. "Let's get it all packed back in." She started gathering up the papers back into a bundle.

"Not going to go over the contract now?" Akane asked.

"I, Genma Saotome, do solemnly swear that I will train my son, Ranma Saotome, to be a man amongst men. Should I fail, my son and I will commit Seppuku," Nabiki recited glibly. "I've got it memorized. It's so open-ended that twenty years down the road Nodoka could claim that because the sky is blue Genma failed. I don't think the answer is in there. But these letters and fragments of Genma's journal might have something. If I can find some place where Nodoka or Genma actually define what fulfilling the contract means I can probably do something with it. I'll need to get this film developed and go over it for a few hours so we'll worry about all this after the omiai."

Nabiki started tying the bundle back up. "Once we get this put away, you can help me practise being 'proper and traditional' with a straight face."

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Dressed in a formal kimono, Nodoka knelt on the floor of the dojo as she awaited the arrival of the applicants to marry her son. To her right and slightly behind her sat Genma, looking sullen and uncomfortable. He had not worn a formal kimono in many years and the old one she had found in his closet was a bit tight after the years of training journeys had added stoutness to his frame. She also knew he and Soun had commiserated together over what they viewed as a betrayal of their dream to unite the schools.

I am sorry, my husband. I have supported you as best I can through this ordeal of years, but now
your task is done and I must support my son now. She smiled a bit... despite his objections, here Genma was, supporting her now, and she appreciated it. Her faith in him had not been misplaced. After all, their goal was the same, was it not?

To her left sat Ranma. He was quiet as well but it was more contemplative. He bore the countenance of someone pondering matters of great weight. That was good. That was as it should be. A man amongst men should be stern, serious and thoughtful, and concern himself with matters of great import.

That left the smaller details to her and in this one arena she would take the lead. It had a reassuring synergy to it; all of them working towards Ranma's great future.

By the Dojo doors, Kasumi waited for her to give the signal. When she finally felt that she was prepared, she looked up and nodded to the younger woman. "I am ready. You may send them in now, Kasumi. Thank you."

Kasumi returned the nod and opened the doors to step outside.

Soun and his daughters were first, as was their right as the oldest engagement, and as the ones who were hosting the omiai. She was pleased to see Akane there on his right arm, head bowed and beautifully dressed. The girl was radiant when she gave but a little attention to it and Nodoka's heart still panged a bit. It was so tempting to simply ignore matters and embrace the girl as her chosen daughter. She saw so much of herself in Akane, and the girl had a fire and drive that Nodoka lacked. Yet that same fire had very nearly driven her and Ranma apart irrevocably.

On his left was Nabiki. It was regrettable to Nodoka that the girl had chosen this path. But like Akane, her head was bowed, her posture was properly demure and she had assumed the illusion of propriety and tradition almost flawlessly. But Nodoka knew it for the artifice it was; Nabiki was a creature of the modern world.

Still... her determination and drive are admirable, as is her devotion to Ranma. Nodoka glanced back at her son, seeing his eyes track both girls as Soun led them to sit in front of them. She has the self-control and discipline Akane lacks. And... there is no question she has entranced my son in a way the others have not. Perhaps... perhaps that is enough for me to reconsider my position? She returned her attention to both girls and smiled as Soun took his place on the sidelines.

"I present my daughters Akane and Nabiki," Soun said. "Both wish to be considered for marriage to your son Ranma as fulfillment of our family contract and to unite the schools of Anything Goes Martial Arts."

Nodoka nodded. "Thank you, Soun." She addressed Akane and Nabiki. "You may present your rirekisho, if you have prepared them." Nodoka did not really expect either girl to have gone to such lengths but formality required that she ask.

Nodoka was therefore a bit surprised with both girls quietly placed folders on the table.

Nodoka accepted the documents and opened them. They were both extremely well thought out packages, providing basic history, vital statistics, employment prospects... in short, everything a good rirekisho should include. The thoroughness and attention to detail made her think of Nabiki immediately, but both documents were equally well prepared. It was as if...

Did Nabiki prepare Akane's rirekisho for her? She studied the girls. Both wore schooled expressions of neutrality. Normally one could be excused for thinking them unrelated but at the moment it was unmistakable that they were sisters. Even though it throws away an advantage and damages her
chances? She considered. Perhaps she is merely here to support her sister?

She skimmed the information again. She was finding it difficult to think of questions for the girls, until she realized that the information had been carefully tailored to address what she would be looking for in a fiancee for her son. Knowledge Nabiki did not have, but Akane, with all the time they had spent together speaking of such things, did… They helped each other? I see. They are working together to strengthen the Tendo claim! They are sacrificing their own personal gain for the good of the family. She smiled and nodded, suitably impressed. Very good. I have underestimated you both.

"You have both prepared for this well," Nodoka said, acknowledging them both in turn with a nod. "As I know Akane well I have no further questions for her right now but I would ask Nabiki a few, if I may?"

Nabiki met her gaze then bowed her head respectfully. "I would be happy to answer any questions you have, Saotome-san."

Good. Respectful, but not overly deferential. Nodoka continued to be impressed. However there was one hurdle Nabiki had yet to overcome. "There is the matter of how you will support my son in his efforts to perfect the Anything Goes art. How Akane will accomplish this is obvious as she herself is a practitioner and heir to the Tendo school. You yourself have elected to not train in the Art. How do you plan to support my son?"

Nabiki took a breath. "With respect, Saotome-san… while I have not trained in the martial side of the Art, the Art is very much the root of the Tendo family and I have lived with it my whole life." She met her gaze again. "I see the Art not merely as a series of techniques to defeat an opponent physically but a philosophy which can be applied to any aspect of life. It is one which I have successfully employed throughout my life, and which Ranma and I have been working together to adapt to other things. He is currently adapting it for use in organized sports to work within the traditional rules of the sport rather than using specialized 'martial arts' rules and we have both been using it to apply to social situations and business transactions. I understand as well that my sister has begun to adapt those same techniques to aid her in improving her domestic skills such as cooking. I believe that I can help Ranma further expand this, to bring the Art into modern, everyday life and to give 'Martial Arts as a Way of Life' a new, more inclusive meaning."

Nodoka simply stared.

She couldn't help the smile that formed on her face. While she knew Nabiki had little respect or love for her, the sheer audacity and ambition of the girl was astounding. She has redefined the Art itself to turn her disadvantage into an advantage… which, true to her word, is at the very CORE of the Anything Goes philosophy! I did not expect this from her at all. It would still require I accept her… rather RADICAL reinterpretation of the Art but her argument is compelling.

"Nabiki Tendo. I realize you and I do not often see eye-to-eye, especially in matters pertaining to my son and, in all honesty, I had expected to dismiss your claim out of hand in favor of your sister. However," she placed her hands on Nabiki's folder. "Your observation of tradition when required, your attention to detail and the obvious thoughtfulness you have applied to my concerns and our expectations for my son's future have impressed me greatly. You present… a radical choice; one that proposes a revolution of the Art rather than the evolution we had planned on. Such a concept proposes tremendous risks…"

"I prefer to see them as challenges, Saotome-san," Nabiki added softly.

Nodoka stopped short. While the interruption was poor form, the point was devastatingly and
perfectly timed. "... And a true practitioner of the Art must accept all challenges." Nodoka allowed herself a chuckle. "You are making your point by applying the very techniques you have proposed, aren't you? I am forced to re-evaluate my position." She gave Nabiki a nod. "Very well. I accept your claim alongside Akane's. Well fought."

Nabiki smiled. The girl was definitely modulating her responses, but there was a fierceness in her eyes. She and Akane both bowed respectfully, stood and walked over to sit on either side of their father.

*And there goes my first easy elimination. Will they all present their claims so well? I wonder...* She nodded to Kasumi to send the next in.

Ukyou Kuonji was next, as the second oldest claim. While Nodoka favored the Tendo claim, she had to admit that Ukyou was certainly not a bad choice on the surface. The girl entered, accompanied by another girl her age, a willowy dark haired girl who had assumed the role of handmaiden perfectly. Again Nodoka found herself surprised as she had expected Ukyou to be unescorted.

Ukyou herself was the image of loveliness, with her long brown hair perfectly trimmed and straight. Nodoka had heard some talk of the girl's lack of femininity but that was quite obviously wrong for she doubted the girl before her could *ever* be mistaken for a male. With such a pair working her restaurant it was no wonder it was rumored to be so popular!

The two stepped forward and bowed.

"I am Konatsu Kenzan, formerly of the Red Hot Tea House Kunoichi, retainer to the Kuonji family. I present to you Ukyou Kuonji-sama who wishes to be wed to Ranma Saotome in fulfillment of the contract between her father and Genma Saotome."

Nodoka swallowed her surprise. She had not considered the Kuonji family to be well-established enough for such things! "Very well. You may present your *rirekisho* if you have one."

Ukyou smoothly knelt before her and presented a folder.

Nodoka opened it and found herself confused once more. Again, it was expertly done, with that same attention to detail and careful focus on Nodoka's own specific preferences and concerns. She shot a bewildered look at Nabiki and Akane but both girls were keeping their expressions carefully neutral.

*They helped the Kuonji girl as well!? Why would they do that?* Nodoka flipped through the folder, now thoroughly at a loss. Again, most of her basic concerns were answered within the file, robbing her of easy questions and carefully filling any obvious holes in Ukyou's claim.

She cleared her throat. "Kuonji-san, thank you for coming. I understand you run your own business and this keeps you quite busy most of the time."

"Yes, Saotome-san," Ukyou nodded. "It has been quite challenging and rewarding operating my own business."

"It is, and to have accomplished such a thing at your age speaks of great drive and ambition. I also understand you have an Art of your own you pursue and you seek to become the greatest Okonomiyaki Chef in Japan, correct?"

"Yes, Saotome-san."
Nodoka took a breath, centering herself. Ukyou was surprising her as well, but she would need to be ruthless in order to narrow the field. "Then would you truly be satisfied giving up these things in order to support my son in his own pursuits? Or would you expect him to sacrifice his own path for the sake of yours?"

Nodoka expected stammering, hesitation, perhaps even denials or emotion. She got none of these things.

Ukyou's eyes were clear and her manner calm. "Actually, none of that would be necessary. In fact, Ranma's path and mine are complimentary. I understand you want him to graduate high school. By the time we've both done this my restaurant will be self-sufficient and under the management of my retainer, Konatsu. I expect Ranma will be going on training journeys to perfect his Art and this suits me as I would seek to do so as well. Not only will the income from my restaurant provide financial support to us, but my skills are best suited to making a living on the road. With a simple yattai, I can easily support us both wherever Ranma's journey might take us and my own Art can contribute skills and techniques to the Anything Goes style." She closed her eyes. "And, with due respect, Genma Saotome has already accepted the dowry for my engagement to Ranma. I am willing to forgive that matter on behalf of my family but I do believe I am entitled to equal consideration because of it."

Nodoka was rocked back on her heels. Her concerns had all been deflected with the same calm confidence! Her gaze flicked to Nabiki for a moment. Did she and Nabiki prepare for this beforehand? Again my most obvious objections are turned to strengthen the case! Kasumi had said that the fiancees had come to a truce of sorts but I hardly expected this!

"I… can find no flaw in your argument, Kuonji-san… Ukyou. Despite your claim being predated by the Tendo claim, the fact the dowry was accepted and the unexpected thoughtfulness and preparation you have outlined for supporting my son's future more than outweigh that disadvantage. I can find no reason to dismiss your claim out of hand. You will have the due consideration you seek."

Ukyou bowed. "Thank you, Saotome-san." She stood smoothly and walked over to her retainer's side, sitting to Nabiki's left. Nodoka noticed that both Akane and Nabiki watched her and Akane's mask of control had slipped somewhat, betraying a supportive smile.

Are they conspiring to make my choice more difficult?! Nodoka boggled. At least the next case would be easy to counter. While the Chinese girl's enthusiastic and determined pursuit of her son was a gratifying testament to his manliness, her claim was weak and hearing it out now was merely a formality. She nodded to Kasumi to usher in the next group.

Nodoka had thought perhaps the Chinese girl would adhere to her own culture rather than respect Japanese traditions and make her task even easier by showing up inappropriately garbed (As she understood was her wont). Instead, the lavender hair girl stepped into the dojo as perfectly groomed and traditionally Japanese as the others. She suddenly recognized her movements and posture to be an almost perfect mimic of that of the Kuonichi girl, though they lacked the ease of familiarity Konatsu had displayed. In retrospect, all of them showed signs they'd been coached by Ukyou's retainer, further suggesting a baffling collusion between them.

Shampoo's Great-grandmother stepped forward, forgoing her usual habit of hopping about on her staff like a pogo stick. She lead her granddaughter forward and they both bowed. "I am Khu Long, Elder of the Joketsuzoku tribe, from the Byankala Mountains. I present to you my Great-granddaughter and heir, Xian Pu, who wishes to be married to Ranma Saotome in accordance with Joketsuzoku law."

Nodoka felt a cold ball form in the pit of her stomach. Had Nabiki coached them as well? How could she possibly strengthen their claim to match the others!? "Very well, you may present
your *rirekisho* if you have one."

Cologne made her way to the sidelines as Shampoo knelt and presented what Nodoka had been dreading; another folder, identical to all the others. Inside was an expertly tailored package of information. They had even included copies of their legal documentation, from work visas to the business license for their restaurant, proving it was all quite legitimate and legally airtight. All of her obvious, easy questions addressed and resolved.

Nodoka could feel a migraine coming on. "Shampoo-san… I apologize for not quite being able to pronounce your name correctly."

"Is of no concern, Saotome-san," Shampoo said, smiling. "Japanese pronunciation is like familiar nickname. Sh… I do not mind it."

"I notice your Japanese is… somewhat flawed," Nodoka said, catching the girl correcting herself.

Shampoo nodded, surprisingly unperturbed by the observation. "Yes. *I* am working to correct, with help of Ai… Ranma. *I* have enrolled at Furinkan to further work on my skills."

"And you don't feel your lack of language skills is a matter of concern?"

Shampoo's smile shifted, a flicker of a smirk that told Nodoka she had stumbled into a trap. "Perhaps, but Japanese is Sham… *my* sixth language, after Persian, Greek, Latin, Cantonese and Mandarin. Takes time to learn. But *I* feel that it should not hamper me overmuch as Ranma travelled through China without learning any of our languages in a similar time. Way of speaking is… more of an *affectation* now."

Nodoka could tell the whole delivery was rehearsed, which meant the objection had been predicted and now not only been expertly shot down but turned into an advantage for the girl. She was beginning to recognize some of the signatures of Nabiki's style and realized she was *still* demonstrating her Art, now via proxy.

"I… yes… That does make sense," Nodoka took a deep breath. This was not going as well as she had hoped. "I do understand that you intend to return with Ranma to China and your village. You understand that would not be acceptable, don't you?"

Again, Shampoo was unfazed. "On contrary. Understand Saotome-san wishes to ensure son becomes strongest martial artist, yes? Most powerful techniques Ranma possess currently given to him by *Joketsuzoku*. Many more available to him once he marry into tribe. China home to many more challenges and ancient knowledge and techniques than Japan, as well as many skilled trainers and opponents. Sha… *my* family will run Nekohanten, providing home and income in Japan so can easily travel back and forth. Ranma have much larger range to journey and train as well as many many willing pupils with *Joketsuzoku*. Children be born with dual citizenship, travel and training even easier, be raised steeped in more traditional *kenpo* ways in village and learn ways of world in Japan."

Nodoka gaped at her, then dropped her eyes, looking over the *rirekisho*. This was maddening! Every avenue she had to pare down her list of choices was being expertly parried and the decision was only becoming more impossible by the second! "There still remains the matter of the engagement. It was not agreed upon by myself, Ranma or my husband, so…"

"Actually, matter is matter of *Joketsuzoku* law. Ranma issue formal challenge according to accepted forms, Shampoo accept and Ranma win. Law clear on matter," Shampoo interrupted.
"But this is not your village, this is Japan and Japanese laws apply here," Nodoka said, standing her ground.

"Incident happen in China, however," Shampoo replied, still cool and composed.

"Ranma was not aware of the law when he made the challenge nor was he male at the time. I believe that you gave him the Kiss of Death, not the Kiss of Marriage, before you arrived in Japan, did you not?"

Shampoo looked down. "Is true, Shampoo gave incorrect kiss, due to lack of understanding of nature of curse. But law applies to the reality of the challenge, not perception, and ignorance of law is not acceptable defense in either China or Japan. Elders of village have punished Shampoo accordingly and have ruled Kiss give on Joketsuzoku lands as Kiss of Marriage. In lieu of pursuing extradition proceedings, Shampoo ask merely to be considered as candidate for marriage."

Extradition...! Nodoka's head reeled. She did not know if Japan had an extradition treaty with China but the matter of honor was clear regardless; Martial Artists must abide by the conditions of the challenge. As the challengers, the onus was on them to determine what those were. The fact that the matter appeared to have legal teeth simply made it more clear that she could not simply set the claim aside without due consideration. "It... appears I can find no reason to object further to your claim, Shampoo-san. Given the circumstances, your request for consideration is entirely fair and what you offer is exactly the kind of support which would secure my son's future. Again..." She shot a glance at Nabiki. The girl's mask did not so much as waver.

"Thank you, Saotome-san," Shampoo said with a smile. She stood and walked over to settle with her great grandmother on Akane's right.

I was supposed to quickly reduce the number of fiancees and yet all I've managed is to officially confirm them! I had thought that only Akane and Ukyou would be serious contenders, but now the matter is completely muddled! She looked again at Nabiki. And this was YOUR doing, wasn't it Nabiki? Why? She sighed heavily and rubbed her temples. Perhaps this last one, at least, would be straightforward. She motioned for Kasumi to show the girl in.

Kodachi Kuno immediately dispelled that notion. The girl was dressed in a more elaborate, but fully traditional kimono, suitable for a bride in waiting. She was flanked on her right by a short, stocky little man in a shinobi's dogi.

Her bearing and countenance were nothing less than stunning. The girl was not only demure but had an air of nobility and refinement that the other girls had lacked. There was a serenity in her expression and her movements had a dancer's grace. She displayed all of the ease Konatsu had shown, speaking of long experience with tradition. She looked as if she had stepped out of an old painting.

"My name is Sasuke Sayogakura, retainer to the family Kuno," the little man man in the suit said with an solemn air. "I present my lady, Kodachi Kuno, daughter of Tatsuyuki Kuno, sister of Tatewaki Kuno, who has been promised to be wed to Ranma Saotome."

"Very well. You may present your rirekisho if..."

The retainer hobbled forward and produced an absolutely massive leather-bound tome and dropped it on the table with a grunt. The table creaked dangerously under the weight.

"... you have one..." Nodoka finished. She tentatively opened the book as Kodachi took her position across from her.
"I present myself for your approval, Saotome-sama," Kodachi said, bowing formally.

The book was apparently a professionally published account of the girl's life and included full color pictures and illustrations. It was hundreds of pages long and printed on very heavy, glossy stock. Nodoka spent a few awkward moments skimming through its pages.

"If there is something specific you wish to know, you will find there is a full index at the back," Kodachi supplied helpfully.

Nodoka nodded and continued her examination. While it lacked the concise focus of Nabiki's carefully groomed *rirekisho*, the account in the book was nonetheless impressive, outlining achievements, family lineage, holdings, family history and testimonials. From what she could glean from a brief scan, the Kuno family was of unquestionably noble blood, traced back to at least three prominent samurai clans and had close ties with innumerable figures of wealth, nobility and political power. The family also had a long and illustrious martial arts history and was considered the root of several prominent kendo styles.

"Your credentials are… rather impressive," Nodoka admitted finally. "I can see you have put a great deal of effort into preparing for this."

"I have been eager to make your acquaintance for some time, Mother," Kodachi said to her, her eyes bright and sparkling. She blushed and covered her mouth. "I mean… Saotome-sama. Please, forgive my presumption. I have been anticipating this day in my mind and… I have not had someone to call 'mother' in so very long."

Nodoka smiled. She had to admit it did feel nice to be called that. "That's quite alright, dear. Now… I see you are quite devoted to my son."

"I would do anything for my Darling Ranma," Kodachi said solemnly. "There would be no sacrifice too great for him. This effort is but barely a trifle."

Nodoka blinked, hearing her own words from the girl. "I appreciate that and it brings me great joy to know my son's manliness has drawn so many to flock to him."

"In truth, he is a paragon of manliness that none can match," Kodachi said earnestly. "I fear even my noble brother struggles to contest him that."

Nodoka smiled again, then her face fell. "That too makes me happy to hear. However, as genuine as your affection for my son may be, there is no formal agreement between the Saotome and Kuno houses."

Kodachi smiled. She snapped her fingers and her manservant handed her a rolled up parchment which she unrolled. "Actually, some time ago, your husband, Genma Saotome, signed this agreement with my family." She pointed to her husband's unmistakable signature. "It has also been signed by my brother in his capacity as acting head of the Kuno family and fully notarized."

"WHAT!?" Ranma yelped and darted forward to look over his mother's shoulder. Everyone else in the dojo was staring in shock.

Everyone except Genma who was trying very quietly to leave.

"I… see…" Nodoka gaped at the evidence before her. "When was this…?"

"Don't you remember darling?" Kodachi smiled up at Ranma. "It was during that unpleasantness with the Tendo finances last year." She smiled at Nodoka. "As much as the Tendo claim is contrary
to mine, I couldn't well allow my darling future husband to suffer malnourishment! So I ensured there was ample food and provided a small stipend for your husband to contribute to his and Ranma's room and board here…"

"A… stipend," Soun said, taking interest himself as he scooted over. "How much is this stipend?"

"Oh, a pittance - a mere 500,000 yen or so a month. He assured me every bit of it was going towards his son and the upkeep of the Tendo Dojo. The checks are cashed quite promptly. I do hope it's sufficient? I can double it if it's required."

Soun twitched. "No… no… that's quite alright. I will just need to… discuss the matter with Saotome."

"I see… so… this document was signed in exchange?" Nodoka said carefully.

"Oh, not at all. This would hardly be an acceptable dowry!" Kodachi said, aghast. "This was signed in exchange for the dojo and fitness center that I had constructed downtown for Ranma's use. You remember that, don't you Ranma? Your father was kind enough to sign the documentation for you, though I did absolutely insist it be in Ranma's name, not his, as he suggested. We have been placing the operating proceeds in trust for your family, to be signed over once you formally take possession."

"Oh… my…" Nodoka felt a sinking sensation. Of all of the agreements, her husband had signed formal, legal documentation on this! "You… do understand there are others who have a claim to my son's hand, don't you?"

"Mom, you can't seriously be…” Ranma started to protest.

"Ranma, you can't possibly…!" Soun sputtered at the same time

"Ranma, sit down!" Nodoka didn't look at him. She was tired of the appalling lack of restraint. She glared at Soun. "You too! If you wish to remain at this omiai, you will conduct yourself with a measure of decorum! Now, Ranma… this girl has gone to great lengths for this and has been promised the same as all the others. She is due her consideration… allow me to consider."

"I…" Ranma looked like he was about to protest again but Nodoka merely slowly turned and looked at him. The coldness in her stare drove him back down to his seat.

Nodoka took a deep breath. "As I was saying… Marriage to my son is a… contentious issue, you understand."

"I do," Kodachi bowed her head. "A mother is the final judge of what is best for her son, is she not? To that end I submit myself for your approval, with no further stipulations beyond that I be considered fairly." She closed her eyes. "I have absolute confidence that I am the one who can shepherd Ranma to the greatness for which he is destined. I humbly ask for the chance."

Again, Nodoka was impressed. And this time, WITHOUT coaching from Nabiki Tendo! She thought, feeling a bit soured by the whole matter now. She did not appreciate manipulation and, though the motive was incomprehensible to her, she knew Nabiki Tendo was manipulating her. At least Kodachi seemed honest and earnest, though there was still the matter of whether she could support her son. "I presume financial matters are of no concern, given your family's reputation. However, my son is not destined for the lap of luxury nor idle wealth. He has a destiny to perfect his Art. How do you propose you will support him in this?"

Kodachi smiled, snapped her fingers again, and her manservant produced for her a rolled tube of paper, which she spread out on the table. It was a world map. "Ranma will need to travel far and
wide in order to add knowledge and techniques to his school and to test them against worthy opponents. I have taken the liberty of sending investigators around the globe to track down the most skillful martial artists, to verify rumours of ancient training grounds or techniques and to acquire any training manuals or documentation being sold or otherwise available for procurement. This is what they have found in their preliminary survey. I have also marked the nearest airports accepting international flights and I have a private jet available for Ranma's personal use whenever he desires. It is currently waiting for him at Tokyo International Airport, if you would care to take a jaunt?"

Nodoka looked over the map. It was crowded with notes, flagged locations and travel routes. Multiple reference to other maps suggested that each area had its own more in-depth documentation. Nodoka began to wonder about the possibilities with such resources at Ranma's disposal. "And… what of your own ambitions? Your own Art?"

"With all due respect, Saotome-sama… My only purpose is to see my Darling Ranma succeed. No other ambition comes close," Kodachi said. "I would see the Saotome family flourish and join the Kuno family once more on the pillars of the nobility to which a family of samurai heritage is entitled! It is a cause I am willing and able to devote my life to wholeheartedly, as well as the happiness of my Darling Ranma."

Nodoka nodded. "I see." Total devotion to my son, the resources and prestige of a noble family… and a legally binding agreement. "Given the weight of evidence and your commitment to this, I cannot in good conscience dismiss your claim." She smiled at Kodachi. "I will give you your chance, Kuno-san."

Kodachi broke out into tears, which she demurely dabbed at with a handkerchief. "Forgive me, Mo… Saotome-sama… I have… I have struggled and hoped and prayed for so long to hear just those words." She reached out and clasped Nodoka's hands. "You will not regret this. No matter the outcome, I will honor your kindness a thousandfold, you have my vow!"

Nodoka smiled back, feeling her heart soften towards the girl. She gently patted her on the head. "I know you will, dear. You have done well. Now, go compose yourself and relax. There will be refreshments served and time to talk about the next meeting and how to resolve this little conundrum of ours."

Kodachi bowed, stood and glided elegantly over to the opposite side of the room as the others, along with her manservant, settling onto the cushion he set for her.

"Well, then…" Nodoka said, taking a deep breath. "It seems… the fiancee count is now five. I have my work cut out for me, don't I?"

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In the kitchen, Kasumi busied herself silently with the preparation of lunch for the gathering while Nodoka sat at the table in the family room, sternly lecturing her husband. Soun sat at the table with them, a vacant expression on his face as though he had lost the will to live. Nabiki, Akane, Shampoo and Ukyou clustered together by the koi pond and Kodachi sat under a tree some distance away as she gave orders to Sasuke.

"Well, that could have gone better!" Ukyou hissed. "What are we supposed to do about Kodachi!?"

"Crazy girl not threat before, just nuisance. Now…?" Shampoo looked over her shoulder. "Could take care of quietly…"

"Easy, girls," Nabiki held up a hand to try and calm them. "That went better than you think. Nodoka
was planning to eliminate some of us from the running. The fact that we *all* made it through means she's been forced to decide we're all acceptable. That's huge."

"I don't know. She considers Kodachi acceptable too," Akane muttered.

"Kodachi is rich. That makes you acceptable in a *lot* of people's books," Nabiki replied. "But we're in a position to offer something Kodachi can't and wouldn't even if she could."

Shampoo smirked. "Manly man have four fiancées. *Manlier* man have four wives, yes?"

"Exactly. And the fact she didn't immediately eliminate Shampoo over going back to China means it's an option she might accept, which means we have alternatives to dealing with the Himura problem," Nabiki grinned. "We just have to broach the subject with her the right way and at the right time, and we've got a deal Nodoka can't refuse!"

"Do my ears deceive me?" A dry croak came from about knee level. They looked down to see Cologne standing there with a bemused expression. "Am I to understand that you are actually advocating for Son-in-law to return with us to China?"

"I'm advocating for *all of us* to return to China, and only after the Nekohanten and Ucchan's are self-sufficient," Nabiki clarified. She kept the confident facade in place but she felt a pang of dread at dealing with Cologne after their last encounter.

"I admit I am impressed, Nabiki Tendo," She said, hopping up on her staff. "It is not many people who can lie to my face and get away with it."

"And I'm not one of them," Nabiki said confidently. "Nothing I said was untrue."

"You said you had no interest in son-in-law."

"At the time that *was* true. I had resolved to fix his issues so he could pick one of his other fiancées. It wasn't until later that Akane convinced me to throw my hat back in."

"Hnnh. And you expect me to believe you are not manipulating my great granddaughter for your own ends now that your motivations are somewhat *less* altruistic?"

"Why would I need to? My actions are perfectly in line with the best interests of the Amazons."

"Our 'best interests' are to return to China with son-in-law with as little fuss as possible. *You* are requiring rather considerable compromises to that…"

"Compromises that aren't *actually* compromises because, rather than netting a single martial artist of Shampoo's calibre or better, you net three - which was your goal all along when you instructed Shampoo to give the Kiss of Sisterhood to Akane and Ukyou and fast-tracked their qualification. This has been your best-case scenario since the moment you realized your great granddaughter fancied my little sister. You just haven't had any way to actually accomplish it until I came along to make it all work, which I did *instead of* just jumping a plane with Ranma and disappearing into the American midwest."

"Which was your plan B. I found the plane tickets in your room. I opted *not* to 'wake you up so you could watch me kill you in your sleep' at that point, as you put it. You *do* have a tendency to dramatics when you are excited, child."

"And you aren't prone to being accommodating when it doesn't suit your purposes, yet you've been *perfectly* accommodating to us. Even suspiciously *forthcoming* which tells me that helping us
get what we want is not only getting *you* everything you want, but you figure you're getting one *hell* of a bargain. Either that, or you know as well as I do that this is your only chance in hell of Ranma willingly going back to China and fathering that new generation of Amazons you are so desperate for, much less get two more top tier martial artists to join the tribe in the bargain. So perhaps we should talk about *you* sweetening the deal a little?"

Cologne regarded her for a few more moments with that inscrutable wrinkled mask, then broke out into creaking laughter. "Oh you are a treat, Nabiki Tendo! I had no idea I would enjoy your antics *this* much. But, there is a misconception on your part."

"Oh?" Nabiki crossed her arms and arched an eyebrow. "What's that?"

"You presume I am satisfied with securing three skilled in the Art. I demand *four.*" With that she hopped up on her staff and, before Nabiki could react, planted a kiss on her forehead.

Nabiki blinked, her hand reflexively moving up to the spot though she refrained from touching.

"As a blooded *Joketsuzoku* warrior and matriarch and elder of the tribe, I name you Sister and blood of my blood. To prove your worth to your sisters, I declare a Challenge, and it is thus:" Her face cracked into a crooked grin. "Succeed, Nabiki Tendo. Win Ranma by whatever means you see fit and by whatever arrangement. I have seen your Art today and deem it worthy of the *Joketsuzoku.*"

Nabiki blinked. "That easy, huh?"

"Oh, nothing about this is going to be *easy,* child," Cologne chuckled. "You have opted for perhaps the most *impossible* route through all of this."

"How impossible the route is doesn't matter if it's the only one," Nabiki replied.

"It's hardly the only one. But… I think at this point it is the only one you would accept." Cologne cocked her head. "Determination matched with a refusal to compromise can make for history's greatest fools, or its greatest conquerors. Merely seeing which you will become makes supporting you worthwhile." She hopped off her staff and used it to tap Nabiki soundly on the shin, hard enough to make her wince. "Though we are going to need to do something about your training. Even if your strengths are in more subtle forms of conflict, it does not do to have a *Joketsuzoku* who cannot fight."

"Ranma has agreed to train me," Nabiki said, though she remembered that they had only ever had the one session.

"And I'm sure he will in time, but for now Son-in-law has his hands full. I will see to your training *personally.*" Cologne smiled again.

Nabiki swallowed nervously. Of all of Cologne's implied threats, *that* was the one that concerned her most.

"Well, *that* should be fun," Ukyou said with a smirk. "But, onto more pressing issues… has anyone seen Ranchan?"

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"AAAAAAAAAAAAAARRRRRRRRGGGGGHHHHH!"

Ranma squatted under the bridge, pulling at his hair and rocking slightly on the embankment. "Five! *Five!* And one of them is *Kodachi!* Pops actually *did* sell me to the Kunos!" He closed his
eyes tightly. "I'm going to school as a girl, I'm engaged to five girls, four of 'em want to marry me at the same time and the fifth is the yandere poster girl! I've got another girl who wants to make me her servant, my Mother is gonna pick who I marry and none of this has anything to do with Martial Arts!" He started to giggle softly. "This is a dream! It's just a dream. That's it! I had some leftovers for a midnight snack that were slightly off and now I'm just having a bananas dream! I bet I don't even turn into a girl in real life! I've just been out cold since before Jusenkyo! I've been in a coma for a couple of years! Yeah, that's it! Gotta be!" He shuddered. "Oh god, now being in a coma is preferable to my life..."

He dropped his hands to his sides and slumped, looking into the water. "Nabiki said she was going to calm things down. Mom said she was going to calm things down. But everything just keeps getting more and more nuts!" He chuckled but there was a hysterical edge to it. "It might not even be that bad if I wasn't stuck between Mom with her Seppuku contract and Himura and her threats to send me to jail for being a pervert."

He tried to find some serenity in the flowing water, watching as the ripples distorted his reflection. "I wonder if it could actually work? I mean... it's insane, right? Even for us." He picked up a rock and threw it, skipping it across the river's surface. "No, what's insane is that Akane was the one who tried to sell me on it first. How did I go from getting malleted for looking crosswise at her or any other girl to her trying to seduce me in the bath and suggesting I hop in bed with her and three other girls? Not at the same time, of course..." He paused. "I... well, I never actually asked about that, did I?" A rather pleasant, utterly hentai mental image passed through his mind and he quickly squeezed his eyes shut. "Okay, NO. Shut down that idea fast, Saotome. You'd never survive the beating from that one. Or worse... they could think it's a good idea and kill you that way. I mean, Shampoo alone... Augh, STOP!" He beat the heels of his hands into his temples a few times. "Ugh, I'm turning into the pervert Akane used to accuse me of being!"

He sighed. "Still... it'd be nice though, right? To just be together and not fight?" He lay back and folded his hands behind his head. "Kinda wish I hadn't run now. It would be nice to talk to them all together like they are. Just... to see what it feels like."

"I can't talk to them now, though. Not after I ran out like that. But I need to talk to someone... someone other than myself, I mean." He sighed again. "Ucchan, Nabiki, Akane... heck, even Shampoo would've been good... but they're all part of this. Mousse? Like he needs even more reasons to try and kick my ass. 'Hey, Mousse, wanna help me smooth things over so I can be in a group marriage with Shampoo? It's cool, my Mom likes her!... yeah... Hiroshi and Daisuke? They'll be paragons of empathy I'm sure. One of these days those jerks are gonna come to me with romantic problems and I'm gonna laugh... Sayuri and the girls? No, no, no, that'd be weird... Do they even know about any of this? Don't wanna think how Rin would react..." He huffed in frustration and stared at the underside of the bridge for a while.

"No," He said to no one in particular.

He closed his eyes quietly and tried to relax, to clear his mind.

"I'm not doing that. I said I was gonna take some time away and, if I went, I'd have to go as a girl which would just make this even more awkward."

Silence.

"Nope. Not happening."
Ryouga had been enjoying his Sunday. Ranma had been right. Extended contact had made the effects of the treatment last longer and, although he could feel the effects fading, he’d had an amazing day just exploring his own house. He had found things he had lost when he was a little kid… heck, there was even a room he hadn't been able to find for years that he finally tracked down. And it was amazing to have a mental picture of how the inside of his house related to the outside.

And no, he apparently did not have a garage. He hoped whoever did own the garage would take good care of their electric teakettle.

It had all been a nice distraction from thinking too much about how he had gotten this brief respite from directionlessness. Getting a certain redhead off his mind was exactly what he needed to restore his equilibrium and get back to normal.

Which is why he was less than pleased when he answered a knock at his front door (He still knew where that was!) to find the damp, somewhat dishevelled redheaded source of both his newfound sense of direction and newfound emotional equilibrium problems standing there.

They both just stood there for a moment, as the awkward silence stretched out.

Ryouga knew this was a bad idea. He could already tell. This was something he didn’t need right now. Ranma knew that. There was no shame in acting on that. *I'll just close the door. I'll just close the door, and…*

"Hi, Ryouga," she finally said softly.

… *God damnit.* Ryouga sighed in defeat and stepped back, silently motioning for her to come inside.

She had a sheepish expression, her blue eyes peeking out at him from under damp crimson bangs. Rather than being all girly, she was just wearing her usual red chinese shirt and loose black training pants. For once she wasn't actually trying to be cute, she just was.

Ryouga knew that being aware of that - much less so acutely - was probably bad for his sanity. "So what brings you here, Saotome? Akane realize you're a jerk and kick you out of the Tendo's place?"

He walked inside and hopped over the back of the couch to sprawl heavily onto one side of it. He didn't spare her another glance.

"That I could deal with," Ranma said. She hopped over the back of the couch as well and landed relatively close to him. There was a respectable amount of space between them but Ryouga subtly scooted a few inches further away for good measure. "Where's your Mom?"

"Out back, gardening. I think she's also chatting with the neighbors," Ryouga replied nonchalantly.

Ranma clasped her hands in her lap and hunched over to stare at the floor. "Mom went ahead with her *omiai* thing. She was gonna cut down the number of 'official' fiancees I've got from three to two - or hopefully just one."

Ryouga glanced at her then went back to looking elsewhere. "She cut the one you actually wanted to be with and now you're regretting not saying anything?"

"I now have five fiancees."

Ryouga turned and gaped at her. He snickered, which turned into giggles, which turned into a guffaw and finally into full-on uncontrollable laughter.

Ranma glared at him. "Thank you *so much* for your supportiveness, Ryouga."
Ryouga took a few more moments to recover and struggled to get his giggling fit under control. "If… If you wanted support why… why the hell… ~snark~ why the hell did you come here!"

Ranma glared at him a few moments more. Then the anger faded from her face and she looked at the floor again and hunched over even more. "Because… because I don't have anyone else I can talk to about this."

Ryouga's laughter faded fast, very quickly replaced with guilt and a not insignificant amount of panic. *Oh crap, she's serious! "L-look, I'm sorry, I didn't mean…!"*

"Yeah, this was a mistake. Sorry to bother you." Ranma put her hand on the back of the couch and turned away from him, vaulting over the back again.

"No, wait!" Ryouga lurched out of his seat and made a wild grab. He wasn't exactly sure what he was doing or what his plan was or even why he was doing it. Ranma being there was bad. Ranma being in close proximity was *worse*. And all of it because it could lead to the third thing which, as his hand landed on hers, he realized he had *just made happen*.

Both of them gasped softly as the link opened in the instant that Ryouga's hand covered hers. Ryouga felt the rush of emotion from her, his mind already sorting the colors and shapes. Fear, anxiety, loneliness…

*I need to let go of her hand!*

Their eyes locked. Her gaze had the slight lack of focus he was sure his did as she sorted through everything she was getting from him. His hand twitched. He could feel her emotions shift. Embarrassment, confusion… relief? More anxiety…

*Let go of her hand dumbass!*

Was her face closer? More 'warm' emotions now. The initial feelings were cycling into the background now as something more immediate supplanted them. More anxiety? No, that was more… anticipation, maybe. He couldn't move his hand. It wasn't paralyzed but he couldn't seem to muster the will to move it. Tension and uncertainty, definitely. Conflict. Impatience? Something else started to emerge, new emotions that were very warm colors.

*LET GO OF HER HAND!*

Ryouga finally found the will to jerk his hand back, overcoming the strange paralysis that had gripped him. He realized they were a *lot* closer to each other than when they had started as both of them had leaned forward. They were still a good foot apart but it remained disconcerting.

They didn't immediately jump back, the normal reflex to such situations. There wasn't really any point. This was way outside the realm of 'embarrassing misunderstanding'. 'Embarrassing understanding' was probably a better term for it.

Ryouga turned away from her, crossed his arms and slumped onto the couch. He closed his eyes and spent a few breaths worth of time in silence trying to center himself. *It's fine. It's fine! Just tell her to go. She'll understand. Just say 'Maybe now's not a good time, Ranma.'*

He heard her settle onto the couch next to him. He could *see* her in his mind's eye. That acute hyperawareness that came with the link was lingering and he could see her as plainly as if his eyes were open, curled up small on the couch, her hands in her lap. He heard a rustle and knew she had pulled her legs up and was hugging her knees as she stared at the far wall.
Ryouga clenched his jaw. She had seen. He knew she had seen it. It was right there, on the surface, she'd have to have been blind not to see it. And in a minute she would say something and make it real and if he could just hold that off for a few moments... Just tell her you need a minute. Tell her you're going to go make some tea. Tell her you hear your Mom calling you. SAY SOMETHING! Quick, before... before she...

"I didn't know," Ranma said softly.

DAMNIT! He let go of the breath he didn't realize he had been holding and slumped back in the padding, squeezing his eyes closed more tightly.

"Why didn't you say something?" She asked, again in that small voice.

He desperately wanted her to be loud and brash and obnoxious - to laugh and ridicule - to protest - to make a stupid joke, something - anything other than this!

"What did you want me to say?" He asked finally, not looking at her. "It's not like I'm the only one. I'm not even the only one who also knows about the curse."

"Yeah, well, most of them see me as a person about as much as they do the ecchi posters they have on their bedroom doors. You're not like that."

"You don't know that. You haven't seen my bedroom lately."

"... Was that an invitation?"

"What!? No!"

"Sorry! That was... sorry..." Ranma fidgeted next to him, wincing. "I was just trying to make a joke... I just..." She hugged her knees tighter. "I was... I was thinking about this last night."

Ryouga finally looked at her, wide-eyed. "About this!?"

Ranma winced again. "Not this! Not the... the poster... thing..." She blushed and buried her face. "... Maybe a little about the poster thing."

Ryouga covered his face with his hand. "Ranma, you're engaged to a girl. You're engaged to five girls. Last time I checked you've told at least two of them that you love them..."

"I do!"

"Yeah, I know," Ryouga muttered. "The only reason you're still breathing right now is because anytime you say Nabiki or Akane's name your whole emotional... whatever goes nuts. I'm still not sure I can forgive you for not having to deal with being in love with someone who doesn't feel the same way or even having to choose between the ones you love!" Ryouga let his hand slide away, his jaw muscles tensing. "You've got more than any person deserves to have, ever, and you're doing shit like this!?"

"I know. I know..." Ranma said. "Do you think I want to feel this way?"

"I don't know. Ranma. You keep saying that, but here you are! As a girl, no less!" Ryouga threw up his hands in exasperation. "You can't seem to ever let things lie! God damnit Ranma, you're a guy!"

"Not right now I'm not!" She said hotly, clenching her fist and glaring at him.

"You don't get to just pick and choose like that! That's not how it works, Ranma!" Ryouga growled
back.
"It is for me!"

The silence after that was deafening.

Ranma seemed intent on curling up tight enough to collapse herself into nonexistence. What was visible of her was nearly the same shade of red as her shirt.

Ryouga was just staring dumbly. He opened his mouth to say something, realized he had absolutely nothing and closed his mouth again.

"Still wish you had my curse, Ryouga?" She mumbled, muffled by her arms and legs. "You've never forgotten that you weren't a pig, I bet."

"You mean that time you hit your head and thought you were a girl?" Ryouga said nervously. "I don't think that really counts Ranma…"

"No!" She raised her head. Her eyes were red rimmed and glistening, like she was trying very hard to hold back tears. "You think any of this would be like that if it was that simple? It happens every day. More now that I'm spending so much time as a girl and it gets worse the longer I live with the curse! I'll just be doing whatever it is that I'm doing and I just… forget. Forget that… that this isn't really me! That this isn't right! I zone out and, just for a second, I can't remember which I originally was anymore!"

Ryouga swallowed, trying to comprehend that. Being P-chan did change stuff… but not to that degree! He had never been in danger of losing himself like that.

She shuddered and looked away. "Some days… I'm not even so sure if that would be so bad… That if I can't find a cure then maybe it would be better to just get locked as a girl rather than be stuck in-between like this." She rested her chin on her knees. "Do you have any idea what that's like?"

"No…" Ryouga admitted softly.

Ranma huddled a little tighter into her ball until she saw a hand extended towards her in the corner of her vision. She turned her head, staring at the offered hand uncomprehendingly.

"... But I could… If you want to show me. If that'll help," Ryouga finished.

Ranma looked up at him then down at his hand again. She slowly uncurled herself from her ball, eyes on his hand the whole time. She reached towards it finally, hesitated, then looked at him one last time, seeking confirmation.

Ryouga nodded trying to show more confidence than he was really feeling. Not that it would matter in a second or two.

She paused for a final half second then her hand snatched his and held on.

Ryouga closed his eyes and tried to relax, to put aside his own feelings for a moment and just try to see what she was seeing.

It was more chaotic than before. Confusion shot through with fear, shame, all encircling and binding other, warmer emotions.

Normally that was it. He never 'looked' too closely but this time he needed to understand, so he
focused a little harder. Part of him didn't want to… part of him was really worried about how deep this link could go and if by pushing it he was changing the nature of it irrevocably.

For now, just impressions were enough to resolve the emotions a little further. A wish for acceptance… a fear of rejection… guilt was still complex, tied to multiple things at the same time, which all seemed to 'pull' in mutually exclusive directions. Some of those things ran very deep. Being a girl was all snarled up in the mess. Not just with the curse… buried in the knot were fears of involuntarily changes, of losing herself to something invasive… and below those were the curiosities. An odd sense of being comfortable… of conflict about her identity and a longing for peace… shame about things she didn't know about being female… or about being male. In fact, the shame was worse on that side because of the sense that these were things she should know, lacking the excuse of the curse.

Very deep but part of the foundation was a fear… of being found out? Of being an imposter. This was strong for both sides…

There was a disconnect for some of the feelings, like they didn't quite make sense in context. He realized that there was a schism, a divide between how things were felt by the male side and the female side. Not as dramatic as a split, but more like something one had experienced while drunk and remembered afterwards when sober again.

Ryouga retreated. He was getting too close to actual memories with that and he didn't want to cross that line. There was also a disconcerting sense he was getting very close to things referring to himself and this wasn't how he wanted to learn those things.

Her emotions were evening out now, the chaos calming. It was still there but muted. He wondered why until he realized it was the same as with the fear dredged up by their close call with the Neko-ken.

She doesn't want to be alone with it. He had been boggled by the mess of Ranma's emotions and the sheer impossibility of dealing with them all, but… maybe that wasn't the point?

"Ranma Saotome, you are the most messed-up person in all of Nerima," Ryouga said finally. He squeezed her hand gently to blunt any sting even though he was sure she would see what he meant regardless.

"You should talk," she murmured. She had relaxed, her eyes closed, almost meditative.

"I should. I don't like the competition," Ryouga replied. "You're… uhhhh… how deep are you looking?" He suddenly felt nervous.

She smiled. "You're worried I'm going to find something embarrassing. That's kinda cute," she said softly, not opening her eyes.

Ryouga flushed. He opened his mouth to protest that he didn't want to hear that from her when he felt a flicker from her through the link. Desire for acceptance. Does… she want me to just let that slide? He pondered that for a moment. She just let slip probably her darkest secret to me. She wants to know if I'm… okay with it? If… I'll accept her… as a girl?

Ryouga realized this was a rabbit hole, dark and deep and with no idea where it led. If he let this slide, he was going to lose his fight to maintain his mental image of Ranma Saotome and was going to have to redefine it from scratch. All of that comforting certainty, that safe place to vent his anger, the core purpose that he had used to push himself through the most difficult trials of his life was going be taken off life support and allowed to die at last, and he was going to have to face some
absolutely terrifying possibilities and a whole lot of unknowns.

_All you have to do is say 'I don't want to hear that from you, Saotome.' You can even say it playfully. She'll pass it off as a joke. That's all it'll take. She won't even get mad. Just say it and hang on to some shred of sanity!_

He gently, timidly gave her hand a squeeze.

A whole lot of fear unravelled from that. Not quite disappearing, but receding, and drawing back from other feelings it had been strangling. And a new feeling that took a minute for him to identify because he hadn't felt it from her in all the time since the link had started acting as a bridge.

She felt _safe_.

"You don't have to worry," she said finally. "I'm just kind of… listening to the surface. When you calm down it's kind of relaxing. _When_ you calm down." She cracked an eye open and smirked at him. "Which isn't all that often."

"You didn't come here to talk about my problems, though," He replied. "So… tell me about the omiai."

"Nothing you can really do about it."

"Doesn't matter. I still want to hear it."

She smiled and he felt a warm surge from that… and it was hard to tell if it was from the link or from within himself. She started talking, laying out the events of the day, colored by flickers of emotion through the link.

At some point - he didn't remember when - she shifted her hand and wove her fingers with his.

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_So… yeah, people who don't like RanxRyo stuff are probably not going to like me much after this._

_I appreciate all of you who aren't fans of some of the themes I'm exploring with this, but are sticking with me anyway. I can't promise the story will always go comfortable places, but… I CAN promise I will write it to the best of my ability._

_And yes, I intend to try and give Kodachi a fair shake too, as far as characterizations and motivations. And eventually Tatewaki will return._

_And for those who are new from AO3? Congrats making it this far! There will be cookies at the finish line._
Do Cyborg Girls Dream of Electric Bakas?

The next morning had that sort of odd, surreal feeling for Nabiki. Somehow trying to go to school like everything was normal after the events of the previous day just seemed nonsensical.

In fact, that's the last couple of weeks, isn't it? I've gone from being the girl on the sidelines to having my entire life riding on a mess of concurrent, utterly INSANE challenges. I didn't realize being engaged to Ranma meant BECOMING him, Nabiki thought as she sipped her coffee. She made a face at the bitter taste. Maybe I should ask Kasumi if there's a store that sells Earl Grey? Jiro has ruined me.

"Morning…" Nabiki looked up to see Ranma making his way down the stairs. He had bags under his eyes and looked like he needed caffeine more than she did, which was an accomplishment. He had a towel over his shoulder, so she guessed he had gotten up early for a morning soak.

"Good morning Ranma," she smiled. "You're up early. Especially considering how late you got in."

"Uh… yeah… well…" Ranma rubbed the back of his head sheepishly. "How is Ryouga doing?"

Ranma stiffened, and Nabiki saw a blush rise on his cheeks. Her smile shifted into a confident smirk. Ranma, Ranma, Ranma. You may have suckered me into falling for you, but you will never, EVER get one past me.

"Umm… he's fine," Ranma said nervously. "Just uh… just decided to drop by and see how he was. Y'know… after the hospital and all…"

"Uh huh…" Nabiki sauntered over to him, getting right up close into his personal space in that way that seemed so very effective at making him panic. She leaned in close and trailed a nail lightly down his chest, savoring his deer-in-headlights expression. It was nice to know she could still do that to him. "Just don't forget those pictures you promised me."

He blinked, and the blush deepend. "Nothing happened! We were just talking!"

"Mmmhmm…" She purred and slipped her free arm around his neck. "And when something does happen, just make sure I get pictures. That's all. Now… do you need someone to scrub your back?" She leaned in closer, pressing herself against him casually.

She saw the flicker in his eyes underneath the panic and guilt of being caught; The urge to say yes. "I… uhh… I'm just… I gotta rinse off and… umm… change for school… y'know?"

"I know," Nabiki purred and leaned in further, her lips only a few inches from his. "Would you like me to scrub your back?"

Nervously he nodded and swallowed hard.

Before Nabiki could capitalize on her win, she felt something smack the back of her head that nearly caused her to spill her coffee. She released Ranma and whirled on her assailant. "Hey!"

Akane stood there, holding a large fan of folded paper which she smacked into her palm with a scowl. "No seducing Ranma before school!"
"Oh that is *not* fair, baby sister!" Nabiki stomped up nose to nose with Akane. "How *dare* you block me for something you did yourself?"

Akane sniffed and looked away. "We don't have time this morning! Ranma needs to change and I want to walk to school with Ukyou and Shampoo! Have your bathtime fun *after* school!"

"I don't want two baths in one day!" Nabiki whined. "This was supposed to make first period bearable! I've been looking forward to this all morning, Akane!"

"Then you should have woken him up sooner."

"I tried! Nothing seems to work short of a glass of water!"

"Ask Kasumi to ask him to get up."

"Oh, yes, let's do that! Hey, Kasumi, could you wake Ranma so we can have sexy times in the furo before school? *That's* not awkward and weird!"

Kasumi poked her head out of the hallway. "Ranma is already awake, Nabiki. I saw him heading for the furo."

"AAAAUUUGH!"

Soun sat unnoticed at the table, his newspaper in his hands and a haunted expression on his face. "At least they're getting along. That's good, right? It's... it's good. This is... a good... ~sniff~ good thing... I'm... I'm sure their mother would understand..."

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"We're picking up Ryouga?!"

"Volume, dear sister," Nabiki said, rubbing at her ear casually as Akane fumed next to her.

"Since when do we walk Ryouga to school!?"

"Since he *enrolled*, Akane," Ukyou replied. "You can't expect the poor dope to make it on his own."

"I *know* but..." Akane wrung her hands. "I'm not *ready* for this! We still haven't... I mean, the last time I saw him I was so awful and then he..." She covered her face with her hands. "What am I going to do?!!"

"Challenge to combat to restore honor," Shampoo suggested. "Win, stain on honor cleared."

"What, if you are crappy to someone you just beat them up and it's all good?" Nabiki asked skeptically.

"If Ryouga lose, was weak and deserved to be treated bad. Needs to get stronger," Shampoo replied.

"That explains your relationship with Mousse *so much,*" Nabiki said, pondering the implications. "Hold on, what if Akane challenges him and loses?!"

"Akane become Ryouga's slave."

"I *am not* fighting Ryouga!"

Ranma was conspicuously silent through all of it.
Eventually they reached Ryouga's house. The exterior continued to show the benefits from his mother's efforts. Not only was the lawn trimmed and the garden beds freshly edged, the walk had been swept and it even seemed that some of the trim had been freshly painted.

"So Ranma should probably be the one to knock, since Ryouga is her boyfriend," Nabiki said as they approached.

"Nabiki, don't even joke about that!" Akane growled.

"I'm not," Nabiki gave Ranma a glance. "Somebody decided to give that to Ryouga's Mom as a cover story!"

"Hey, that was Ryouga's brainwave, not mine!" Ranma protested. "And we didn't specifically say that! He just told her that I'm really a girl and she sort of... inferred it."

"Better than pretending to be his fiancee," Akane muttered.

"No, that was what they told the people at the Hospital," Nabiki corrected her.

"That was Ryouga too!"

"Just go get him before I decide if I should be mad at you or not," Akane gestured for Ranma to be on her way to fetch the Lost Boy.

Nabiki raised an eyebrow. "Akane, you're going to need to dial it back a bit if you plan on making up with Ryouga."

Akane sighed. "I know, I know! It's just... This is so awkward." She watched as the door opened. Ryouga's mother answered and gave Ranma an immediate hug which Ranma managed to return without too much flailing. "And... I don't know. I don't know what to do with all this anxiety and worry..."

"Talking about it is a good start, sugar," Ukyou chimed in, patting Akane on the back.

"Shampoo know good ways to burn off stress," Shampoo said, popping up into Akane's field of view.

"Shampoo, don't be hentai," Nabiki cautioned.

Shampoo blinked at Nabiki "What?" She turned back to Akane. "Was talking about Tai Chi. Hentai here not Shampoo! You have too too dirty mind, Nabiki Tendo!"

Akane smirked.

"... Though now think about it, sex pretty good way too."

"Shampoo!"

Ranma was returning with Ryouga in tow. The Lost Boy was wearing a Furinkan boy's uniform and tugging at the collar. He had a standard school bag, but had modified it with loops for his umbrella. He also still wore his signature bandanna, which Nabiki suspected was partially fused to his skull at this point.

She rubbed her chin and considered. Complaints about his headwear aside, Ryouga looked surprisingly good in the outfit, filling it out more than most boys his age. He looked a bit goofy and lost now, but combine the uniform with one of his 'brooding loner' expressions and some good
lighting… maybe leave the jacket open… no undershirt of course…

She shook herself out of it before she got too far into calculating the optimal per-unit charge. *You're not in that business anymore, Nabiki, as much fun as it was.* She gave Ryouga another thoughtful once over. *Maybe I can get Ranma to sweet talk him into a private set though?*

"Uhh… hello, Akane," Ryouga said, eyes darting away from the youngest Tendo as he greeted her, nervously rubbing the back of his head.

"Hey, Ryouga," she said softly and managed a weak smile.

"There! All friends again!" Ranma said brightly. She gave Ryouga a shove in Akane's direction.

"Now, you two chat, hash things out, become good friends again and I'm gonna walk up with the others just outside of ki blast range, 'kay?" She beamed her best cutsey smile and bounced over to Nabiki. She managed to hold that smile until she got a few feet away, at which point it cracked and became slightly manic.

"You okay, Ranma?" Nabiki asked, raising an eyebrow.

"*No!*" Ranma hissed. "This is a stupid idea! This is a terrible idea! One or both of them are going to snap on the way to school and take out three city blocks!"

"This is your idea," Nabiki reminded her.

"I know! Why didn't you talk me out of it?!" Ranma demanded. "I rely on you to counteract my bad ideas!"

Nabiki smiled a bit at that and ruffled her hair. "I know, Ranma, but sometimes bad ideas are also good ideas."

"That makes zero sense…"

"Or at least entertaining ideas."

Ranma made a face. "Okay, that makes more sense but is way less reassuring."

The continued on their way.

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Akane stared at the pavement as they walked, unconsciously avoiding the cracks as she struggled to think of what to say to the Lost Boy.

*What would Ranma say? Something stupid that would make it worse, probably, she thought sourly. What would Nabiki say then? I mean, aside from some kind of blackmail… Ugh… Kasumi? Kasumi would never have gotten into this situation in the first place. She clenched her fists and took a breath. Okay, this is stupid! I'm just gonna start talking and just say the stuff I've said to everyone ELSE about this and hope it helps.*

"Ryouga, I…"

"Akane, I…"

They both clammed up, blushed and looked away from each other. Akane sighed, slapped the sides of her face and admonished herself to stop being stupid.
"I'll go first," Akane said. "Ryouga… I am so sorry for how I treated you. Both in how I saw you while you were P-chan and… how I blurted it all out like you weren't even there." She wrung her hands. "I… used your curse as an excuse to make myself more comfortable with using you. I'm sorry."

Ryouga smiled. It wasn't the goofy, lovesick smile she had seen on him in the past; she had the feeling that, even if she succeeded in patching things up with him, he wasn't ever going to see her that way again. It was better. It was genuine.

"I think I deserved it," Ryouga said. "No… scratch that. I know I deserved it. I knew it every moment I played that stupid game. I knew you'd find out. I expected you to hate me, to want me dead, to want me out of your life… Deciding I was just a pet pig instead was probably the kindest way you could have handled it." He sighed. "Nothing you said or did was anything I didn't set myself up for."

Akane cocked her head. "Maybe you're being too hard on yourself?" She smiled. "I mean… when you're P-chan you are a pet pig, right? That's how the curse works."

Ryouga laughed weakly and shook his head. "Well… I think I get now why you think that, if you're basing it all on Ranma. I mean… I didn't get it before… she really does change doesn't she? Mentally, I mean. But… That's a human to human curse. I think those just have a way more profound effect. But when I change it's not like my brain gets swapped out for a piglet's brain. I'm still me in there, not some piglet version of me."

Akane stopped walking.

"I mean… I admit, getting my ears scratched as a piglet does feel pretty good, so there's some kinda bleed over but it's not like I suddenly find pigs attractive or any…" He trailed off as he felt the wash of heat across his back. He stopped and slowly turned.

"What did you say?" Akane asked. Her voice was low and dangerous. Her eyes were covered by her bangs and hidden in shadow, but most disconcerting of all, she was glowing blue.

"Awwww crap…"

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The walk to school had been remarkably peaceful; Plenty of time, no rivals or strife, and everyone was getting along.

That should have been the first clue that something was about to go horribly wrong.

The second, of course, was Ryouga nearly bowling over Nabiki and Ukyou as he bolted past them, sprinting for the Furinkan gates.

"What was that about?" Ukyou asked.

"RYOUGA HIBIKI, PREPARE TO DIE!"

An enraged Akane sped past and actually spun Ukyou around - and would have knocked her off her feet if Nabiki hadn't caught her.

"Oh," Ukyou said, a little dizzily.

"Oh no," Ranma scowled and took off after them.
"Ranma, wait! You can't get into any fights on school grounds!" Nabiki yelled after her. She cursed under her breath and took off in pursuit, followed by Shampoo and Ukyou.

Ryouga made for the wall and vaulted over it in a single bound. He was well-acquainted with Akane's abilities, having participated in her training in the past, and such an obstacle should be enough to slow her down. With what he knew about her speed and how long it would take her to round the wall, or pull herself over it with her known jumping ability, he should be far enough ahead to discourage her from chasing him further.

Unfortunately for Ryouga, he had absolutely no idea how much Akane had progressed in recent weeks.

As his trajectory peaked, he felt a presence and turned just in time to see Akane right behind him. She'd actually made her leap over the wall more efficiently than he had and cut his lead down to nothing, dropping to the ground a half second before his own feet met the tarmac.

He simply didn't have enough time to react. She made a spinning sweep kick low to the ground and knocked his legs out from under him just as his feet touched and before his weight could even settle onto them. The force was enough to pinwheel him around so he was poised to complete his fall headfirst. But that wasn't sufficient for Akane, who was already reaching back for a haymaker. Ryouga crossed his arms in desperate attempt to block just before the straight punch hit and slammed him back with bone-rattling force, sending skimming the ground upside down.

He caught himself with his hands and used the momentum of the hit to flip himself onto his feet, skidding another couple of yards as he pivoted to face her. His eyes were wide as he tried to reconcile the Akane he knew with the berserker who was bearing down on him.

He wove out of the way of another strike - one that generated enough air pressure to cause his ears to pop. *She's almost as fast as Ranma now!* He hopped back to re-establish his balance and blocked the next strike, gritting his teeth as he felt the impact through his arm. *Stronger, too!*

This Akane was a legitimate threat.

Her guard was tighter too, but he could till see some of her old signatures. Her tendency to push and charge, to use her momentum to add power to her attacks. It was a staple of the Anything Goes style though Akane was much more of a ground fighter than Ranma.

Ryouga blocked another strike and parried the next, his eyes narrowing. Her style was perfect for someone like Ranma, who could be pushed back easily, or hordes of weaker opponents, but it was at a disadvantage against him. He could take the hits and dish out the punishment for getting close, blunting her ability to use her momentum against him. Sure enough, after seeing a few more of her strikes parried, she hopped back to avoid a counterstrike.

The question was, was Ryouga willing to do that?

He watched her carefully. A few days ago he'd not have even been able to entertain the thought. He had no real compunctions against fighting girls. A martial artist was a martial artist in his eyes and he'd faced enough formidable martial artists of both genders to have had any such notions of chivalry beaten out of him in a rather painful manner. But Akane?

But that was before Akane had revealed how little she thought of him or how much of a fool she had made of him. She had strung him along just because she wanted her little black pet piglet and, now that he had dared to imply that her assumptions about him had been wrong, it was somehow his fault?
Something dark bubbled up within him, something he had once reserved for another but had been forced to give up. The pain twisted within his cracked glass heart and a filter settled over his vision. Akane wasn't Akane anymore. She was his Rival - the one who had caused him pain. And somewhere deep within him a greedy voice whispered that she was the one who held the heart of someone important to him, even as she had hurt them, too. The thoughts were like an old sweater - familiar and comfortable.

A Rival he could fight.

A nasty smile spread across his face. He wasn't totally gone. He knew that, despite her obvious improvement, she was still no real match for him if he pulled out all the stops. He had no real intention of injuring her, but he'd had just about enough of her little temper tantrum. If she wanted to be treated as an equal then it was about time someone showed her what that meant!

She charged in again and again he stood his ground. He let her draw back and throw her punch but this time he caught it with his hand, stopping it dead.

She glared at him, fire flashing in her eyes. "You slept in my room, you watched me change, you lied to me!"

"You knew what I was. You could have called me on it any time. You even knew how I felt. You just decided it was something different because it was more convenient!" he growled back. He released her hand and spun in a high roundhouse kick.

Her eyes widened and she dropped to avoid it, obviously shocked he had made an attack of his own. He didn't hesitate with his second attack, continuing for another full rotation, raising his fist to bring it downward in a smash on top of her.

Akane backflipped out of the way and Ryouga's fist hit the tarmac. There was a deep rumble and the asphalt crumbled under the blow, a small crater forming from the impact.

Akane made a few more flips to get her distance and stopped, eyes wide. "You actually tried to hit me!"

There was a crowd gathering now, watching raptly as another martial arts battle unfolded, this time between two opponents who had never been seen facing off against each other before. Murmurs ran through the crowd. Most recognized Akane and a few even remembered Ryouga from his previous altercations at the school.

Ryouga straightened back up, cracking his knuckles. "What's the matter? Not any fun when they fight back?" he asked, smirking.

Akane's expression shifted into a smirk of her own. "Oh no, exactly the opposite! Now it's just going to be that much more satisfying to wipe that smug look off your face!" She dropped back into a ready stance, tensing.

"Heh… Don't blame me then if this doesn't go the way your ego tells you it will," Ryouga replied, falling easily into his own stance. "You've still got a long way to go before you're at my level and I'm done holding back!"

"Then put your martial arts where your mouth is!" Akane said. Her eyes narrowed as she probed her opponent's defenses and her grin became fiercer.

After a moment's pause they launched towards each other, fists cocked back, set to collide with a force that would likely rock the entire courtyard regardless of the outcome.
Just before impact, their eyes caught a flash of red as it streaked between them.

Nabiki huffed as she rounded the gate and entered the courtyard, panting and winded. She wasn’t by any means out of shape but she had typically stuck to dancing, aerobics or jogging to stay in shape - not flat out sprinting. She was starting to think that her definition of ‘in shape’ was going to need to be revised.

She could see the dust clearing from what appeared to be a major altercation. She wondered what had possessed her little sister to take a shot at Ryōga but now it looked like the Lost Boy might have had enough and started to fight back. There were spiderweb cracks all through the tarmac all the way to the gate and a crowd had already gathered though she couldn’t yet clearly see the combatants.

Slowly the dust settled and she could make out three figures, seemingly frozen in time. Ryōga and Akane were each poised to deliver a strike to the other in what probably would have been a rather savage cross-counter.

And between them, with her arms covering her face and head, was Ranma - their fists mere inches away.

Both Ryōga and Akane looked horrified.

*Good. They BOTH need to learn you can't just haul off and pick a fight without some kind of consequences!* Nabiki thought. Before she could consider how she was planning to lecture them both, she saw something that was about to make it all moot; the diminutive frame of the English teacher, Hinako Ninomiya, pulling a coin out of her pocket.

"Oh crap!" Nabiki heard from her right as Ukyō spotted the same thing.

"Ukyō go!" Nabiki ordered, resuming her run. She knew that the okonomiyaki chef was much faster than she was and she hoped that the coin Ms. Hinako had selected was a 5 yen piece and not a 50 yen coin.

Everything seemed to slow except Ukyō. The chef was a dark colored blur as she darted in, scooped up Ranma, then leapt straight up just as Hinako aimed her coin at Ryōga and Akane.

"*Happo Five-yen Satsu!*"

Ryōga and Akane barely had time to react as their ki was suddenly and brutally drained by an invisible force. They stiffened and started to collapse slowly, no longer possessed of the strength required even to keep themselves upright.

Nabiki managed to reach Akane in time to catch her. Fortunately the five-yen version of Ms. Hinako's ki-stealing trick didn't affect someone not actually actively hostile or emitting ki, which kept it from affecting her as she kept her baby sister from hitting the tarmac. She glanced over and noticed Shampoo had picked up on her cue and caught Ryōga as well. There was less worry about the Lost Boy injuring himself, given his unusual durability of course, but until she knew more about what happened, Nabiki wasn't quite willing to say he deserved an asphalt sandwich and Akane didn’t.

Ms. Hinako grew rapidly, from the form of a 12 year old girl to that of a rather stunning and well-developed woman in her late twenties or early thirties. Her loose, shapeless yellow dress grew tighter as she filled it out almost to bursting. "Well, what have we here?" She strode forward, the demeanor of a hyperactive child replaced with a much more mature cool and authoritarian countenance.
"Delinquency will not be tolerated on the Furinkan school grounds."

*It would be nice if that was ever consistently enforced...* Nabiki thought dryly, but wisely kept her mouth shut.

The teacher walked up to them, regarding Akane's temporarily emaciated face. "Akane Tendo. Second year. Such a disappointment. It seems now that your usual targets don't want to play anymore you've taken to venting your aggression on less acceptable victims, hmm?" She glanced over to Ryoga. "And one of our new transfer students. I had a bad feeling about you from your transcripts, Ryouga Hibiki. I'm disappointed to find my concerns so quickly validated. I'll be seeing you both in detention first period." She nodded to Nabiki and Shampoo in acknowledgement. "Thank you for taking care of them. Please make sure they're not late, would you? We wouldn't want to compound their punishment through tardiness."

She turned and started walking back to the school but paused, glancing at Ukyou and Ranma who had managed to get clear of the drain, if only just. "Ranma Saotome." She walked over to her and smiled. "While attempting to stop schoolyard fights is a task best left to teachers, I appreciated that you acted so selflessly and non-violently. That's quite the improvement from your normal behaviour. You've become quite the model student since joining the volleyball team."

"Uh... thanks teach... I guess?" Ranma replied, a little uncertain. *Praise* was not something she got often from Ms. Hinako, much less from her adult form.

"I'll be watching your game on Wednesday. I'll be expecting quite the performance from you and your team. Don't disappoint me." She winked, turned and strode back towards the school as a number of male students scrambled to escort her inside.

Nabiki raised an eyebrow and propped her sister up a little further. "Just when you think you've seen everything... Ranma Saotome, teacher's pet."

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By the time the bell rang Akane and Ryoga still hadn't recovered from the ki drain, so they had been propped up unceremoniously in the hallway against the wall. The usual water buckets delinquent students were expected to hold up for the duration were simply left on the floor next to them as it had been enough trouble just getting them to remain standing.

"That... sucked..." Akane said weakly, still somewhat unsteady as she stared blearily at the floor.

"You... get used to it," Ryouga replied, as he'd been the target of Ms. Hinako's drains many times before.

"Really?"

"No. It *sucks.*"

Akane chuckled weakly, more of a wheeze, even though she was gradually recovering. "Too bad she got us. I was really starting to get into that fight." She turned her head and managed a smile. "Thanks for taking me seriously."

Ryouga snorted dismissively. "I don't do charity when it comes to martial arts. I took you seriously because you were a legitimate *threat.*"

Her smile grew. "That means even more coming from a guy like you."
They spent the next few minutes in silence. Feeling and color were slowly returning to their extremities as the effects of the ki drain wore off. Their postures became more relaxed as it became less of a struggle to stand.

"Truce?" Akane suggested, holding up the arm nearest him, fist closed.

Ryouga glanced at her. He closed his eyes then raised his own arm, crossing forearms with her briefly as a sign of respect. "Truce. For Ranma's sake."

"That's something I never thought I'd hear you say," Akane raised an eyebrow. She folded her hands behind her head and leaned against the wall.

"Yeah, well…" Ryouga shrugged. "Stuff has gotten a bit weird lately. Just don't go expecting me to put you on a pedestal anymore. Or play the part of your pet pig."

Akane scowled. "Oh, I'm not shedding any tears, trust me Hibiki." Her expression softened a little and she looked up at the ceiling. "Actually… This could be fun. I've never had a serious rival before."

"I am not your rival, Tendo," Ryouga scoffed, giving her an incredulous look. "Go pester Shampoo or Ukyou for that."

"Mmmm, tried it with Shampoo. Couldn't ever really stay mad at her," Akane said thoughtfully. "Her teasing used to piss me off but I'm starting to think she's actually serious. She's too cute to stay mad at."

Ryouga immediately grabbed at his nose. He pulled off one of his seemingly endless bandannas and used it to staunch the burgeoning nosebleed. "What?!

Akane smirked at him, an evil glint in her eye. "What, you didn't pick up on that after listening to me tell you all my secrets, P-chan? Why do you think Ranma was the only one I ever had any serious interest in? If the whole school is just gonna assume I'm a pervert anyway, why should I bother to hide it?" She glared at him. "I like girls, Ryouga. And you and I are after the same one."

Ryouga's eyes widened in surprise then narrowed again. "I never said I'm after Ranma. I don't need to own someone to be concerned about their safety! Besides, didn't you learn anything from all this? You can't just define Ranma as a girl because it suits your preferences!"

"Why not? You're doing it."

"I am not!"

"Really? I didn't know you swung that way, Hibiki."

"I don't!"

"Then you're either lying, or you're lying. Which is it?"

"Look, just drop it, Tendo!"

"Fine, fine… I shouldn't have expected honesty from you. I guess if I want to have a conversation with a real man I would probably be better off talking to Ukyou."

"Hey! You leave Ukyou out of this! She didn't do anything to deserve that!"

"Who said it was an insult? She's prettier than I am and she's still manlier than most of the guys in
this school. *Including you!*

At that moment, the classroom door was flung open and Ukyou herself stomped out. She glared at the both of them furiously.

"U-Ukyou?" Ryōga managed.

"Would the two of you jackasses kindly **SHUT UP**!?" Ukyou snarled. "We can hear every single word in there!"

Ryōga turned beet red, a panicked look on his face. "You can!?"

"But… Ranma and I used to argue out here all the time and no one said anything!" Akane protested, almost as red in the face herself.

"Yeah, well I wasn't the subject of conversation then, was I?!" Ukyou shot back, trembling with fury and embarrassment.

"Also, it was **funny as hell,**" someone supplied helpfully from within the classroom.

Just then the intercom came on. *Good morning students! It's another wonderful day at Furinkan High! It's time for your daily announcements. Before we begin, your Student Council President wishes to extend her congratulations and the congratulations of the Furinkan Student Council to Ranma Saotome and Ryōga Hibiki, whom we recently learned have become engaged! Isn't that exciting?*

"WHAT!?" Akane whirled on Ryōga, who's expression was one of rapidly building realization and horror.

"Himura visited us in the hospital! She must have heard about it from the staff! This wasn't my fault!" Ryōga protested frantically.

"**Ryōga Hibiki, prepare to DIE!**"

"**Happo Fifty-yen Satsu!**"

"Ack! Teacher, don't drain US! We didn't do anything!"

Ranma buried her head in her arms and wished fervently for the ground to open up and swallow her whole.

"**In other announcements…**"

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"So, let's take inventory, shall we?" Nabiki said at lunchtime as they sat around their usual tree. With the size of the group now they had managed to more or less monopolize it. As had become custom, lunches had been spread out potluck-style to be shared between them all. "Akane has managed to out herself… not exactly big news but several rumours have now been confirmed. She's also raised suspicions that Ranma is, in fact, a girl who had a guy curse, a theory which has only been supported by the fact that Ranma hasn't attended school as a guy for **weeks**, and further reinforced by Himura's having arranged for Ranma and Ryōga's cover story of an engagement to the hospital to be spread around the school. Ukyou is now rumored to actually have a Jusenkyo curse and Hana has placed a fairly sizeable bounty on photographic evidence of Ukyou's 'guy side', most likely to screw with us. Ryōga is either gay, engaged to Ranma, *both*, or actually Ranma in disguise depending on who you
talk to and there is a betting pool going around with fairly decent odds that one of us is going to turn out to be a space alien." She snagged a bit of fried tofu with her chopsticks and popped it in her mouth, pausing to chew and swallow before continuing. "I trust I don’t need to explain why it's important to be careful what you say to anyone?"

"It probably wasn't helped by Rin's insistence that Ranma really is a girl," Yuka commented, her arms folded.

"But senpai is a…" Rin started to protest, but the combined glares made her shrink back to pout a little.

"Speaking of 'senpai'..." Sayuri said, shooting Ranma a stern glare. "We are having volleyball practise today after school."

Ranma sighed. She was seated between Ryouga and Akane as she was one of the few things anyone was reasonably sure neither would smash through to get at the other should they start squabbling again. This had also resulted in some sulking from Ukyou and Shampoo. "Assuming everybody present behaves, I think that covers any potential disasters that might…"

"I'm here my darling Shampoo!"

"... Awww crap. I forgot about Mousse," Ranma sighed, not bothering to look as the blind weaponmaster approached.

"Uh oh…" Riko turned to look at Rin who had gone stiff.

Rin abruptly shuddered, blinked, and, with a glassy, blank look, started to stand. "Oh, the take out delivery is here! I'll go pay."

"Quick! Grab her legs!" Yuka yelped as she made a grab for Rin. But Rin didn't seem to notice; she simply tried to disentangle herself.

"She's going to get away!"

"Tackle her!"

Ranma blinked as the rest of the volleyball team dragged Rin to the ground and piled on to pin her while she calmly yet insistently tried to free herself. "Did… I miss something?"

Ukyou sighed. "Rin apparently has a bit of a mental malfunction around Mousse. I'll go get the ramen." She stood up smoothly to go deal with the delivery.

Nabiki watched the antics, both as the volleyball team attempted to subdue their striker and as Akane recounted to Ranma what happened. Her sour mood eased quickly to give way to an amused contentment.

She felt a nudge at her side and turned to see that Shampoo had snuck over, her expression uncharacteristically subdued… almost bashful.

"Nabiki… make appointment?" She fidgeted a bit and actually blushed.

Nabiki smiled. "Yeah, it's all set for Thursday."

Shampoo nodded. She glanced at the others but they were too engrossed in all the other things going on to pay any attention. "Will hurt?"
"They said it was painless. Just an injection, really. They don't even need anaesthetic. It's tiny. Like a grain of rice." Nabiki gave Shampoo her full attention. "This really has you unsettled, doesn't it?"

"Is… humiliating," Shampoo admitted. "Understand better why Pig-boy have freakout. Not like idea of being helpless like that. Not like impli… implic…" She huffed in frustration. "Not like ideas it give Shampoo about things that could happen."

Nabiki gave her a sympathetic look. "I'm sorry. I'm not exactly proud of having thought of it, but if I did you can bet Himura has. This is the best insurance I can think of… and it's not great. Be extra careful, okay?"

Shampoo nodded then settled next to her. She was silent a moment. "So… Nabiki be one on registration?"

Nabiki nodded, plucking a cherry tomato from one of the bentos with her chopsticks.

"Na shi yin," Shampoo said with a smirk.

Nabiki raised an eyebrow and smiled. "I knew you were going to go there eventually."

"Your Mandarin better than you say," Shampoo folded her arms.

"I never actually said how good my Mandarin was," Nabiki waggled her eyebrows and popped the cherry tomato into Shampoo's mouth. "I also didn't say you were wrong."

Somehow the rest of the day managed to pass without further incident. As they'd previously agreed, everyone ended up at the Tendo Dojo after school except Akane and Ukyou, who were working the dinner rush at Ucchan's, and Shampoo, who was needed at the Nekohanten. The idea was to do some volleyball training in preparation for Wednesday's match.

Unfortunately, Genma Saotome had other ideas. He had been waiting when they got to the Dojo and had accosted Ranma as soon as they walked in.

"You're getting too soft, boy!" Genma scoffed, levelling an accusing finger at Ranma, who was still female and dressed in her school uniform. "Look at you, prancing about like a girl and playing women's sports! You're a disgrace to the Anything Goes School of Martial Arts! If your mother knew…!"

"If Mom knew she'd cut both our heads off," Ranma said coldly. "So why don't you go ahead and tell her about it?"

Genma shuddered. "How can you joke about such a serious matter of honor so flippantly, boy? Don't you have any male pride left?!" In truth Genma was a little off balance. He wasn't used to Ranma parrying his veiled threats quite so well.

Ranma smirked. She had learned a few things from Nabiki. "Guess if I'm so girly you should start engaging me to guys instead, huh? Oh… wait! You already have! I wonder what Mom would have to say about that, huh?"

"You ungrateful brat! After all I've done for you, how can you be so disrespectful!!?"

"You sold me to a Korean businessman when I was twelve! To a 40 year old guy! That was way before the curse! What's there to respect?!"
"That was *training*. Any student of the Anything Goes School who couldn't get themselves out of that situation doesn't deserve to be taught!"

"I almost got shipped off to Seoul in a **crate**! I was a **kid**!"

"You were far too old then for this much whining and you're certainly far to old for it **now**! Now change back so I can teach you some manners!"

"I don't have time to kick your ass, old man! I'm supposed to train for the game on Wednesday!"

"So you're just going to **stay** a girl?! I've heard enough! I'll restore your pride as a man if I have to **beat** it into you!"

"Hey, leggo! You'll wreck my uniform! At least let me change fir-AAAAAAAAaaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

Ranma squawked as she plunged into the koi pond.

Rin sighed as she watched the two go at it. The enraged redhead popped out of the koi pond soaking wet and furiously attacked the old man. Genma danced back and proceeded to taunt her further about her 'feminine hang ups'.

Nabiki had retreated upstairs to her room and Ryouga had headed off to find the bathroom and gotten himself lost. She could still hear him banging around upstairs, though she was fairly sure the bathroom was on the main floor. Sayuri and the others had already given up and headed to the dojo to try and get in **some** practice but Rin had declined to join them.

"You're Rin, right?"

Rin looked up to see the eldest Tendo smiling down at her, a tray in her hands. Rin smiled back because it was the polite thing to do but it wasn't something she was really feeling.

"We just got in those uniforms of yours with the changes Nabiki asked to have made. They look very fetching! A little daring for my taste but I suppose that's the style these days." Kasumi sat down across from her and noticed that the girl seemed to be distracted and upset. "Are you feeling all right, dear?"

Rin shrugged. In reality she felt a little sick but it wasn't really a physical thing. She glanced nervously out at the fight going on in the yard. "Senpai's Dad scares me."

Kasumi gave her a sympathetic look. "I can understand that. He is very loud. And violent, sometimes. But he also would never harm an innocent bystander like you. It's mostly just Ranma he's that way with."

"Because he can get away with it," Rin said, hugging herself and ignoring the cup of tea Kasumi placed in front of her.

Kasumi cocked her head. "What do you mean?"

Rin chewed her lower lip. She wasn't entirely sure how much she should say. She had gotten in trouble for this before. These people were being nice to her and it wasn't nice to be judgemental in return but... but...

"You're not nice to each other," Rin said quietly, not looking at the older girl.

Rin had learned early on that not all families were like hers. In fact, most *weren't*. It meant she was lucky but at the same time it was so *frustrating* - like somehow they just couldn't see what was
happening. "You're nice to me, so you know what nice is. But then you're not nice to senpai." Rin spared a nervous glance at the older girl. Most of the time when Rin pointed these things out people laughed it off. Sometimes they acted confused, like she had given them a riddle that they wanted to understand but they just couldn't see the solution. But there were some where the mask cracked and they got angry and they stopped being nice. Because they knew and they were that way on purpose. Those people were scary. And for some reason, no matter what, people weren't okay with Rin saying these things.

Kasumi looked confused. "I would never say such things to Ranma!"

"He does," Rin nodded in the direction of the ongoing tussle in the yard. She looked down and picked at her shoe. "And you don't say anything." This was the part where they told her she didn't understand, that it was the way things were, that something Rin knew wasn't okay actually was because of something that Rin knew didn't matter.

"I… yes…" Kasumi looked away, that same confused look on her face. The confusion was good sometimes. Sometimes they'd understand later what Rin was trying to say. But more often than not it just meant they had started to laugh it off and would tell her she was being silly. Or worse, they'd start wearing the mask. "It must seem harsh, but… it's not my place to question Mr. Saotome's teaching methods, or how he chooses to raise his son…"

"Who's is it?" Rin asked.

Kasumi trailed off, more confusion clouding her expression. "Pardon me?"

"Who's place is it to question how he does it?" Rin asked. She looked at the older girl again but still only saw confusion. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Why was it so hard to find the words? Why did something that normally made perfect sense suddenly stop making sense just because the jobs had different names? "When a teacher teaches, their students need to get good grades but they also have to do lots of other stuff too, and everyone questions what they do and how they do it - the Principal, the parents, the school board. If they do something wrong they get asked questions and if it's a bad thing they get told to stop. Why isn't anyone telling him to stop? Who's job is it? Who do I tell!?"

Kasumi gaped at her for a moment then looked pensive. She moistened her lips and did what Rin knew she was going to do.

"It's different than with a teacher when it's family. You wouldn't want someone else judging your family if…"

"People do judge my family," Rin said curtly. "A lot. And just because nobody likes it when someone says they're doing something bad doesn't mean someone shouldn't say something! How would you feel if someone robbed your house but no one would do anything because they didn't want the robber to feel like they were judging him?" She gave Kasumi a pleading look. Please… please listen this time! I know SOMEONE has to see it! "He's saying all those terrible things to her about something she can't help!"

Again Kasumi's expression shifted back to surprise, confusion, maybe even a little realization. Rin had a moment of hope, but frustratingly it was buried again. "Mr. Saotome says such things… to harden Ranma against such tactics being used against him by others…"

"That's not why!" Rin cut her off again. "Even I can see he's saying it just to make her mad so she'll fight and he can justify hitting her… and then when he can't hit her he keeps saying them because it's the next best way to hurt her! And the only reason it hurts her is because he made her ashamed of
being who she is! That's just bullying!"

Kasumi took a deep breath. "Rin, I know from what my sisters have told me that you have some trouble around Ranma's curse and, even though you've seen it, you're more comfortable thinking of him as female, but…"

"I know about the curse," Rin said. "I know Ranma was born a boy. You don't have to patronize me." She felt her lower lip quiver and clenched her fists in frustration. Why could no one see it? Why couldn't she ever find the words to explain it? "I know… sometimes Ranma is a boy, but…"

"Yes, dear, that's how the curse works," Kasumi said, smiling, seemingly relieved that Rin grasped the idea.

Rin shook her head in exasperation. "I'm not talking about the curse! I am, but… not the way you are! Maybe the curse started it but…" She felt frustrated tears start to blur her vision. "There's something wrong with all this! Nobody sees it, not even senpai, but it's there." She looked up and scowled at Genma as he and Ranma bounced across the yard trading blows. "And he knows. He knows."

"I… don't know what you're talking about, dear," Kasumi said. She followed Rin's gaze and tried to see what Rin was seeing, to see what was upsetting her so much.

Rin shook her head again and stood. "That's okay… nobody does. Just… if you really do care about Ranma, find out whose job it is to ask the questions?" She scooped up a wayward volleyball that had been left by the back door and walked out onto the veranda.

"Rin…?" Kasumi watched her go, wondering what she was doing.

Rin felt the tears starting to flow now. Frustration and helplessness at not being able to find the words to make anyone understand the wrongness she saw - what she knew deep down to be true. She was stuck outside watching people hurt again and she hated it.

"Come on now, girl! I came here to train a man! You're letting that pathetic form get to you, boy! When did I raise such a pathetic, weak woman?" Genma taunted, dodging another swipe.

"I'm a guy, goddamnit!" Ranma snarled, aiming a kick at his midsection.

Rin knew no one else saw the slight dampness at the corners of her eyes, or heard the edge in her voice when she said that - the desperation.

Except him. He was the one who had done this, of that she was sure.

She waited until he turned and caught sight of her. It was the briefest of moments but it was all she needed to lock eyes with him and to make sure he saw her. She felt herself tremble with the frustration and more than a little rage.

"Ranma is a girl," she said. It was soft enough to miss but that's why she had waited, made sure he had seen her, seen her lips move so he could see the words. And she saw his eyes widen ever so slightly, just a trace of surprise, and she knew that he understood. He was the one with the mask.

Her father had told her not to do this. He had specifically forbade her. She tossed the volleyball in the air with her left hand, still holding Genma's gaze. She knew this was the wrong thing to do but she couldn't find the right thing, no matter how hard she tried. Maybe this would make it stop, if only for a little while.
Every since she had been eight years old she'd had to hold back when she hit the ball. There was a point where it just wasn't productive in a game of volleyball to hit the ball any harder. You just wrecked the ball and sometimes the floor or you could really hurt someone, and that was something Rin absolutely did not want to do. So she held back. Even when she had been showing off for Ranma, wanting to impress her, and had 'killed' the ball, she hadn't been hitting as hard as she could. She had promised she wouldn't.

She didn't hold anything back this time.

It hurt to hit the ball this hard. It made her arm ache for hours afterwards. But this time she didn't mind. She squeezed her eyes shut and screamed as she poured all of her helpless frustration into that ball.

Genma had a half second to realize he might be in trouble.

The impact was like a cannon retort. Genma's body was flung backwards like a ragdoll, curling around the point of impact as his 300 plus pound frame was tossed like a fly swatted by an angry god. He hit the concrete retaining wall around the yard and punched through it to leave him half buried in a pile of rubble on the far side with the shredded remains of a volleyball lying on his chest.

"Rin?! What the Hell!?" Ranma gawked at her. The redhead's eyes were wide, horrified.

Rin stood on the porch rubbing her sore arm. Angry, shameful tears ran down her cheeks, her head bowed she whispered, "I'm sorry, Senpai." She knew this was the part where Ranma would start hating her. She turned and ran back inside the house past a startled Kasumi and out the front door.

"It's not right! It's not right!" The phrase kept running through her head as she ran through the streets with no real idea of where she was going.

"Good news, she's at home," Sayuri said, hanging up the phone. "She must have run the whole way. Her Dad is wondering what's got her so upset but he said she wouldn't tell him anything."

Ranma sighed in relief. "I was afraid I was going to have to go out searching. Could have taken hours with the headstart she had and no telling what sort of trouble she could stumble into."

"You should know better than to bring such an unbalanced girl to the dojo. Think of the damage she could have caused!" Genma groused. His ribcage was developing quite the impressive circular bruise and one of the lenses in his glasses was cracked.

"I agree with Saotome," Soun said, folding his arms. "Martial Arts challenges are one thing but this was an unprovoked assault. Ranma, you need to find out what possessed that girl to do such a thing!"

"Errr… That isn't necessary, Tendo. I'm sure it was just a misunderstanding," Genma folded his arms stoically.

"I can guess," Ranma growled. "So what did you do to her, huh Pop?"

"I've never seen that girl before in my life!"
"She was here last week!"

"She actually seemed quite distressed about your treatment of Ranma, Mr. Saotome," Kasumi said quietly.

"What, our training banter? Ha ha!" He laughed and clapped Ranma on the back. "That's just a little back and forth to get us fired up, right boy?"

Ranma scowled at him. "You could tone it back when I've got people over! I mean, we were supposed to train for the volleyball match on Wednesday!"

Genma glared at him. "You don't need to train to smack around a ball with a bunch of girls, Ranma! And you especially shouldn't be neglecting your training in the Art for it! I think maybe you need a good long training journey to get your head straight!"

"Don't you ever listen? This is for the challenge I'm dealing with at school! You know, the whole 'We have to accept all challenges' thing?! I can't just pack up and leave!"

"Hmph! You need to straighten out your priorities, boy!"

"My priority is to not end up with a criminal record!"

"Sacrifices must be made for the Art, boy!"

Ranma finally lost patience with him. She drilled her fist right into his bruised ribs, causing him to double over with a pained wheeze, then grabbed his dogi and shoulder threw him out the door and into the pond.

"Why is it whenever you say that, I'm the one doing the sacrificing?!" she yelled, then sat back down and crossed her arms with a scowl.

"Well, not much point in this without Rin here," Sayuri sighed. "I'll try and call her later and see if I can work out what's got her so riled up." She bowed to Soun. "Thank you for the use of your Hall, Mr. Tendo. We appreciate the hospitality." She picked up the duffle bag that they had packed the new uniforms into and motioned for the other girls to join her. "See you at school tomorrow, Ranma, Nabiki, Ryouga?"

"Maybe next time we should grab Akane from Ucchan's first," Nabiki sighed, eyes flicking towards the pond.

A very damp panda tromped into the house, holding up a sign.

"PMS?" Ranma inquired sweetly, batting her eyes. Soun choked on his tea.

The Panda narrowed his eyes. You joke, but mark my words, you keep this up and it'll be flower arranging and tea ceremonies!

"Yup, that urge for flower arranging is just overwhelming, right Sayuri?" Nabiki snarked.

"And tea ceremonies!" Yuka added. "If I don't get my tea ceremony fix, I get the shakes something terrible!"

Sayuri folded her arms. "It's not like us girls do anything else, right?" She glared at the Panda, who at least had the good sense to look slightly sheepish.
"Not that I would know anything about it. Genma flipped his sign quickly.

"You'd think a married man who lived for a year in a house with three and a half girls would have picked up on something by now," Nabiki raised an eyebrow. "Or maybe that's really a note of longing behind this constant harping? Got a secret hankering for lilacs and herbal tea, Mr. Saotome?"

"Nabiki, that's quite enough!" Soun said gruffly.

"Father, I notice you're quite quick to defend Mr. Saotome when he is being taunted," Kasumi commented, sipping at her tea. 

"Of course! Saotome is our honored guest, and it's my duty as his host…"

"I've not seen you extend the same courtesy to Ranma. Or our other guests. Particularly when Mr. Saotome is insulting towards our gender," Kasumi finished. She gave her father a searching look.

"I don't expect you to understand, Kasumi, but it's very important for… for…" He started to stammer as her gaze hardened. "I mean… a-a man… It's not intended as…" he withered further. "Ryouga, you're a man, help me out here!"

"Don't look at me, I do girly things like rhythmic gymnastics, remember?" Ryouga sipped his tea.

"Err…" Soun switched his gaze to Ranma. "Ranma!"

Ranma gave him a half-lidded glare and folded her arms across her well-formed chest to make it just that much more obvious how male she currently was not. "Really?"

"You don't actually mind all that banter, right? You and Saotome have been doing it for years! Ha ha… I remember some of the zingers he and I passed back and forth when we were training. Isn't that right, Saotome?" He laughed weakly.

"That's right, Tendo!" Genma chimed in, still steaming from the kettle of hot water he had poured over his head.

"Well, then you and Mr. Saotome shouldn't mind a little friendly ribbing from us then, should you?" Kasumi said.

"Well…" Soun started to sweat as it dawned on him that he'd completely lost control of the situation. "There is the matter of respecting one's elders…"

"Oh? I shall have to ask Elder Cologne if some of what I hear you and Mr. Saotome say about her qualifies. I fear my concept of it might be flawed and it might be good to get a second opinion, don't you think?" She smiled and cocked her head.

Soun swallowed. "... Kasumi, that's blackmail!"

"Then perhaps you should assist Mr. Saotome in cleaning up his language while he's a guest, hadn't you?" Kasumi said, with a truly uncharacteristic, dangerous note in her voice.

Soun looked up to see every female in the room glaring at him. He cleared his throat. "~Ahem~... yes… well… We can discuss it at dinner perhaps."

"Oh? What are we having?" Yuka asked and plunked back down at the table.

"Would it be all right if we stayed, Kasumi?" Sayuri asked. "I've got a sudden craving for your cooking."
"Oh my, that would be wonderful if you don't have any other plans?" Kasumi said, beaming.

Riko plunked down next to Yuka. "Not anymore we don't!"

They all smiled pleasantly at Soun, doing a fair impression of Kasumi's usual serene smile.

"Yes… well… " Soun cleared his throat then suddenly leapt to his feet. "Saotome, I think we should see what Nodoka is making tonight!"

"Capital plan Tendo! Let's…"

"Yes, we should…!"

They glanced at each other then scrambled over each other to evacuate the house.

"Don't stay up too late girls!" Soun called as the front door slammed open then closed behind them.

Yuka peered down the hallway and raised an eyebrow. She slowly sat up, stretched and said, "I don't know about you, but I'm feeling a sleepover."

"I'll call Rin and see if I can coax her into coming back over," Sayuri said as she hopped back up.

Seeing he was in danger of becoming the token male, Ryouga stood. "I… uhh… should probably get home…"

Nabiki reached up, grabbed his shirt and dragged him back down. "Oh no, you're staying too, Ryouga," she said sweetly. "You and I need to have a little chat, after all."

Ryouga swallowed hard.

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"Ow… ow… ow…"

Ryouga winced as Nabiki dragged him to her room by the earlobe. Normally things like that wouldn't bother him overmuch but she had rather sharp nails and seemed to know a pressure point or two that she was using with ruthless efficiency.

She released him once they were finally inside and closed the door. "All right, Hibiki, have a seat," she motioned him towards the bed as she sat down smoothly on her desk chair and crossed her legs.

With a sigh, Ryouga trudged over to the bed and sat heavily. Western-style mattresses felt so weird to him even if that was the kind of bed he had at home. It was akin to sitting on a marshmallow.

"Look, I can guess what this is going to be about."

"Normally, yes, and I'm sure I'd find it hilarious how off-base you were," she smirked. "But tonight we've got guests coming so I'm just going to make this quick. It's time for some ground rules, Hibiki."

"Look, there's nothing…"

"Hush," she said sharply and gave him a warning look. "I'm neither stupid nor my sister. I'm not here to accuse you of trying to seduce Ranma."

"Thank god," Ryouga slumped in relief.
"But I am aware that things are rapidly changing between you two, thanks to that link you've developed."

Ryouga stiffened again. "She told you about that, huh?"

Nabiki nodded then regarded him levelly. "I'm... going to try a different approach with this, Ryouga, and trust me when I tell you that if you breathe a word of any of this to anyone, the local butcher will be selling long pig and not know it." She glared at him until he swallowed nervously and bowed his head.

Nabiki took a deep breath. "All right. You know how I felt about Ranma before. He was a naive, chauvinistic, dumb jock who was good for extorting some pocket money out of. He also, for whatever unknown reason, seemed to make my sister happy when he could stop driving her into a murderous rage, so I tolerated his presence here. But I never liked him much. He was a target, not a person."

Ryouga raised an eyebrow. "What changed?"

Nabiki was thoughtful a moment. She closed her eyes and remembered the beach weekend and everything that happened. She smiled slightly. "I let him be a person for once. It was just to try and keep him in line so I could enjoy my weekend - make him a partner in crime and maybe give him a chance to unwind. I figured he'd stumble over a girl, make an idiot of himself like he normally does, and I'd be there watching from my beach chair as he ran past being chased by a horde of angry boyfriends or something."

"That didn't happen?" Ryouga asked, incredulous.

Nabiki raised an eyebrow, leaning in closer to him. "You know better than that, Hibiki, don't you?"

Ryouga smirked, enjoying having a few cards to show yet. "Maybe, but this is your story, right?"

Nabiki quirked a grin of her own, giving him a nod of respect. "Yes, that's not what happened. Turns out Ranma barely knows the first thing about being sociable, much less meeting girls. So I let him hang around at first. We did the boyfriend/girlfriend cover story to keep the creeps off... which didn't work. Then Ranma... convinced the creeps to back off and it ended up being our ticket to hang out with some college kids, which was exactly what I was looking for. So, Ranma got dragged along and I ended up doing something I had never tried before. I talked to him."

She smiled as the memories filtered through. "It was perhaps the worst thing I could have done. That's what gets you with Ranma - you get a glimpse of what he is past all the machismo and the dumb stereotypes. You realize he's never really had anything... just dribbles and drips. He's had so little human contact outside of his father - a brief friendship every four years or so or a chance to experience something outside the Art. And it makes you want to show him. It reminds you just how amazing something simple like an ice cream cone can be or being able to sit around the campfire with some new people and tell jokes, or what it's like to flirt with someone without it having to be anything more than that. And I watched him... unfold. It's like... seeing an abused dog who has been kicked and beaten and starved and abandoned, and still it wags its tail when it sees you because, after all of that, it's still good and kind and just wants to be loved. And you realize he'll do anything for you if you give him just a little." She laughed and shook her head. "I fell hard. I fell hard and I wanted to run away with him and just never come home. And I'm still not sure that if I could do it again I wouldn't do exactly that."

"Why didn't you?" Ryouga asked. His voice was low, quiet, contemplative.
Has that thought occurred to you yet, I wonder? she thought. "Because I was in denial. Because he was making everything I believed about myself out to be a lie. And because I found out why the fiancée mess has never been resolved."

"There's a reason?"

"Ranma didn't quite grasp it consciously, but… what happens if one girl wins him?"

Ryouga scoffed. "She goes back to China, or works as an Okonomiyaki waitress, or inherits the Tendo Dojo."

Nabiki wagged a finger at him. "You're making the same mistake everyone else does. You're thinking about the winners. But for every winner there's going to be at least two losers. A girl who gave up her identity and gender and was shunned by everyone to finally find someone she could love, only to have him taken away. A girl who can never return to her own people, her future forsaken and her honor in tatters. A girl who will be left fighting the world alone without someone who understands her."

"A girl who goes through life as a mercenary?" He asked. It wasn't a quip, there was something in his eyes that told her he understood, at least a little.

"I think I could have survived without him at that point. Akane… Akane figures I was already lost by then." She smiled a little, remembering that conversation with her little sister. "But I saw right away what Ranma was doing. If he picked a winner, two others lost. If he didn't pick a winner things would stay the same and he'd suffer. So… he suffered." She folded her arms across her chest. "I don't think it was altruism, really… it was instinctive. He was trying to protect them."

"So… you organized them into a harem for him?" Ryouga asked skeptically.

Nabiki chuckled. "No, I just tried to map out a way to defuse their bad ends so he could actually pick one. Apparently Shampoo had a similar idea before me and the harem was her solution. And before I could think of anything better, Himura made a united front seem like a good idea."

"And you're okay with that? And the rest are too?" Ryouga scowled. "No weird Amazon potions or magic trinkets involved?"

"Fair question. None that I've discovered. I think the other girls were sensing what Ranma was sensing about their situation and there had been a year for the animosity to wear thin and for them to realize they had more in common than not. If it wasn't for Ranma getting between them they'd have become the best of friends ages ago, just because they're three of a kind in so many ways. Well… that and Shampoo is apparently a bit pervy and this isn't really Ranma's harem, he just gets to be part of it."

Ryouga blinked, parsed that, then quickly accepted the box of tissues Nabiki had already held out to him, stuffing a wad of tissues into his nose.

"You're going to die of blood loss at this rate, Hibiki," Nabiki noted playfully.

"So what about you?" Ryouga asked. "I thought you weren't that invested? Why are you in this mess?"

"Maybe Ranma just pulled me in that fast," Nabiki gave him a wry smile. "And maybe you should be very careful yourself. Or maybe that's a good reason to be reckless?" She winked, making Ryouga wince and reach for more tissues as he started to overwhelm his current handful. "But… it's more than that. Nerima is a huge, chaotic mess. The fact it's still standing…well, mostly standing… is
no small miracle. Each individual here has such incredible potential. The more I look the more I find, even among those I always pegged as ordinary students." She let a little of her enthusiasm show through. "Something like this… getting all of these people together on the same page? It means something. It's important. I don't know why or how yet, but… I want this to work." She gave him a searching look. "I love Ranma. I would do… I think I really would do anything for him right now. But I'm not doing this for him - not just for him. I'm doing this because this is the ground floor of something amazing."

"That's still… I mean… you're okay with sharing him?" he seemed skeptical, though he had his reaction to the concept under enough control to ask.

"I went into this knowing I pretty much had no hope of getting him all to myself," Nabiki admitted. "I'd already fallen for him and I was ready to give him up - just to try and make things better. Because I knew that if I didn't, I'd never be able to live with myself. Ranma Saotome cursed me with a conscience." She laughed dryly. "Yes. I'm okay with this. I'm even starting to look forward to what it might be. Something in me likes doing things in a way everyone says will fail, just because they assume it must." She looked over at him. "Which brings us to you, I guess."

"Because I'm threatening to screw all that up," Ryouga said quietly, lowering the tissues and sniffling a bit.

"I don't know. Are you?" Nabiki asked, raising an eyebrow.

"No!" Ryouga said fiercely. "I don't…" He took a deep breath. "I've… when Ranma talks about you… you and Akane in particular… It's… her feelings about you are blinding. It's hard to begrudge someone who feels something like that for someone else. It's impossible to hate them."

"Easy to love them though?" Nabiki asked softly.

"I'm not in love with Ranma Saotome," Ryouga said firmly.

"But how you feel has changed radically over the past weekend, just because of the link," Nabiki continued. "And you need the link and Ranma to cure your directional curse. How much more are your feelings going to change?" Her eyes narrowed. "Don't think I haven't noticed you have exclusively referred to Ranma as female since then, 'Ryo'."

Ryouga winced but Nabiki noticed he didn't look guilty. In fact his jaw seemed to tighten. Was that a conscious choice?

Nabiki sighed then steepled her fingers. "I'm not going to push, Ryouga. I'm not going to assume I know where things are going with you and Ranma. I don't want to make this just another version of all the conflict that screwed things up so much before. I also don't want this to crash and burn, because…" He closed her eyes. "... I've got that feeling again. That this is important. Do you understand?"

The tightness of Ryouga's jaw eased, replaced with mild confusion. "Important?"

Nabiki looked down. "You're… tapped into something in Ranma that none of us knew was there. You have a connection with Ranma that… that I wish I had. But instead of being jealous and possessive and destructive about this I'm trying very hard to make this work too. I need to know that you'll meet me halfway. That if… if something happens, that you'll come to me and let me know? That you'll tell me if there is something from us that he… she… needs."

Ryouga was silent a moment. He wrung his hands slowly in his lap, deep in thought. "I didn't intend
for this to happen," He said finally.

"I know," Nabiki smiled gently.

"I don't intend for it to go further. I just… want to get my life back on track and leave Ranma to hers."

"I know," Nabiki replied again, more softly.

Ryouga's jaw muscles twitched. "This isn't like what happened to you."

"It's confusing and frustrating and embarrassing and it's messing with all your safe preconceptions and it involves Ranma, who you used to not like very much." She 'tch'd' and shrugged. "Seems pretty similar to me." She held out her hand. "Truce?"

He looked at her hand skeptically. "We were never at war."

"Allies in trying to get through this nonsense sane then."

He chuckled a bit at that. He hesitated, then took her hand and shook it. "All right. Allies in a hopeless cause then."

"Good." She paused a moment, considering something. "Speaking of tea ceremonies, remind me to show you a little tea shop I found. I think you might find it pleasant…"

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With the fathers having evacuated, Kasumi and most of the other girls split up on various tasks. Now that Kasumi had a much larger group to feed, a trip to the grocery store was in order. Riko was insistent on picking up snacks as well. Sayuri had already departed to fetch Rin (who had reluctantly agreed to return) and both the Ucchan's and Nekohanten had been called to offer invites.

Ranma had changed into her usual chinese shirt and pants and was cleaning up the worst of the rubble from the broken wall when she noticed a mop of dirty blonde hair peek around the edge of the hole, wide green eyes staring.

"Did I do that…?" She asked in a tiny, terrified voice.

Ranma smiled and put down the broom. "Yeah. Pretty cool, huh?"

Rin jumped through the hole and then dropped to her hands and knees, bowing her head. "I'm so sorry I didn't mean to hit it that hard well I did but I didn't know it would do THIS and I'll pay to fix it I swear and PLEASE FORGIVE ME!"

Sayuri poked her head through the wall, smiled and nodded. "I'll… uhh, go around to the door and leave you two to talk," she said.

Ranma nodded then knelt down. "Rin? You can stand up, Rin. You're not in trouble."

Rin hunched a little more. "But I knew it was wrong!"

"Yeah, well, I do that all the time. I also knock the old man through the wall all the time," she patted the top of Rin's head.

Rin looked up and sniffled. "Really?"

Ranma helped the girl to her feet and immediately found herself the victim of a fierce hug.
"H-hey…” Ranma said a little nervously though she patted Rin's head affectionately again. "Careful with that. People get the wrong idea about that sort of thing."

"Not into girls," Rin replied, muffled in Ranma's shirt.

"Yeah, you might have said that, but a lot of people don't see me as a girl," Ranma replied.

Rin sniffed and stepped away, her head still bowed. "I… I know that probably makes you upset, senpai," she said softly. "How I keep saying that you're a girl…"

Ranma looked away thoughtfully and considered that. A year ago? Six months ago? She'd have been howling that she was 100% guy. Even after she started to use her girl form to scam sweets or manipulate Ryouga or otherwise try and play the girl to trick her opponents or get into a place she couldn't normally go, it was a mantra that she repeated in her head constantly, like a vaccine.

Until Jusendo, she thought. Seeing the training grounds flooded like that, all of the springs ruined along with any chance of a cure, just drove home the fact that… she didn't really care. The idea of curing the curse - of not being a girl sometimes - had become abstract and alien.

And then… what about Akane? Akane loved her as a female, even if she had accepted her male side.

And then… Ryouga? She shivered a bit. She still wasn't quite ready to process that, but the fact it was there meant…

Maybe this wasn't something she could win by fighting.

"Nah," Ranma said finally. She turned back to Rin and gave her a small smile. "I think… I'm gonna have to accept that. If I'm gonna choose to live like this." She gestured at herself. "I gotta learn it's okay that for some people I'm a girl with a guy curse. Maybe… even that that's not really so wrong, anyway."

Rin fidgeted. "I… didn't see it as a choice. It's just how senpai is."

Ranma gave her a confused look.

Rin sighed. "It's hard to put it in words. But my Dad said it's never okay to judge people for what they are or where they were born or the things they can't control about themselves. You have to judge them by their choices." She bit her lower lip. "Senpai doesn't have a choice about what she is. That's… that's why your Dad being so mean to you about it made me mad."

Ranma shrugged. "That's just Pops. He's been doing that since before the curse. Part of trying to make sure I grew up into a 'manly man'."

"It's still wrong!" Rin said firmly, her jaw setting with surprising determination. "And if I see him do it again I'm… I'm gonna thunderbolt him again!" She stomped her foot and folded her arms.

"I can take it, Rin," Ranma winked and flexed her arm. "I'm pretty strong."

Rin nodded. "Senpai is the strongest person I know. Not just the martial arts, either! You… you don't give up, ever! That's why you're senpai. That's why… that's why I want to be like you! But… that doesn't make it okay. Senpai wouldn't stand for someone bullying someone else and so I won't either!" She ducked her head nervously. "B-besides… just because senpai is strong doesn't mean senpai can't be hurt. Nobody should choose to hurt someone they care about like he does."
Ranma smirked. "You know what? You feel the need to Thunderbolt Pops, do it. It's not like he hasn't pretty much always got it coming for something."

Rin nodded once brightly then looked hesitant again as she glanced at the house. "Is... is it okay for me to be here? I mean... I know senpai's Dad was a friend of Mr. Tendo and I made a hole in the wall and... and I was kinda mean to Kasumi even though she was nice..."

Ranma patted her on the shoulder. "You're fine, Rin. I think you actually kinda inspired Kasumi. Lemme tell you about what happened after you left." She gently steered the girl back towards the house.

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People started to trickle back for the impromptu party. Rin apologized tearfully to Kasumi when the older girl returned which led to Kasumi hugging her and a lot of reassurance back and forth, including Kasumi thanking Rin for waking her up to a growing problem in the household. Eventually Rin settled happily into helping in the kitchen and bestowing the title of 'Oneechan' on Kasumi, which the eldest Tendo seemed more than happy to accept. Akane and Ukyou arrived at about the same time and Akane excitedly presented some of her early attempts at Okonomiyaki. After proudly proving they were non-toxic by tasting one herself, the others tried them in turn and declared them surprisingly edible if not quite up to Ucchan's standards.

"They're not sellable yet, Akane," Ukyou qualified, trying to take the sting out of the judgement. "But your prep is spot on and you've even got your pour down. It's just a matter of technique now."

Ranma simply stared at the plate like it was some kind of incomprehensible matrix in non-euclidean geometry. "How...?"

"I know I've got a long way to go, but... I'm pretty proud of it, actually," Akane said shyly.

"It's actually pretty good!" Riko said.

"Maybe we should kick out our home ec teacher and get Ukyou to run the class," Sayuri joked, chewing thoughtfully.

"Maybe we should kick out our home ec teacher because she's a headcase," Yuka replied. "All she does in class is talk about how we have to make ourselves 'in tune with the feelings of the food' and then pop valium when she doesn't think we're looking."

"How...?" Ranma repeated, staring at the plate dumbfounded.

"Ranma, you don't have to exaggerate that much," Akane groused.

"You are being kind of dramatic, Ranma," Ryouga said, leaning against the wall a few feet away. He had been staying to the edge of the conversation for the most part.

"I don't need you defending me anymore, Hibiki," Akane growled at him.

Ryouga shot her a smirk. "Wouldn't dream of it, Tendo."

Ranma finally overcame her stunned paralysis and grabbed Ukyou by the shoulders. "Ukyou, don't you understand what you've done!? This is food! You allowed Akane in a kitchen, and she came out with food on the plate! Actual, edible food! You've broken the curse! I could kiss you!"

Ukyou raised an eyebrow and blushed a little. "No one's stopping you, sugar."
Ranma blinked, considered then grabbed both sides of Ukyou's face and pulled her in for a sudden, deep and very passionate kiss.

"Hey!" Akane stomped as Ukyou got rewarded for her hard work.

There was a heavy ~thump~ from Ryoga's direction, like a body hitting the ground.

Ukyou, for her part, was not objecting as she recovered from her surprise. She did seem to wobble a bit as Ranma released her and her eyes were a bit glassy. "Oh…" she managed to say, though language was something that eluded her for the moment.

"Ranma, that's not fair!" Akane continued to complain and turned to glare at the redhead, ready to chew her out thoroughly for giving Ukyou all the credit.

Naturally her defences were completely down when Ranma chose to give her an equally enthusiastic kiss.

"Mmmph!?" Akane initially protested when Ranma cupped her face and claimed her lips. But very quickly her eyes glazed over and then slid shut as she melted into the kiss.

Ranma pulled back then excitingly snatched up the plate with the half-eaten okonomiyaki. "I gotta show this to Kasumi! She's gonna be so proud of you guys!" She gave them each a final peck on the cheek and bounded into the kitchen.

Sayuri and Riko blinked owlishly.

"So…" Sayuri said, still trying to reconcile what she had just seen with what her brain insisted should have happened. "That happened…"

"I guess things really are different now," Riko said. "At least… Ranma's not bashful about it?"

"Ryoga's dead," Yuka called casually from the back of the group, nudging the body of the unconscious Lost Boy with her foot.

Ranma ended up getting conscripted for kitchen duty. Akane and Ukyou seemed very eager to cook as well but there simply wasn't room in the small kitchen and so they were left to move the TV and stand into the dojo, the only place large enough to ensure they had enough room. Nabiki took pity on Ryoga and dragged him off to an out-of-the-way corner of the room and helped clean him up. This put her in a position to answer the door when there was a knock.

"I guess Shampoo has finally figured out this 'door' thing," Nabiki said as she walked to the front door and slid it open. But instead of the bubbly Chinese Amazon, she was greeted by the faces of Hiroshi and Daisuke.

"Hey boss. Sorry for the in-person visit," Hiroshi said, holding up a hand in greeting. "But this seemed like something you'd want to know about ASAP."

"Himura's up to something new?" Nabiki asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Not Himura. Far as we can tell she's not even aware of this one yet," Daisuke said. "This one has to do with Kodachi Kuno."

"We figured she'd qualify for your 'persons of interest' list, even if she isn't technically on it yet," Hiroshi finished.
"Kodachi is up to something?" Nabiki sighed. *Stupid stupid STUPID! I should have expected her to start scheming after this weekend! * "What have you got?"

Daisuke opened his mouth to answer but was interrupted by the ringing of a bicycle bell. From above.

Hiroshi hopped back as Shampoo's bike plowed Daisuke into the ground. Shampoo blinked and peered at the crumpled form under her tires. "Why boy get in way of Shampoo's bike?"

Nabiki sighed. "It would happen less if you kept your bike on the *ground*, Shampoo."

"Why do that? Not be able to use rooftops." Shampoo hopped off her bike and immediately glomped Nabiki. It had become the Amazon's habit to glomp whichever of the fiancees she spotted first. Of course Nabiki was the first to figure out the best way to escape a glomp was simply to return it and she immediately hugged back. It wasn't exactly *unpleasant* after all. Shampoo smelled nice and she had a talent for fitting herself against someone and squirming in just such a way that it made Nabiki wonder if her heterosexuality being fatally compromised wasn't just *Ranma*'s fault.

The look of profound envy on Hiroshi's face was pretty amusing as well.

"Thank you for inviting Shampoo," the Amazon purred. She noticed even after Shampoo relaxed the deathgrip her hugs were getting steadily longer. "Airen inside?"

"Yup. She's helping Kasumi in the kitchen," Nabiki raised an eyebrow. Is she actually… purring?

"Good. Should go. Stupid Mousse follow, should get inside before…"

*I'm coming my Darling Shampoo!*

*Tā mā de,* Shampoo muttered. She looked up at Nabiki, a thoughtful expression crossing her face. "Nabiki forgive Shampoo, yes?"

Nabiki quirked an eyebrow. "Forgive you? For what?"

"This." She slid her arms around Nabiki's neck, leaned up and kissed her full on the mouth.

There was a loud crash as Mousse's graceful, almost swanlike landing was instantly transformed into a graceless, albatross-like faceplant.

Nabiki immediately realized what Shampoo was doing. She could have played along. She could have shot Shampoo out of the water. But she didn't really want to do either of those things. What she *decided* to do was to educate Shampoo that if she was going to do something like this, she had better *mean it*.

She slid her arms around her, one slipping to the small of her back, the other moving to tangle in the Amazon's hair. Shampoo had already subtly started to lean back to break the kiss, likely to admonish Mousse, and was unprepared when Nabiki began kissing her back, tangling her up in her arms. The Amazon made a small, unintentionally cute squeak and her eyes opened in surprise.

And then… she surrendered to the kiss. Her initial squeak was replaced with a small, delectable moan, short and muffled as she seemed to melt in against Nabiki, offering no resistance. If Nabiki had been thinking rationally she would have realized this was the ideal time to break the kiss - to leave Shampoo wanting more - but something had been flipped on for her as well and suddenly power plays and shows of dominance were the furthest things from her mind. Instead, occupying her thoughts were those little moans and sighs and how best to elicit more of them as her hands started to
roam. Shampoo was different from Ranma's female form... her feel... her smell... her taste... soft but with iron beneath. Shampoo could snap her like a twig but was submitting to her willingly and even eagerly. The mix was intoxicating.

If they hadn't needed to pause to breathe it would have gone further, Nabiki was certain. As they parted just enough for air it was enough to break whatever spell had formed and for a little sanity and situational awareness to seep back in. They stared into each other's eyes for a moment, wide-eyed and stunned, almost afraid to move.

"W-wǒ shǔyǔ nǐ..." Shampoo said, almost too softly to hear. Her eyes were still glassy and unfocused, her lips slightly parted in invitation, her chest heaving and causing some very distracting sensations against Nabiki's own.

Nabiki wanted to kiss her again. Nabiki wanted to pick her up, carry her to her room and do things that she hadn't even done with Ranma yet, and that she knew neither of them was ready for. She took a slow, shuddering breath, tried to get her heart-rate under control and to keep her hormones from overwhelming her better judgement. She closed her eyes and took one final, deep breath. "Maybe when we're ready for that, kitten..." she replied softly.

Shampoo shuddered in her arms as her eyes cleared. She blushed a little and her arms loosened but she didn't pull away. Nabiki followed suit. It was so hard to pull back. She was absolutely certain her dreams that night were going to be vivid and entirely focused around the Amazon - possibly for several nights.

"S-stupid Mousse!" Shampoo turned shakily to pick up her original plan. "No should interrupt bonding between..." she trailed off as she noticed that all three of the males, Mousse, Hiroshi and Daisuke were out cold. Though, to be fair, Daisuke was likely that way before the kiss. Mousse and Hiroshi, however, showed plenty of evidence that their condition was caused by blood loss. "... Sisters?"

"We should probably bring them inside," Nabiki sighed. "The neighbors complain when we leave bodies on the front porch."

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After learning of the boys' plight, Kasumi insisted that they stay for dinner as well - an offer none of them were inclined to argue. Hiroshi and Mousse were still a little pale, with tissues jammed in each nostril, and Daisuke had an ice pack to his head.

"... You should have woken me up," Daisuke said finally.

"You were out cold!" Hiroshi protested.

"You should have tried!"

"I kind of had other things occupying my attention!"

Yuka bapped them both across the back of their heads with a paper fan. "Stop being perverts. We're not here for you to leer at."

"No one is leering at you, Yuka," Daisuke muttered, earning another bap.

Mousse and Ryouga were both stoically silent. Mousse was watching Shampoo in quiet misery while Ryouga was trying his best not to look too long at anyone.
Shampoo was uncharacteristically subdued, as was Nabiki. Shampoo had chosen to sit next to Nabiki rather than Ranma and the two of them occasionally snuck glances at each other, until the one would notice the other looking and suddenly the wood grain of the table or the patterns on the ceiling became fascinating.

Ranma was sandwiched between Ukyou and Akane, who were both in tremendously good moods thanks to the okonomiyaki success, and were working in surprising harmony to feed morsels to Ranma with such enthusiasm that Ranma had been forced to simply put down her chopsticks and let them feed her, blushing the whole time.

Sayuri and Riko were in an animated discussion about which of the movies they had brought to play first. Yuka was peripherally part of the conversation but seemed distracted by the need to admonish the boys. Rin was sitting very still, flushed and seemed to be trying very hard not to get caught looking in the direction of a certain Chinese Amazon weaponmaster. She seemed oddly torn, her expression shifting from goofy glee to concern and back as she wrestled with some internal dilemma.

"I notice that Mousse has you somewhat distracted, Rin," Kasumi said softly as she leaned over towards the younger girl.

"Yes! No! Maybe?" Rin mumbled, fidgeting and blushing harder when she realized she'd been caught. When she spoke again the words came tumbling out so fast that Kasumi could barely keep up.

"He's so pretty and I know it's wrong to base an opinion on someone just on looks but I can't help it but he's also nice and he's from the circus and he does martial arts and every time I talk with him my brain falls out so I was just going to look but he seems so sad and I want to hug him but then I'd just die and…"

"Rin… Rin," Kasumi gently shook her by the shoulder. "Breathe. One thought at a time."

Rin whimpered. "I get this way when I get too excited," she sniffed. "He's… I've never met anyone like him. Not even senpai. And he's nice and I wanna talk to him, but…” She squirmed. "I get overloaded and kind of shut down and go on autopilot and I never say the stuff I want to. And… and now he's sad and I want to ask why, but…”

Kasumi patted her hand. "I think I might have something that could help you. I'll give it to you after dinner, all right?"

Rin blinked. "I… really, I wouldn't feel right involving you in my problem Oneechan…"

Kasumi raised an eyebrow. "Didn't you ask me to find out who's job it was to ask the questions when something was wrong?" She squeezed the girl's hand. "Thank you for reminding me. And now that I know the answer, I'm asking for you. Do you want help with this?"

Rin ducked her head and blushed. "Yes, please," she said in a very small voice.

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Sheepishly, Rin followed Kasumi upstairs to the eldest Tendo's room. There was always that awkwardness that came from being in someone else's house and Rin got the impression that that even family members seldom entered Kasumi's room. It had an aura of serenity that didn't seem to be found anywhere else on the grounds.

Kasumi walked over to a small jewelry box on the dresser and opened it. She pulled out a smooth, flattish stone, oval and the perfect size to sit comfortably in the crook of the thumb and forefinger. Rin thought it might be an amethyst from the deep purple hues shown as the light played across its translucent surface. Kasumi walked back to Rin with a smile and placed the stone in her hand.

"This is my Worry Stone," Kasumi said. "When I was little my mother gave this to me as it was
given to her. It originally came from America and she was told that it was very old, from a time even before the European settlers had arrived. Whenever things became too hard to handle, I would hold it in my hand, rub my thumb against it gently, and it would give me the peace to help deal with my problems."

Rin examined the stone curiously. One side was slightly indented, making a place her thumb could rest comfortably, and it was perfectly smooth; weathered that way rather than by artificial grinding. The other side bore an engraved symbol - some sort of bird above a round icon that she assumed to be the sun. "I… I can’t accept this! It’s precious!"

Kasumi took her hand and closed it around the stone. "I don’t need it anymore. My mother told me that this stone is not a keepsake, but is to be passed to someone who needs it when I feel the time is right and I am to tell them they are to pass it along when they no longer need it. Until then it will always find its way back to you." She smiled. "I used to carry it in my pocket when I was in school. I lost it so many times, but somehow it was always there after, so… perhaps there is some truth to that? Keep it and pass it on when you no longer need it. That's what keeps the magic alive."

"R-really?" Rin stared at the stone incredulously.

"That's what she told me, and that's what she said the man who gave it to her told her. And it's always made me feel better so I hope it does the same for you." Kasumi smiled and gave the diminutive blond a reassuring pat. "Take good care of it for me."

Rin touched the stone reverently then nodded. "I-I will, Oneechan!"

Kasumi's smile widened and she ruffled Rin's hair. "I know you will. You always take such good care of others. But remember - that stone is for taking care of you."

Rin nodded and turned to head out of the room, still fondling the stone. She rubbed it between her fingers, deep in thought. It felt nice - smooth but not slippery - and was slightly cool to the touch. She held it in the crook of her finger and thumb and slid her thumb against the smooth indentation. She could feel the carving on the other side, pressed against her fingers.

She didn't notice that she had reached the bottom of the stairs until she ran out of steps and almost stumbled. She looked up and walked around to the main room where everyone was still cleaning up after the meal.

Well, most of them. A few people were missing, either helping to set up the dojo, helping out elsewhere, or perhaps had snuck off to avoid extra work. Rin blushed slightly, realizing she technically qualified for the latter. She'd opened her mouth to offer to help when she looked past the table, through the doors and outside, at the solitary figure sitting on a rock next to the koi pond.

She swallowed mightily. She almost turned away to offer to help with cleanup again, but her fingers curled more tightly around the worry stone. She stared at it for a moment, then slipped it into her pocket and walked slowly out the sliding doors into the yard.

Mousse was sitting in a lotus position on the rock, arms tucked into the sleeves of his robe, glasses pushed up on top of his head, his eyes closed. His face was still, but there was subtle play of emotions across his features, hinting that he was wrestling with something emotionally. Rin crept closer, curiosity overcoming her hesitation and shyness.

Mousse sighed, causing her to freeze. For a moment, she thought it was just an involuntary reaction, but then he spoke.
"You thought you could sneak up on me, didn't you Saotome?" Mousse said, eyes still closed, his posture unchanged. "But your footfalls are distinctive because they're lighter than anyone else's here. I don't know why you've chosen to try a sneak attack, but I guarantee you're about to regret it."

Rin stammered but she couldn't make her lungs work to draw in air to tell him she wasn't Ranma. The best she could manage was a strangled whimper.

"I say again, and for the last time... Ranma Saotome prepare to die!" Mousse suddenly spun, claws popping out of the sleeves of his robes as he coiled to leap at his foe, aquamarine eyes flashing with rage.

Then he paused, sensing something wasn't right. He reached up and flicked his glasses down, then leaned in and peered. "Wait..."

Rin made another strangled whimper.

Mousse's eyes widened. "Oh! Ms. Rin! I forgot you were here! I didn't account for that, I'm sorry!" The claws snapped back into hiding and he stepped back, looking mortified.

Rin trembled, swallowed and clutched the worry stone in her pocket so tightly she was afraid it might snap in two. She hiccuped a few times, trying to draw in the breath for a scream, but by the time she could the moment had passed. She considered it anyway.

Mousse could see the panic in her eyes and he gestured frantically, looking about in panic. "I didn't mean...! I... ummm...!" Desperate, he decided to fall back on his old circus training. He extended his hand and performed one of the first magic tricks he'd learned, making a bouquet of paper flowers appear in his hand with a puff of pink smoke.

Rin blinked owlishly at the bouquet then at him. Then, mercifully, she giggled.

Mousse smiled in relief, shoulders sagging.

Rin clutched her worry stone and rubbed her thumb against it, feeling the tension bleed away. It really did work. "That's an amazing trick! Did you learn that in the circus?" She accepted the bouquet and blushed as she noticed the flowers were all quite intricately made.

Mousse had been saving that bouquet for Shampoo but he considered it a fair penalty for his hasty actions. He reminded himself that he needed to be more careful around so many non martial artists. "Yes. I developed my art from the things I learned in the circus. Sleight-of-hand, blindfolded knife throwing, strong man lifting, cotton candy making..."

"Cotton candy making...?"

"You would be astonished how many applications I've found for that," he smiled again. He wasn't usually much of one for smiling but this girl was genuinely pleasant. Not many people took an interest in him or his skills unless it was to make fun of them. He was reminded of some of the happier days with the circus when people used to be enthralled by his tricks. "Is there something I can help you with?"

Rin blushed. She hugged the bouquet a little tighter, tucking her head and hiding her face behind it. "I... I... You just... You..." She swallowed, gripped her worry stone tighter and blurted it out. "YoulookedsadandIwantedtohelp!"

Mousse blinked. "Oh." In truth, he had been pondering what he had always been pondering; the Shampoo Problem. He typically spent many hours in quiet contemplation of that, trying to come up
with the correct thing to say or do. It rarely mattered since as soon as he was in her presence he got so flustered that he typically regressed to jabbering idiocy or irrational rage towards his perceived rivals. He hadn't realized his emotions had been so plainly visible, though.

Of course today was worse than usual, Mousse thought glumly. "It's… it's nothing new. I'm sure anyone could tell you about it. Thank you for your concern," he bowed slightly then returned to his rock and settled back down to close his eyes.

The Ranma problem was easy. Ranma was loud, brash, arrogant and an Outsider. Mousse had always operated assuming that Shampoo's devotion to him was a mix of devotion to the laws of their people and some kind of odd infatuation with the boy because he was so different from anyone else in the village. Mousse just needed to show Shampoo that Ranma was unworthy of her. What better way than for him, someone Shampoo had no respect for, to defeat him? No law was absolute and if Shampoo decided that Ranma was truly unworthy, Cologne could undoubtedly find a way to get her out of the Kiss of Marriage.

Not that Mousse had much love for Amazon laws or traditions. They were the very same things that had threatened to crush him his entire life. But maybe… maybe she'd understand. Maybe if she was forced to see someone else in a way other than what the law dictated she could start to do the same for him.

But now?

Bonding between Sisters was nothing new to the Amazons. It forged strong connections between warriors and blunted the natural rivalries between them. It provided a more positive outlet for the natural passions and drives of Joketsuzoku women that the more passive males typically couldn't. It was a deeply ingrained part of their society and not one any male would ever deign to interfere in, even one so rebellious as Mousse.

But… to take an Outsider as a Sister? Not just to invite them into the tribe, but… to seek those kinds of bonds with them? And to do so with one who wasn't even a warrior, like Nabiki Tendo?

He had been wrong. Shampoo was already beyond what the laws dictated. If she had chosen Nabiki… and from the rather devastating feeling the two had shown in that kiss he had no reason to doubt that… Then Shampoo was already beyond the laws.

If Shampoo was following the dictates of her heart and not the laws, if she would do something so far outside of what their culture normally accepted, if she had formed such strong bonds with these Outsiders and still showed him nothing but contempt… the thought was unbearable!

He realized then that Rin Ito was still there. He glanced too see her still looking uncertain. Was he really so intimidating to Outsiders who weren't martial artists? "Is… something wrong?"

Rin closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "Could… could I hear it from you?" Within the confines of her pocket she was rubbing the worry stone frantically.

"Hear what?" He cocked his head.

"I want to hear your story from you!"

Moussed blinked, momentarily unsure how to respond.

"I… I could hear your story from s-someone else but then… then it wouldn't be y-your story." She squirmed a bit, unable to look directly at him. Her agitation and nervousness only increased as the moments passed.
Finally she lost her nerve. "I-I... I'll just go and stop disturbing you..." Red in the face she turned to bolt for the relative safety of the house.

"All right," Mousse said.

"Hiiri!?" Rin squeaked as she turned back stiffly.

Mouse smiled and pushed his glasses back up on his nose. After a moment's fiddling, he gave up and just pushed the uncomfortable things back up onto his forehead. He didn't need to be able to see for this anyway. "I'm not much of a storyteller and I fear that my story isn't all that interesting, but I'll tell you, if you really want to know."

Rin swallowed. She slowly walked back over to the edge of the pond, found a stone to sit on and clutched the bouquet in her lap.

"My story starts in China, in the village of the Joketsuzoku, or what most here call 'Chinese Amazons'. In my village, unlike the rest of China or even Japan, women are dominant and men are subservient. The elders say this is just proof of how backwards the rest of the world is. I don't particularly see the difference; the strong rule the weak. It's just that in our village the women are the strong ones. But even among the men of our village I was considered pathetic. My eyesight made me clumsy, slow and made it hard to learn things. None of the usual herbal remedies or traditional medicines worked so my parents had to rely on Outsider medicine to allow me to see." He tapped his glasses. "It worked, but... it marked me. I was either the clumsy boy who squinted and mistook people or the boy who wore Outsider contrivances on his face. Neither made me very popular."

"I grew up with Shampoo, and... she was everything I admired. Strong... confident... skillful. I desperately wanted her to accept me. I think... she was the tribe to me. Of course... she wanted nothing to do with me. I was pathetic." He slumped a little at the memory. "After a time I couldn't deal with it anymore and ran away from home. I couldn't imagine living my life with no hope of ever being anything more to Shampoo... or anyone else. So I ran... not to get away, but to find something that would make me worthwhile and then to return."

"I had started training to fight even though it's forbidden for Joketsuzoku men. When they demanded that I stop, I fled. I eventually fell in with a travelling circus." He smiled a bit. "The ringmaster was Korean, named Byungchul, and had gathered performers from all over Asia and even beyond. Some were misfits like me, some were born into performing and others were just travellers who were on the same road. At first I thought I'd stay with them a short while to earn my way somewhere I could train. But I quickly realized there was more I could learn from them than I could from any martial arts master."

"It was... hard at first. Circus folk do not trust outsiders easily. I had to prove that I was willing to work and was dedicated to my tasks. But... they treated me fairly and when they did accept me, I was accepted as family. That was... that was new for me. My own parents had always been kind... my mother still writes me and they supported me even when I chose to go against tradition. But to have a whole community behind me felt... It felt nice. Several of their star performers took me under their wings, including a magician from Britain who taught me the art of magic, concealment, manipulation and sleight-of-hand, and a blind knife thrower from Vietnam who taught me that marksmanship is not something that comes from good eyesight. I felt... accepted. But..." He shook his head. "I never really belonged, though not from lack of trying on their parts. So... when I heard that Shampoo was in Japan, once our tour brought us here, I left to seek her out."

He laughed bitterly. "I thought... I had this fantasy of impressing her. That I would show up, cool, confident and skillful. I would show her how much I had grown since we were children - show her that I was worthwhile." He shook his head. "But nothing had changed. She had found someone to
lavish her attentions on. And when I challenged him to prove that I was better in a way I thought she might at least respect... she helped him cheat to win. A narcissistic Outsider with no real grasp of honor or fair play and who spent more time in dresses than Shampoo did was so much greater in her eyes than me that she'd set aside her own honor for him."

"I couldn't bring myself to give up, though. I... she still had a power over me that overrode all reason. For the last year I've debased myself, grovelled, begged... for any scrap of attention. There was always a glimmer there, a spark of hope that kept me trying. I thought... I thought I could prove myself to her. On Togenkyo Island I got my wish. I fought a powerful foe for her and she sided with me against him - and she was afraid for me. When I collapsed afterwards she tended to my wounds tenderly, but..." he squeezed his eyes shut. "All she said, over and over, was, 'Mousse, you no need to'. At first I didn't understand."

"It wasn't until I actually had the chance to get what I wanted. Shampoo had been afflicted by something that would make her love and obey the first thing she saw. Ranma himself encouraged me to take the opportunity. And... I realized... she would never love me like I hoped she someday might - that if the choice was to have her by enslaving her heart or seeing her free in the arms of another... there was no choice. Instead I gave her a mirror so the one she would love and obey would be herself."

"I don't know why I stayed after that. Despite my epiphany I think I still hoped that... that my gesture would move her - still sought to be rewarded for merely refraining from doing the wrong thing, I suppose." He shook his head at his own foolishness. "Even now she has such power over me. I would do anything for her... anything for even the smallest praise or acknowledgement - even scorn... as long as I knew that she saw me - that she acknowledged I was here. But... it's become increasingly clear to me I have no place in her life. She has filled it with others and left no room for me."

He blinked away a bit of haze in his eyes and flipped his glasses back down to look at the odd girl. "Is that what you wanted?"

She swallowed. Her eyes were wide, attentive, and the wavering in her pose had ceased. She seemed to have forgotten whatever trepidation had plagued her.

"Why do you stay, then?" she asked finally. "Isn't it hard working with her every day?"

"It's torment," he said simply. "I am... just left with nothing else to do. Nowhere else to go. No one else to be. So I suppose I will simply continue to play the buffoon in her life until she no longer tolerates me."

"Why not go back home to your parents?" she asked. "Or to the circus where you were at least accepted?"

"I've considered both. I have broken the laws of the Joketsuzoku, however. Even if I was accepted back I would be a pariah and my parents would be pariahs for harboring me. I have no place there. And as for the circus? I don't even know where to begin looking for them. They travel the world; it could be decades before they visit Japan again. Even then... would I be any less the buffoon if I am doing it for the amusement of others rather than their annoyance?"

"You'd be loved. Accepted," Rin said.

"That's not enough," Mousse shook his head. He'd come to a realization - a final understanding of what had been holding him in this place. He stood slowly.
"Then what is?" Rin asked, standing with him.

"Respect," Mousse said. "If I can't have Shampoo's love... I want to earn that, at least. And I can't do that by continuing to act the buffoon." He turned to her. "Thank you, Rin Ito. You've helped me understand something." He glanced past Rin, through the doors and into the house, where Shampoo sat clinging to Ranma's arm, uncaring about her form or the reactions of others. He felt an ache in his heart - an old longing. He knew he needed to leave now, before it led him to indulge in his old ways. "I should go."

"Wait..." Rin said. Shyly, she held out the bouquet of paper flowers to him. "You made this for her, right? These flowers are... are beautiful and they were meant to mean much more than just a simple trick. S-so... you should take them back so you can give them to the person they're m-meant for."

He studied her face for a moment. He thought he saw something familiar in her eyes but couldn't place it. He realized she was older than he had initially thought from her small frame. Has Saotome cursed this one as well? He felt a pang of sympathy and another of jealousy. You are ever unworthy, Ranma Saotome. "Keep them," he said finally. "I've made dozens like them and they've all ended up in the trash or ground under her heel. Better they should be in the hands of someone who can at least appreciate them." He turned and leapt up onto the compound wall then over it and into the night.

"I don't wanna watch a chick flick!"

They were all gathered in the dojo proper. Blankets, pillows and futons had been gathered and piled up into a kind of impromptu mound to lounge on in front of the TV. Popcorn had been made and everyone was discussing which movie to watch. Since it was a school night Kasumi had decreed only one before bed.

Akane narrowed her eyes in annoyance at Ranma's protests. "Every time we let you pick it's always a martial arts flick, Ranma."

"Well, duh!" Ranma sniffed. "Those're the only things worth watching!"

"Ranma, you live a kung fu movie. Don't you want to maybe watch something else as a way to escape?" Yuka said, scowling.

"Like what?" Ranma asked, quirking an eyebrow skeptically.

Nabiki smiled and sidled up to her, slipped her arm through the redhead's and leaned against her. "Maybe something about two lovers who meet on a beach? They both live crazy lives and get away for a weekend of normalcy. They start out pretending to be a couple as a cover but at the end they wind up falling for each other for real?"

Ranma completely missed the reference. "Nah, too far fetched," she said after a moment of consideration.

Nabiki huffed and released her arm.

"I could go for a good sci fi flick, actually," Daisuke said.

"Or a comedy," Hiroshi added.

"Don't worry, I think I've got you all covered," Riko said with a grin as she pulled out a DVD case.
Everyone leaned in to peer at the title.

"'My Girlfriend is a Cyborg'?” Ranma read off the title and gave Riko a skeptical look.

Yuka plucked the case from Riko's grasp. "Guy falls in love with a cyborg girl from the future. Yeah, there's no way this could possibly be good."

Daisuke shrugged. "I'm willing to give it a shot. Heckling a bad movie is almost as good as watching a good one."

Yuka smirked. "Oh, I can't wait to see what an amateur like you comes up with for heckling. All right, I'm in." She handed the case back to Riko.

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Two hours later Yuka and Daisuke were huddled together around a thoughtfully provided box of tissues, bawling their eyes out. In other circumstances they might have gotten mocked but there was a distinct lack of dry eyes all around.

"That was… that was actually quite good," Kasumi dabbed at her eyes.

Most of the group had gravitated together as the story progressed. Watching the first tragedy that crippled the protagonist, that led him to spend his whole life recreating the girl he had met but once so he could send the android back to try and prevent his own tragedy - but he only managed to set off a cascade of time loops that conspired to keep them apart.

"But… it's sad," Rin said. "He found the original girl in the end, but… what about the android? She finally understood his feelings and could love him back but she was never able to be with him and only woke up again in time to see him die."

"And what about all the other versions of Jiro?" Ranma asked. "Do they… just stop existing?"

"It's all alternate timelines," Hiroshi said. "You can't change your own past. Every time you go back you just create an alternate timeline. For every version of your story that had a happy ending there are three where things ended badly. And sometimes for one person to have a happy ending, someone else has to make sacrifices."

"Everybody deserves a happy ending," Rin said softly, cradling the bouquet of paper flowers in her lap.

"Sometimes you gotta earn it, I guess," Sayuri said. "And it's not like you get a 'Happily Ever After'. Life is a whole string of endings, happy and otherwise. Not all of them are going to be happy."

Most of them were silent at that, lost in thought.

"Well, I should get this mess cleared away," Kasumi said, finally breaking the reverie. "You should all get your bedrolls set up. You have school tomorrow after all." She stood and started collecting half-empty bowls of popcorn and other debris from the party.

"Here… uhh… let me help, Kasumi," Ranma said, getting up quickly.

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Helping Kasumi clean up had been a convenient excuse. The truth was that Ranma felt the need to be a guy again, if only for a bit, so he could ponder things as himself. And even though there were
other guys present he felt oddly awkward about being around them as a guy himself.

_Sayuri, Yuka, Riko and Rin… they're my girl-side's friends, he thought. And then there's Ryoga… I still haven't really figured that out with him. Is that even possible? To have different relationships depending on which form I'm in? Or am I being an idiot?_

He had hopped up on the roof of the dojo and settled back for a little stargazing before bed. The stars in the city were weak; light pollution washed out the night sky to inky blackness with but a few bright pinpricks. It was nothing compared to the awe-inspiring canvases that he had seen while travelling the wilds, far away from the lights of civilization. But it was still soothing to look up when the sky was clear.

Something about the movie was sticking with him. It was supposed to be a happy ending but the characters had gone through so many bad endings to get there. It had taken so much just for two people to be happy and even then it had almost not happened at all.

"I thought you might be up here."

Ranma sat up a little and looked to see Nabiki's head poking over the edge of the roof. He got up, walked over and offered her a hand up.

"I've learned to keep a ladder handy if I wanted to talk to you," Nabiki winked. As he pulled her up onto the roof, she revealed she was carrying a blanket with her.

"Cold?" He asked.

"You may be okay with lying on filthy roof tiles, but not all of us were raised in the woods," she said with a smile. "And… while it is getting colder, keeping me warm is your job."

He blushed a bit as she spread out the blanket. He lay down on it next to her and she quickly scooted over to rest her head on his shoulder. He curled his arm around her shoulders and relaxed again. "So, what made you think I'd be up here?"

"You never offer to help clean up," Nabiki said, poking him in the chest. "I figured you needed some alone time."

"And yet you're up here," Ranma said. He immediately regretted it, but it was hard to get out of his old blunt habits.

With Akane that would have triggered a fight but Nabiki just smiled, accustomed to navigating his social gaffes. "Yes, well, I need some reassurance and love from my boyfriend."

Ranma shifted his hand, threading his fingers lightly through her hair. It had been a while since he had seen her by starlight and it was bringing back memories. "Oh? What's on your mind?"

She huddled a little closer, closed her eyes and enjoyed the casual attention of his fingers. "Just… thinking about this crazy thing we're trying to do."

"You too?"

She smiled a bit. "Nice to know i'm not alone." She took a deep breath. "Promise not to get mad?"

"Uhhh… sure? About what?"

"I kissed Shampoo."
Ranma laughed. "I heard about that. Daisuke wouldn't shut up about it! Shampoo was just trying to get Mousse to lay off."

Nabiki was quiet a moment. "That's why she did it. But... I don't think what she intended was what happened." She shivered against him slightly. "It... I don't know, it woke something up in me and now I don't know what to do with it."

Ranma continued to run his fingers through her hair. He had started to learn when it was best for him to just be quiet and let her talk.

"I... I knew stuff like this was going to happen in this crazy mess. Shampoo and Ukyou have already been on again off again and then there's that mess between you, Ryouga and Akane... I knew that if we were all together and replacing our old ways of competing for your attention and with each other in general that things were going to change between us all. I've been focused on trying to keep things from getting too conflicted or making sure that a certain lavender-haired hedonist didn't push things too far too fast for Akane to be comfortable with, but..."

"You forgot to add yourself in to your figuring again, didn't you?" Ranma asked softly.

Nabiki sighed. "I'm... not used to having my own feelings complicate my plans." She rolled onto her side and curled against him. "Shampoo even called me on it. I'm not used to making sense of my own mess. I didn't used to have a mess! I stuck to money and just figuring everyone else out got me that much. Now... Now..." she huffed.

"You're confused?" Ranma suggested helpfully.

"Yeah," Nabiki said softly. "I wasn't into girls before this. I don't think? Ugh, I know attraction isn't a binary thing but... this... this isn't physical. Well, it is, but..." She buried her face in his shoulder. "Arrrgh!"

"Yeah, you're confused," Ranma chuckled softly.

"Oh, I bet you're loving this!" Nabiki growled, slightly muffled.

He hugged her a little tighter, trying to comfort her. "It's kinda reassuring, yeah. It's nice to know I'm not the only one having trouble with lines getting blurry."

"You've got an excuse. A few actually," Nabiki muttered. "Trying to cram sixteen years of social development into one, having to deal with your actual preferences changing with the temperature of the water and now you're an empath."

"Just with Ryouga," Ranma said.

"Yes, well, Ryouga has about six people's worth of issues, so..." she trailed off. "I'm actually kinda jealous."

"You wanna read people's emotions?" Ranma asked.

She raised her head, her big brown eyes reflecting starlight. It was so easy for him to lose himself in them at times like this.

"No. Just yours," she replied.

"Maybe I'll figure out how it works before all of this is done," Ranma said. He thought back to the movie and the android's struggle to comprehend Jiro's feelings and Jiro's frustration. "You can
always ask me."

She smiled a little. "Maybe I just like the idea of being able to listen." She rested her chin on his chest and continued to gaze at him. "I like how your mind works."

"How my mind works?" Ranma smirked. "I woulda figured you'd be the first to say it doesn't work."

"You were just lacking a framework to process things. You're not dumb. You can't be and be the martial artist you are." She cocked her head slightly. "I like… that look you get in your eye when something clicks - when you figure out some crazy way to approach a problem that no one else would think of. I think that's what got me."

"You fell in love with me for my brain?" Ranma was incredulous.

"Yes. Your brilliant, feral, uneducated brain," she reached out and ruffled his hair. Her hand fell back to indulge in her habit of playing with his pigtail. "Everyone has a different reason why they fell for you. That's mine."

Ranma considered that. He thought about his own 'moment'. There wasn't any one thunderbolt he could think of for any of them - it was a series of little things that added up. But they all tended to have some quality - each of them was different, and all of them something he lacked himself.

"You're the brilliant one," He said softly. "All of the problems I solve… They're simple. Straightforward. But the stuff you tackle… I wasn't lying when I said you were a grandmaster of your Art. You take all of these threads, and you… you weave them. It's all a chaotic mess to me then you make somethin' out of it. But… at the same time… you're good at making me feel needed, an' important. I wanna follow where you lead just 'cuz I wanna see where you go with it." He closed his eyes a moment as he reached a decision. "You remember why you call me your boyfriend and not your fiance?"

"Because it was what we decided - on our own. Not because of the engagement," Nabiki said softly.

"H-how do people…" he swallowed, suddenly nervous. "How do people… normal people… ask someone to marry them? Not… not on TV or nuthin'… I mean… I mean I know there's supposed to be a ring…"

Nabiki reached out, took his hand and wove her fingers with his. She was smiling and her eyes were shining… crying? Maybe. Hard to tell. "Forget the ring. Just ask."

Ranma nodded. "I know… it's supposed to be a special moment. And… I couldn't seem to find one. Then… there's what Sayuri said tonight, about there being no such thing as a Happy Ending, just happy endings… and how you gotta work for 'em. And I realized I gotta make the moment." He closed his eyes. "I'm… a mess. I know I am and I'm gonna do stuff wrong and you get that and you help me fix it, which is why… I know we're still young and we wanted to figure it out first but I don't think I can do this without you and there's Amazon law and the engagements but… forget that." He opened his eyes. "Nabiki Tendo, would you marry me?"

Nabiki squeezed his hand. She was beaming and he could see the reflection of starlight in the tears running down her cheeks and the stars themselves reflected in her eyes and he had never in his life been so absolutely sure he had made the right decision.

She nodded, sniffed and threw her arms around his neck hugging him. "Yes… Yes I will, Ranma Saotome." She pulled back a bit and let out a little laugh that was half a sob, but her smile was wider and brighter than he had ever seen. "And for the record… that was perfect." She leaned in and kissed
him, hard enough to drive away the chill of the night air and all of the remaining doubts he had.

For the record, the 'Jiro' from 'My Girlfriend is a Cybro' is of no relation to Jiro from Clara's Leaf.

Yes, 'My Girlfriend is a Cyborg' is a real movie.

Since I gave a warning about RanxRyo last time, I figured it's entirely fair I give a similar warning here. If NabikixShampoo is a deal breaker for you, stop reading here. We're going there. I know that's a little moot now with the Harem already established, but fair warning regardless.

I am having more fun with a Ryouga/Akane rivalry than I thought. I was trying to decide how Akane would continue to develop her skills. I think this should cover it.
Roses By Any Other Name

The next morning was an interesting one.

Ranma had returned to female form and returned to the dojo with Nabiki, at which point the sleeping arrangements for the fiancées had evolved into what could best be described as a 'dogpile' with Ranma at the bottom. Somehow they had managed to sleep that way, though Ranma was complaining of being stiff and there was some awkwardness in the morning sorting out who's limbs belonged to whom.

Ryouga had gotten up early to train a little, making use of the rope-bound wooden posts set up for strike practice. Though he naturally couldn't hit them very hard by his standards, he made good use of them for speed exercises. Rin had gotten up to watch the display of martial arts, rapt, while Yuka and Riko had gotten up to watch, equally rapt, as Ryouga had elected to practice without a shirt.

Kasumi was in her element, shuttling about to get breakfast ready and to prepare bentos for the whole gang. Some had tried to insist she didn't need to but Kasumi seemed determined to give those in her charge the full treatment. Shampoo and Ukyou joined her efforts in the kitchen while the rest quickly busied themselves cleaning up, the boundless generosity of the eldest Tendo motivating them to contribute however they could. By the time breakfast was ready the entire compound had been thoroughly cleaned and tended by the small army.

"It seems you've deprived me of my day's chores," Kasumi noted wryly as she finished her miso soup. "I don't think the dojo has been this clean in years."

"Just don't tell my parents?" Hiroshi said sheepishly. "If they knew I cleaned this hard they'd expect me to keep my room at home like this."

"Ditto, please Ms. Tendo," Rin added quietly, raising her hand.

Sheepishly, most of the rest of the table raised their hands in agreement.

"Ranma, put down your hand," Akane admonished the redhead.

They finished up and headed out with time to spare, able to enjoy the walk. The conversation strayed from the movie to vague plans to repeat the gathering, especially as there was a test coming up that many of them wanted to study for.

_Imagine that_, Nabiki thought as they walked. _The Tendo Dojo full of STUDENTS. Too bad none of them are paying._ She considered the idea of setting up an impromptu study hall at the dojo but she didn't feel right charging. Besides…

She turned and walked backwards ahead of the group for a bit, just taking the mass of them in view. This felt like _something_. It was such a mixed, eclectic group and yet… it felt like something was gelling here. She felt an odd feeling of responsibility to the group.

_I wonder if any of us would even know each other without all of this chaos?_ She sighed and visualized her corkboard. The strings crisscrossing the group were getting thick and it was forming a kind of knot in her model of The Madness.

A bulwark, to be sure, but also a much larger target. That would be something she would have to account for.
At least some of the chaos is actually calming, she thought. The Hentai Horde is broken. Nodoka is in a place where we can negotiate things and Kasumi is on board to keep Dad and Mr. Saotome in line. There are some wobbles but, if I can keep this up, we might just be able to get our big problems off the board. And, at least for now, there's nothing looming. So maybe we can have a quiet day for once? She turned and resumed walking to the gates, rounding them before the rest of the group.

A half-remembered bit of training from when she was a kid prompted her to duck out of the way as something bright purple over her head. It struck the stonework of the gates, chipping away a piece before it flicked back.

That was followed by a very, very familiar manic laugh.

Nabiki stumbled back, off-balance, and would have fallen but strong arms caught her from behind. Ranma had caught her.

Before them stood Kodachi Kuno, clad in her usual St. Hebereke's school uniform and twirling her gymnastics ribbon in one hand, creating a spiral of vibrant purple that experience told Nabiki was far more dangerous than it appeared.

"What are you doing here, Kodachi?" Akane demanded, coming up next to her. Shampoo and Ukyou flanked them, dropping into ready stances.

"Now, now, is that any way to treat a classmate, Akane Tendo?" Kodachi asked with a smirk.

"Oh crap…" Daisuke said from the back of the group. "I knew I forgot something…"

Nabiki winced. The important thing they were coming over to tell us. It slipped my mind after…

She cursed herself for allowing her personal emotional state to affect her professionalism. She stood up and shot Ranma a grateful nod as the redhead came to stand beside her protectively.

"Don't tell me you transferred? Why would you want to come to Furinkan?" Ukyou asked skeptically.

"Father has always had a long-standing invitation for me to change schools but we felt it best for me to stay where I was due to the ongoing… sibling rivalry between myself and my dear, dear brother. However, the poor dear has been laid up with terrible injuries from an assault by some uncultured brute…" she glared at Akane. "And, since my engagement to my Darling Ranma has been confirmed, I saw this as an ideal time to join him here, so that we might more easily plan the wedding particulars between classes." She tittered, covering her mouth daintily and blushing.

"So this planning includes taking my head off?" Nabiki asked archly.

"I was merely practising while I awaited my future husband, Nabiki Tendo. One could hardly blame me if one of my misguided rivals happened to wander into the path of my ribbon," she smirked.

"I wonder if Ranma's mother would see it the same way?" Nabiki asked, crossing her arms.

Kodachi's eyes narrowed. "I hardly see the need to involve her in what was obviously a misunderstanding." She flicked her ribbon, coiling it with a flick of her wrist and tucking it away as she walked up to Nabiki. "Simply be more cautious where you walk, dear." She smiled and reached up to flick an invisible mote of dust from Nabiki's shoulder. Her eyes darted down to Ranma. "And as for you… I have heard from my brother that you are in fact my dear Ranma's sibling. Odd that you were not present at the omiai, nor were you mentioned by Mother Saotome."

Ranma narrowed her eyes.
"Nodoka Saotome doesn't acknowledge she exists," Nabiki said. "Hence Genma trying to marry her off quickly to the Hibiki family to get her out of sight."

Kodachi raised an eyebrow. "She's illegitimate?"

Ranma shot Nabiki a horrified look.

Nabiki merely smiled. "Genma was away on training journeys a lot. He didn't even bother to give her a different name."

Kodachi's stance changed. She gave the redhead a searching look then her expression almost softened. "Mothers… can be cruel to those they perceive as competition for their favored offspring, can they not?" She took a breath, and glanced at Ryous. "Then the rumours of an engagement I heard are true as well. A homeless wanderer certainly is an… appropriate choice for one of your social standing. But it seems there is little reason for us to be antagonistic… outside of gymnastics at least. She smirked. "Provided, of course, your sisterly affection for my darling Ranma is not taken to inappropriate extremes and you are wise enough to stay out of my way."

Her gaze returned to Nabiki and her expression darkened. "You, however Nabiki Tendo… I am familiar with your tricks. You have drunk deeply from the coffers of the Kuno family for quite some time and, while your schemes may have worked on my brother, you will find I am far more canny."

"Even if i were to say that the Ranma Summer picture sets were ready?" Nabiki asked, settling into her typical Ice Queen confidence.

"Ooooh they're ready?!!" Kodachi's air of menace dropped immediately and she squealed in excitement. After a second she caught herself, glanced around and realized she was putting on a scene in front of the ever-growing crowd of Furinkan students. She cleared her throat. "~Ahem~… yes, well… such materials should not be left for public consumption. It would only be right for Ranma Darling's future wife to have such things. P-perhaps we can negotiate for their repatriation another time?" She narrowed her eyes. "But don't think that this will purchase you any mercy from me. I know not what your scheme is in participating in the omiai but Ranma is mine. Best seek your profit elsewhere lest you have need of it to cover your medical bills. Now… where is my Darling Husband? Before I am forced to do something Mother Saotome would frown upon, if you please."

Nabiki quirked an eyebrow. "Haven't you heard? Your father, Principal Kuno, banned the male Ranma from appearing on campus."

"What!?" Kodachi gaped, aghast. "But… but…"

"His sister here has been attending in his stead, taking classes for him to make sure he doesn't fall behind," Nabiki pressed on with her story. "The Principal even had the registration switched to female, since Ranma's parents didn't bother to register them separately. Go ahead and ask him if you don't believe me."

Kodachi's eyebrow twitched. It was obvious she could easily envision her father doing something so petty. "Y-you can be assured I will verify the accuracy of this claim. And…" she glanced at Ranma again, "If it is true you are attending in Ranma's stead to fulfill his scholastic obligations for him… perhaps I have misjudged you." She glared at Nabiki. "But you, however, I will watch closely." She turned and walked away her trademark laugh echoing as the crowd parted for her.

"Ranma Summer picture set!?" Ranma growled as soon as Kodachi was out of earshot.

Nabiki held up a hand. "It doesn't actually exist. Not that there wasn't absurd demand for it."
Ranma crossed her arms. “I promise! And Hana has no negatives to make one, so you're safe.”

Ranma scowled skeptically for a moment then sighed. ”All right.” She rubbed her forehead. ”So… I'm now the illegitimate daughter of Genma Saotome, who my own mother doesn't acknowledge exists because, apparently, she's not my mother… in addition to being the sister of male Ranma, raised as a boy, and being engaged to Ryouga… am I missing anything in the cover story?"

"And you're attending in male Ranma's stead," Ukyou said, concerned. "This is getting kinda unwieldy."

"Kodachi will believe what she chooses to believe, regardless," Nabiki said. "It's not like we're liable to get much contact between her, that neurologist you're working with, or Ryouga's mother. This way it at least gets her off our backs a little."

"Let's just get to class," Akane said. "The day hasn't even started yet and already I can't wait for it to be over."

Nodoka flipped through the pages of Kodachi's rirekisho. She rubbed her eyes and at the dark circles that had formed from lack of sleep. She had stayed up late pouring over the documents and what sleep she had gotten was fitful.

On the surface the problem was so simple. If all of the girls were equally suitable then the obvious choice was Akane. But… were they? The rirekisho provided by Akane, Nabiki, Ukyou and Shampoo had almost undoubtedly been crafted by Nabiki herself, drawing on assistance from the three girls to ensure that each was airtight and that each presented themselves to the ideal that Nodoka was seeking. It was salesmanship, pure and simple. The only one without the mark of it was Kodachi which then suggested that she was the correct choice, if she was so appealing on her own.

But then if she were to accept Nabiki's interpretation of the Art… which was compelling for the sheer ambitiousness and scope of it… then Nabiki would be the clear winner for such skillful use of this new application of the Art, turning her opponents into advantages. Add to that her son apparently favored the middle Tendo now.

No, I mustn't let the fickle whims of my son's young heart or my own prejudices decide this matter, she resolved. This must be decided for the one who will see to his future in developing the Art and rebuilding the Saotome family prestige and who will give him an heir most quickly.

She smiled. From how they looked at him, it was quite obvious that all the girls all adored her son. For a moment she thought about how nice it would be to simply let nature take its course. It felt cruel to cut short his chance to sow his wild oats.

No... The longer this matter continues, the greater the chance something else will arise to cause problems. Ranma MUST be ushered on to the next stage of his journey, now, while things are favorable. She sighed and flipped back to the index of the massive leather tome.

"No-chan, are you still obsessing over that silly book?" Genma asked, walking into the room and settling down at the table. He crossed his arms and closed his eyes, as he often did to seem more knowledgeable when lecturing. "You're merely tormenting yourself. You know the only correct choice in this matter is Akane."
Nodoka sighed. "No, that is your choice, Genma dear. I know how important uniting the schools is to you, but the goal is the restoration of the Saotome family and to ensure Ranma's success in becoming a man among men. We may have to wait to unite the schools with our grandchildren."

"Unacceptable!" Genma huffed. "Uniting the schools of Anything Goes Martial Arts is…"

"What is unacceptable is how you mishandled raising Ranma!" Nodoka said coldly, freezing him mid-sentence. She picked up the cloth-wrapped bundle she carried with her nearly everywhere she went and laid it on the table, methodically unwrapping the katana from the blanket.

This terrified him, she knew. For all his faults and for all the dishonorable things he had done, she knew that this was one point of honor he would uphold. It had been the thrust of his entire life, after all; to restore the Saotome family to greatness and a place of honor. Even when he realized that the compromises it demanded of him would leave his own honor so tattered that he could never be the one to see it to completion.

"If the Tendo arrangement was so vitally important, you should not have diluted it so ruthlessly, my husband," Nodoka chided him as she drew the katana, taking out a soft cloth to carefully polish the blade. Genma sat there, unmoving, shaking slightly with fear.

"Nor should you have brought Ranma back from China blighted as you did."

"I had no control over that," He said tightly.

"So you've told me..." She said, nonchalantly holding up the blade, turning it so her reflection was visible in the polished metal. "But the people who lived there had much greater knowledge of how the waters of that place work. You could have remained to find a solution."

"You know why I couldn't do that!"

She paused in her polishing and turned the blade slightly so that she could see his face and glared at it, knowing he could see her as well. "Again, you explained why you couldn't, but I don't see it. Instead, you elected to return to Japan with your job only half done. And you chose not to tell me, letting me think something awful had befallen you and my son!"

"Ranma is more than manly enough, even with the curse," Genma muttered. "You said so yourself."

Nodoka sighed. "Did you think I wouldn't? That I would opt to invoke the contract over anything but utter failure?" She put the sword down to gather her thoughts. "He is… a miracle, Genma. But all you have accomplished is not fair recompense for what I gave up for him! He could be so much more if he wasn't saddled with… with the mistakes of the past. If you had done your task properly, Akane would be more than suitable for the task. But now? For him to achieve his destiny?" She shook her head and picked up the sword to resume polishing more briskly. "He will need an extraordinary woman by his side. I don't know if Akane can be that for him. This cannot be left to chance and it cannot be further bound by your whims."

"But No-chan…"

She sheathed the sword with the loud snap of the guard hitting the top of the scabbard. "You agreed to allow me to handle this after the last failed wedding attempt. You gave me your word."

Genma slumped. "Yes. I did." He took a deep breath. "But please remember… we wouldn't even be having this discussion if it weren't for Soun. We owe him a great debt and he has the future of his own legacy to secure."
"I know…" Nodoka said, slumping a little. Genma came up and embraced her from behind and she sank back into his arms, closing her eyes. "I will do my best to honor the Tendos and all they have done for us. But Soun's family can endure another generation at least. Ranma is our only hope." She shook her head. "If only he wouldn't preoccupy himself with frivolous things. I wish… I wish he could understand that his life is not merely his own to waste on friends or sports or distractions. He was born for the Art and for the future of the Saotome family line. We have sacrificed so much for him to this end."

"The boy has always been ungrateful," Genma agreed sadly.

"He will be. Someday," Nodoka said softly. "Someday he'll understand all we've done for him. A true Man among men would understand and would thank us." She sighed. "Get me some paper, would you, dear? I need to put out the invitations for the next interview."

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"Ranma, we need to practise!" Sayuri yelled after the redhead as she retreated from the volleyball field towards the meeting tree where the usual group was gathered. "Our first game is tomorrow!"

"I know, I know!" Ranma called back as she backpedalled away. "But I'm starving! Just lemme grab a bite, okay?"

"I don't know how you can be hungry with how much you packed away at breakfast!" Sayuri shot back.

"I'm a growing boy!"

Ranma trotted up to the lunch circle and plopped down next to Akane, crossed her arms and scowled in frustration. "Geez, she doesn't need to make a big deal about it!" She picked up a pair of chopsticks and reached into the collection of bentos for a morsel.

"She has a point, Ranma," Akane said. "You're going to be totally unprepared for the game tomorrow if you keep this up."

Ranma shrugged. "I'll just wing it, like I usually do. Not like Volleyball is hard." She popped a pickled vegetable into her mouth.

"Excuse me, but I seem to remember the only reason you won our game was because the coach gifted you three rounds!" Ukyou said haughtily.

"But I won," Ranma pointed out. "And there's no way they'll have someone like you on their team, so…"

"Just because they won't be martial artists doesn't mean they won't be experts at their Art, Ranma," Nabiki cautioned. "This team went to the quarterfinals last year, after all."

Before Ranma could reply, there was an incoherent scream of rage from the upper floors of the school building. They all looked up and, through the windows, could make out figures running through the halls.

"How DARE you keep me from my Darling Ranma!"

"Kochi, please, listen to yer Papa…"

"I AM DONE LISTENING TO YOU!"
There was a sudden crash and the body of Principal Kuno, thoroughly mummified in a bright purple ribbon, was forcefully ejected from one of the third floor windows of the school. He howled as he plummeted to land heavily on the field and bounce a couple of times before rolling to a stop.

Before he could recover, a figure in a green leotard landed gracefully on his gut, driving what little breath he still had from his lungs.

Kodachi daintily stepped off the groaning form of her father and crouched next to him, still holding the handle of her gymnast's ribbon. "Now, will you allow my Darling Ranma to return to school?"

"But Kochi… Ranma Saotome be right over dere!" Principal Kuno jerked his chin in the direction of the group under the tree.

Kodachi scowled. "Again with this insane babble about magical water and sorcerous transformations?! I am not the child to whom you once read bedtime stories, father dear. Perhaps I will need to be more conscientious about reminding you of that fact until you learn." She straightened and, with a deceptively casual flick of her ribbon, caused it to unwind violently and hurl Principal Kuno across the field to skip and bounce until he smashed headfirst into the metal post of the soccer net.

"Feh. I begin to see why my brother despises him so." She folded her arms with a scowl. She glanced over at the group and her expression soured momentarily, as though she was considering doing something further until her eyes finally lit on Ranma. "Hmpf… as you were then, peasants." She waved airily and began walking back towards the school building.

Ranma had a sudden inspiration.

It was a terrible idea. It ranked right up there with going on a date with Tatewaki Kuno to try and scam a wish from a magic sword, but she had done that too. And there wasn't a whole lot of time to decide, just to act.

But first… Anything Goes School of Bomb Defusing.

Ranma turned to Akane and put a hand on her shoulder. She gave her an earnest look. "Akane, I gotta go talk to Kodachi."

"What!?" Akane squawked, incredulous.

"Look… I'll explain later. But just remember she doesn't realize I'm her 'Darling Ranma' like this. She doesn't really like me much as a girl at all, really, so there's no reason to be jealous," Ranma said in a grave tone.

Akane's brow knit slowly. "I know that, and I wasn't going to be jealous until you made a big production of pointing that out!"

Ranma winced. "Look, please Akane? Just give me the benefit of the doubt on this one? If I was lying, I'd just be ending up with Kodachi anyway, right? Wouldn't that be a better punishment than any malleting you could give me?"

Akane's expression softened. "... All right. Baka. Go talk to her. And be good!"

"Thank you!" Ranma leaned in and kissed her on the cheek then hopped up and bounded off after the gymnast.

Shampoo, Ukyou and Nabiki glared at Akane as Ranma left.
"Why Akane get kiss on cheek and beg for understanding?" Shampoo asked, scowling.

"Even now she's always thinking about Akane first," Ukyou groused in agreement, the two of them giving Akane a united suspicious glare.

"She trusts the rest of you to give her the benefit of the doubt, or at least ask before pounding her into toothpaste," Ryōga said nonchalantly, plucking a rice ball from the lunch spread.

Akane whirled on him, outraged. "Are you saying that I jump to conclusions, Hibiki?!"

Ryōga didn't even bother to look in her direction. "Yes."

"Why you…!" Akane snarled, reared back and threw a punch at him.

Which he caught casually in his hand, his grip on her fist like steel. He finally looked in her direction, giving her a smirk. "I'm not Ranma, Tendo. I don't give free shots. You wanna fight? Make it a proper challenge. And do it after lunch."

Akane ground her teeth. "Fine. After school then."

"Akane, don't…" Nabiki said weakly.

"Done," Ryōga nodded, releasing her fist and pushing it back. They locked gazes for a few more moments, sparks nearly visible between them.

Nabiki rolled her eyes and started mentally figuring odds. She'd need to be prepared to ensure she kept Hana from getting any of the action. "Hiroshi, Daisuke? Looks like it's high time to teach you boys about the fine art of making book…"

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"Kodachi, wait!" Ranma waved, trying to get the raven-haired girl's attention.

Kodachi paused, sighed and turned, crossing her arms in a gesture of annoyance. "My brother's 'Pig-tailed Goddess,'" She said scornfully. "What is it you want? My time is precious and your relation to my Darling Ranma will in no way protect you from my wrath if you are here for some trickery…!"

Ranma held up her hands. "Woah, woah, truce! I'm not here to fight. I'm actually here to ask you a favor."

"A favor?!" Kodachi repeated, incredulous.

"Yeah. On behalf of… uh, my brother," Ranma finished weakly.

Kodachi raised a delicate eyebrow. "... Speak."

Ranma put down her hands. "So, uh… I saw you chatting with Principal Pineapp… uh… Principal Kuno about the whole deal with him not allowing Ranma on school grounds," she swallowed, hoping she had things worded right. "Thing is… Mom doesn't know about this challenge. Specifically, she doesn't like that I'm attending school in his place so he doesn't get behind."

Kodachi's expression softened again oddly. "She truly does not like you, does she?"

Ranma winced. So many of these stories painted her parents in a bad light! But… maybe it was for the best if Kodachi didn't think to highly of her mother right now. Sorry Mom! "She… uhh… she'd probably be happier if she never saw me again," Ranma admitted. It was true enough of her girl side,
after all. "Look, Ranma'd get in trouble if she found out I was doing this, but if I don't he'll get suspended or expelled because of the dumb rules of the contest. So… please don't tell Mom about seeing me at school?"

"I didn't see any reason to unless it came up," Kodachi said. She held up a hand to forestall a protest. "And I see no reason for it to be brought up. For the sake of my Darling Ranma, I will grant you this small boon." She narrowed her eyes. "But do not mistake my concern for his well-being as mercy for your sake. You and I still have accounts left unbalanced."

Ranma sighed in relief. "I'd be happy to give you a rematch just as soon as the volleyball season is over," Ranma said. "Sports team members aren't allowed to fight on school grounds outside of officially sanctioned matches and I don't think they'd sanction one between us, seeing as I'm not on the gymnastics team."

Kodachi huffed. "Yes, I was made aware of that bit of authoritarian annoyance. Fortunately such protections do not extend to faculty. As I verified before Father and I had our little 'discussion'." She twittered.

"Oh? That's actually good to know. Thanks," Ranma replied.

Kodachi raised an eyebrow again. She rubbed her chin, looking Ranma over, as if considering something. "I notice you are quite close to my rivals for Ranma's affection. I presume you favor at least one of them in this marital contest of ours?"

Yes. Any of them. All of them. I'd rather marry RYOUGA.

Ranma felt a brief pang of something at that idea, though she wasn't sure what or why. It oddly did not give the sense of the kind of terrible fate she had been trying for. Scratch that, I'd marry your BROTHER over you! At least I could be sure HE wouldn't poison me! That was better. Pure revulsion there.

"I… uh… I try not to play favorites?" Ranma said, truthfully enough. "They get mad if I do." More truth.

"And yet they cluster around you and ply you with food to try and curry your favor," Kodachi's eyes narrowed. "You are close to your brother, yes?"

"You… could say that," Ranma said sheepishly.

"You ape his clothing style, his martial arts and you even appropriate his name for your own use. That much is obvious," Kodachi said dismissively. "So… you know a great deal about him, then?"

She started pacing in front of Ranma, still stroking her chin thoughtfully.

"Probably more than anyone else," Ranma replied. Another easy truth.

She turned and unexpectedly seized Ranma by the shoulders,rocking her back on her heels. Her eyes were glistening with unwept tears and her expression was pleading. "Please! If truly you are impartial as you say and you know his heart so well… Why does my beloved flee my advances so? What can I do… what can I be to soothe his fearful heart and show him the depths of my devotion?"

Ranma stiffened in fear a second until she remembered that she was girl-type at the moment and, in Kodachi's eyes, wholly separate from the object of her obsession. "Well… uh… He doesn't like being poisoned…"

Kodachi released her and affected an air of innocence. "Oh, the paralysis powders? Those are merely
a game! A message to his would-be paramours that seem to go astray, or… sometimes a 'marital aid' of sorts…" She abruptly closed her eyes, her face screwing up in concentration. "No… no, this is exactly the sort of information I wished." She gave Ranma a determined look. "Continue, Pig-tailed girl. Be cruel in your honesty. I must know my love's heart!"

Ranma's eyebrows rose in surprise. "Well… uhh… I mean… To be honest, you kinda intimidate him with how strong you come on," she found herself saying. It was an odd opportunity to perhaps de-escalate Kodachi's attempts, after all. "And he doesn't like it when any of the girls fight, including you."

"So that explains their current state of armistice," Kodachi nodded, understanding. "Continue."

"And… uhh…" she sighed, wondering how far to go. "You scare him a little."

Her face fell. "I scare him? But… but what would he have to fear from me?"

"The poisoning…" Ranma ticked off her fingers. "The insane laughter… the attempts to buy him or our idiot father with money or expensive gifts… the attempts to hurt the other girls…"

Kodachi collapsed to the ground in a dramatic swoon. "Truly? Has my beloved forsaken me so?"

Her head drooped and her tears began to run in earnest. "Such bitter cruelty your words are."

"H-hey!" Ranma's instincts about crying girls and her protective nature overrode her good sense. She knelt next to Kodachi. "Don't cry. I mean… he doesn't hate you. He's just… overwhelmed, I guess? Maybe you could… tone it down?"

Kodachi looked up at Ranma, and she swallowed at the all too familiar look of shining adulation in Kodachi's dark eyes. Kodachi clasped Ranma's hands with her own, leaning close. "Do you mean… you will aid me? You will help me woo my Darling Ranma above all others?"

Ranma blinked. "I didn't…" She looked around frantically. "If Akane sees this…!"

Kodachi saw her nervousness. "No, no, I understand! You must maintain the semblance of impartiality before the others! This will be our secret, I swear on the Kuno name!" She held Ranma's hands close to her chest and leaned in, an expression of genuine joy on her face. "Oh my dear, future sister, you do not know what this means to me! I have misjudged you sorely!" She immediately pulled Ranma into a fierce hug.

"... Ack?!" Ranma managed, realizing that things were spiralling out of control again.

Kodachi released Ranma and stood, pulling the unresisting redhead up with her. "I will make a new start with you, then, my dear, dear sister!" she said, still holding her hands. "For this you will no longer be the outcast from the family, for you shall have a place with the Kuno clan always, I swear it!"

"Uhhh… thanks?" Ranma said sheepishly. She was starting to wish Akane would show up and interrupt.

"Think nothing of it! Together we shall win for me my Ranma's heart and you your rightful place in the family!" Kodachi beamed then looked pensive. "But I can't keep referring to you by my brother's simplistic nickname! Did your parents not see fit to grace you with a name of your own at all?"

"Uhh…" Ranma swallowed. "Sometimes I'm called 'Ranko'…"

"Ugh, how very common," Kodachi made a face. "But… perhaps…" She took Ranma's hand,
opened it and traced the character for the name 'Ran' on her palm, using the kanji for 'orchid' rather than 'wild'. "Yes, better. You shall be 'Ran', then. Together we shall be the flowers of the united Kuno and Saotome clans!" She giggled, a much more genuine sound than her typical laugh. "This will be an adventure! After school, meet me by the gates and we shall discuss your brother and the omiai further!"

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Ranma wandered back to the group in a daze. She sat down, more of a flop, really, and stared ahead sightlessly. Her eyes had the vacant look of a person who had seen something she could not properly process.

"So, how did things with Kodachi go?" Akane asked. Her voice had an edge of accusation to it, as though she were biting back further comment.

"Great! Just… just great…" Ranma said, still somewhat shell-shocked. "We're besties now. Gonna hang out after school and chat about how she can best seduce Ranma."

"WHAT!?" Akane's eyes widened, her expression twisting into outrage.

Ranma didn't notice. She slumped, still staring off into nothing. "Oh yeah… she even decided to give me… Girl me… my own name. She's calling me 'Ran' now… using the kanji for 'orchid', of course, not 'wild'... she was very specific about that… You can probably put it on my tombstone when they find my corpse on the bottom of the river." She dropped her face into her hands and groaned.

Akane's rage bled away. "What…?"

"Kodachi doesn't see Ranma's girl side as a romantic rival anymore," Nabiki supplied helpfully. She scooted over next to Ranma and put a hand on her shoulder. "So, as Ranma's sister, she'd be the best ally she could hope for to try and win the omiai."

"She's calling us the 'Flowers of the United Clans' now," Ranma mumbled into her hands. "This is so much worse than what happened with her brother…"

"Well, she'll just have to be disappointed with you all over again," Sayuri sniffed. "You have volleyball practise after school."

"Actually…" Nabiki said, giving Sayuri an apologetic look.

"No… no," Sayuri shook her head vehemently at Nabiki. "Nabiki, our first game is tomorrow. We haven't gotten any practise with Ranma!"

"I know…" Nabiki held up a hand. "But this is a way to keep tabs on Kodachi. She's less likely to decide to coat the volleyball in paralysis powder before 'Ran's' game if they're on friendly terms. Plus this gives us an inside track on any tricks she's liable to try in the omiai."

Sayuri pinched the bridge of her nose. "God damnit Ranma… Your popularity is getting really obnoxious." She glared at Nabiki. "And you aren't helping! In case you haven't forgotten, the stakes of this are indentured servitude and/or jail time for Ranma?"

Nabiki gave her a cool stare. "I'm aware, Sayuri. The stakes in the omiai include a contract for Ranma to commit seppuku if his mother isn't kept happy. So you'll forgive me if my priorities can't always make things easy."

Sayuri, Yuka, Rin and Riko went silent, stunned expressions on their faces. Even Ryouga looked
concerned.

Ranma sighed, looking up from her hands. She looked tired, almost resigned to the continuously compounding drama. "I never actually told them about that, Nabiki."

Yuka held up a hand. "I think you need to explain that, please."

Nabiki sighed. She reached into her pack and pulled out a print of the picture she had taken of the seppuku contract. She handed it to Sayuri. "You all know Genma took Ranma away from his mother when he was very young to go on an extended training journey across Asia. To get Nodoka to agree to it, he gave her this contract."

"'I, Genma Saotome, do solemnly swear that I will train my son, Ranma Saotome, to be a man amongst men. Should I fail, my son and I will commit Seppuku,'" Sayuri read out, her eyes widening. "Wait… this is seriously a thing?"

Riko leaned over and looked at the paper. "What's with all the handprints?"

"Those are Ranma's 'signature',' Nabiki said. "As far as we can tell, Ranma thought he was fingerpainting."

"This can't actually be binding," Yuka said. She looked at the martial artists for confirmation, eyes widening at the looks on their faces. She stared at Ranma. "You wouldn't seriously commit suicide because of this, would you?!"

"It's a matter of honor," Ranma said miserably.

Rin simply stared at Ranma, wide-eyed. She was trembling slightly, but otherwise silent.

"Ranma's Mom wouldn't actually call that in, would she?" Ryoga asked. "I mean, I thought she already declared him a 'Man among men' because he was a shameless pervert!"

"Thanks, Ryoga," Ranma growled.

"It was with the proviso that Ranma continue to uphold himself to the standards of a 'manly man',' Nabiki said. "Basically the contract is indefinite and can be called in any time Nodoka declares it in breach. Plus, she's the one who gets to define what 'Man amongst men' means. Which currently is apparently 'marry who Mommy picks for you'."

"This is…" Sayuri's voice was quiet. She handed the contract back to Nabiki, her hand trembling a little. "I knew your Dad was bad, but this…!

"I get it, okay!" Ranma suddenly stood up, her fists clenched. She grit her teeth, trying to keep frustrated tears from showing. "Everybody thinks my parents are terrible! Well I'm sorry my life isn't up to your standards, okay?!"

"Ranma…" Akane's eyes went wide.

"You don't… you don't understand. None of you could possibly understand! It's so easy for you to judge, but… but my parents aren't bad people!" She clenched her fists tighter, nails digging into her palms. "They make bad decisions sometimes but they want the best for me, and they want to be honorable, and they're trying their best, and it doesn't help that people keep on… on… pitying me for stuff I don't need to be pitied for!" She snatched the contract out of Nabiki's hands and tore it up.
"Just… just worry about your own side of the problem. This stuff doesn't have anything to do with you!" She turned and stomped off towards the school building.

There was a moment of silence.

"Ukyou, go after her," Nabiki said softly.

"Nabiki, why…” Akane protested, but Nabiki held up a hand.

"Ukyou doesn't have contact with her family. I'm hoping that will help her to keep from making this worse." She looked at Ukyou again. "Go."

Ukyou nodded, got smoothly to her feet and trotted after the retreating redhead.

Akane and Ryouga both looked like they wanted to protest further. Shampoo looked torn as well, though she was watching Nabiki and seemed to be willing to take her cues from her for now. The rest of the group was still sitting in shocked silence.

"These people are close friends for your family?!” Yuka asked finally, giving Nabiki a horrified look.

"We're not really impressed with them either," Nabiki said. "But…"

Yuka shook her head then looked at Akane. "How…? How do you just pass something like this off as normal?!!"

"It's not, okay?!" Akane shot back. "We know it's not… none of this has ever been normal!"

"How old was Ranma when this was signed!? Three? Four?"

"Two," Nabiki answered softly.

"No…” Yuka shook her head angrily. She laughed darkly, still shaking her head. "No, no, no, this is… How did I get mixed up in this?" She stood up. "Come on, Sayuri. We'll go talk to the police." She scooped up a few scraps of the contract.

"You can't…” Akane said weakly.

"I think we can," Sayuri said quietly. "I know you think you're dealing with this appropriately in martial arts land, but in the real world this is a death threat. There are people who deal with these things." She looked as Riko stood as well to give Rin, who was still out of it, a hand up. "We'll go down to the police station…”

"There's already a file started," Nabiki said finally.

Everyone stared at her.

"You went to the police!?” Akane said, eyes wide. "When?"

"When Ukyou showed up," Nabiki said quietly. "I started the file as a way to cover our own liability in the event any more of Genma's creditors came looking for us - let alone one with a more valid legal claim. I updated it the day I found out about the seppuku contract because if a crazy martial artist family decides to carve their own guts out in your back yard in this day and age, the police ask questions. I've already given them a copy of that contract." She shook her head. "They aren't going to do anything."
"You can't be serious…" Yuka said.

"Ranma was sixteen by the time this all came out. That's old enough to declare his independence if he felt he was in an abusive situation," Nabiki continued, frustration edging into her voice as she recalled the process she had gone through for the past year, feeding her concerns into a bureaucratic black hole. "Ranma's parents can't force Ranma to do it; it would be Ranma's own choice, based on his own concept of honor. Ranma isn't depressed. Ranma hasn't expressed any desire or want to die - quite the opposite. And Ranma's parents haven't expressed any desire to require him to, beyond the ridiculous belief that they can if he doesn't meet their standards. It might shock you to learn that's not even all that uncommon in Japan. Most of them just don't bother with the stupid barely-coherent contract." She sighed. "They showed me how many teenage suicides they deal with daily. They don't care. They don't have the resources to care."

"There has to be something we can do…" Riko said.

"Ranma has to want it," Nabiki said. "Trust me, I've been looking into this since that 'Neko Ken' nonsense came out. I had it pegged at three months before Ranma would either marry into the Tendo family or ask to be adopted by us to get away from Genma Saotome. I severely underestimated both how stubbornly loyal Ranma is and Genma's Saotome's nearly bottomless capacity to ruin a sure thing."

"Should have killed Panda in China," Shampoo said softly. Oddly there was no rancor in her voice, just sincere regret.

"You probably should have," Ryouga said, his jaw twitching. He was remembering what he had seen of the Neko Ken in Ranma's mind - the images he had caught.

"What else don't we know?" Sayuri folded her arms. "If we're going to be this deep into this mess, we might as well get the full story. You said something about the 'Neko ken'? That's related to Ranma's fear of cats, right? Is that her parent's fault too?"

Nabiki took a deep breath. "All right. But not here."

"Fiancée's Tea?" Shampoo asked.

"Fiancée's Tea," Nabiki agreed. She looked over at Akane. "Sister of mine, could you make sure you and Ukyou drop by after the dinner rush?"

Akane nodded.

"This 'Fiancée's Tea' doesn't involve any sort of obligation to actually marry Ranma, does it?" Yuka asked, crossing her arms.

"For you guys? No," Nabiki said. A small smile crossed her face. "Jury is still out on Ryouga."

"HEY!" Ryouga and Akane protested in perfect unison.

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The rest of the school day had been somewhat awkward for Ranma.

Ukyou had been shadowing her for most of that time. She had initially tried to get Ranma to talk, but eventually she gave up and just followed her around. Ranma could feel her eyes tracking her.

In truth, Ranma felt guilty for going off on her friends and fiancées that way. But she felt worse
about the growing negative opinions they all seemed to be getting about her family. What would her parents say if they heard of this? The… the almost murderous rage that mentioning Ranma's parents seemed to evoke now. Even Akane, who used to love her mother, got a dark look in her eyes when Nodoka's name was mentioned.

*I gotta find some way to defuse this. I mean… we're all gonna hafta be family at some point, right? Not Sayuri and the others, but... they're still friends and that's not gonna just go away once this fiancee mess is sorted out, right?*

That was a bit of an odd thought. She hadn't really considered what would happen after the volleyball season ended, but… there was no reason to think they'd *stop* being friends, was there? Ranma tried to think back to friends she'd had long term… and came up blank. She'd always moved, or something she or her family had done had turned them into enemies or rivals, even if she had reconciled with them later.

*That's probably what'll happen this time, too, Ranma thought glumly. By the time we get through all of this they'll be sick of me. It already happened with Ukyou and Ryouga...*

In some dark part of her mind, she wondered if the same thing would happen with Nabiki or Shampoo… and remembered that it had *already* happened with Akane. Was that what relationships were going to be for her? Just an escalating cycle of love and hate?

*Maybe that's why I've been feeling so unsettled. I'm just waiting for them to all start hating me again. Ranma thought. It's inevitable, isn't it?*

She squeezed her eyes shut. *No! They wouldn't DO that!*

... *Would they?*

It was hard to shut out the thoughts. If her parents were so hateful, what would make Ranma any better?

She felt a hand on her shoulder that caused her to jump. She turned to see porcelain skin with perfectly manicured nails.

"The bell has rung, my dear," Kodachi smiled and cocked her head. "You seem preoccupied? We had an appointment, did we not?"

Ranma sighed. *Maybe this is for the best. Get away from the others for a while so I don't make them tired of me. "Uh, yeah, sure… just lost in thought. Didn't hear the bell." She got up, grabbed her bag and followed Kodachi out. She could feel several sets of eyes watching her.*

"So, where are we going?" she asked. She didn't particularly want to go back to the Kuno Estate, but with Tatewaki still in the hospital and the Principal likely busy at the school for most of the rest of the day, it would hopefully be more tolerable than the last visit.

*I was thinking of a little shopping trip, actually," Kodachi said. "I've noticed your wardrobe could use some freshening and I thought it would be a pleasant distraction while we chat."

Ranma slumped a little further, thinking about the poor state of her finances. *"I… don't really have any spending money right now…"

Kodachi smirked. *"That much is obvious, my dear. No, a pittance like this is of no concern, and I would prefer if you didn't continually have to raid my Darling Ranma's closet just to avoid traipsing about naked. Which reminds me," her eyes dipped towards Ranma's chest. "We'll need to get you*
properly fitted. *That* simply won't do. You'd think you got all your underthings second-hand!"

*I kinda do, actually…* Ranma thought. Most of her girly underthings were either donated by one of the Tendo sisters or liberated from Happosai's hoard. "That's… not really necessary, is it? I mean… you just wanna know more about Ranma, right?"

Kodachi paused. She turned and regarded Ranma with a searching gaze and a raised eyebrow.

"Head back! Chin up! Back straight!" she said abruptly.

The half-remembered bridal training Ranma had endured once as part of the challenge with the *La Belle France School of Martial Arts* kicked in unconsciously and Ranma instantly straightened and adopted a more refined, demure pose - though she blushed hard as soon as she realized what she had done.

Kodachi nodded. "You do have some breeding in you. Good. Now, allow me to be clear; while winning my Darling Ranma's hand is of the utmost importance, I am also a woman of my word. If you are to be an active and visible member of the wider Kuno extended family, we must make sure you are presentable." She motioned towards the limousine that had arrived to pick them up. "Now come along, future sister-mine. While we chat on how to secure our future as a family, we can ensure that you are properly dressed for it."

_Maaaaaybe this was a worse idea than I thought_, Ranma mused glumly.

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"**BAKUSAI TENKETSU!**"

Akane skidded backwards from the explosion. She frantically deflected chunks of concrete but she wore a grin a mile wide. *Yes! I made him use it!*

Of course, objectively speaking, this was very bad for her as she lacked both the speed or the durability to properly counter the breaking point. But Akane counted it as a win because if Ryouga was using the move it meant he was taking her seriously as an opponent.

Ryouga erupted from the cloud of dust and debris, umbrella drawn. Time seemed to slow as he hurtled towards her.

Now it was just a matter of figuring out how to avoid getting flattened.

Akane had one advantage over Ranma in that she could hit harder. If hitting Ryouga was like punching concrete, that was fine with her. Rather than evade or block she opted for offense, solidifying her stance and reaching back with her fist for a haymaker. With her feet solidly planted, leverage was on her side. She'd likely take a hit, but she could punish his use of acrobatics with her full force and if she could bull through he'd be forced to try and recover his footing while she had free reign to pummel him senseless.

She locked eyes with him, saw the slight smirk on his face and instantly realized she had made a mistake, even as she committed her weight and momentum to the punch.

Ryouga tossed his umbrella to the side, the momentum of the weighted bamboo weapon altering his course to his left. He twisted his body and the right straight punch that should have slammed into his gut instead grazed past his ribs as he dropped to her right side, inside her guard.

She was already moving, coiling to try and make a leap of her own to evade and recycle the
momentum of the punch into a dodge, but it was far too late. She felt the chop of the knife edge of his hand hit the pressure point between her neck and shoulder and her vision filled with stars as her entire body stiffened. She started to topple over forwards.

Ryouga caught her with his right arm. He extended his left and the handle of his umbrella slapped firmly into his palm as the weighted implement boomeranged back around to him.

In total, the fight had only lasted a couple of minutes.

"You… can put me down now Hibiki," Akane growled, twitching weakly. Her limbs were tingling like they were asleep and she tried impatiently to get her numb legs under her.

"You mean I could drop you now," Ryouga retorted, casually slotting his umbrella into the modified loops on his school bag. She was still draped over his arm like a damp towel. "Most people... that hit would have knocked them flat out."

"Felt like a baby's slap," Akane said fiercely, though her attempt at bravado was somewhat marred by her enduring paralysis.

"You get knocked on your ass by babies a lot then, Tendo?" Ryouga hoisted her up onto her feet and, though shaky, she found she was able to keep herself upright.

"You got a lucky hit in," Akane rubbed the back of her neck and winced.

The crowd that had gathered around started applauding and cheering.

Both the teenagers blushed, not accustomed to having an appreciative audience.

"Smile for the camera!"

Both of them turned to see Hana snapping pictures, the flash catching them momentarily off-guard.

She grinned as she lowered the camera. "Thanks. Not as much clothing damage as the crowd usually likes but stuff with Akane fighting is always a good seller. Especially since I got some good upskirts. Thanks for not changing into a martial arts gi, by the way."

Akane growled and cracked her knuckles.

"Oh, gonna break my camera again?" Hana asked, smirking. She held the camera out to her. "Go ahead. I've uploaded all my pics to the school wifi. All you'll get is a big fat suspension for destruction of school property. Cuz guess what? This camera belongs to the student newspaper!"

"Since when has the student newspaper been able to afford something like that?" Akane glowered at her skeptically.

"Since I took it over. Which means snapping pics is also part of my job, and a school-sanctioned activity." She wagged a finger. "You wouldn't want to be guilty of suppressing the student's free press, now would you?"

"You just said you were gonna sell those pictures!" Ryouga said.

"Ooooh, so I did!" Hana said, feigning shock. "That sounds like corruption! You'd better tell the student newspaper! Or the Student Council? Maybe go to the Principal?" She grinned and winked. "Tell you what, beefcake. Why don't you just focus more on wrecking more of your opponent's clothing and try not to hurt yourself thinking too much, huh?" She turned and gave them a casual
Akane's jaw set. She clenched her fist, and came to a decision. "It's worth the suspension." She took a step but felt Ryouga's hand on her shoulder stopping her. She shot him an annoyed glare.

"It's what she wants, sis," Nabiki said, walking up to them with Shampoo, Hiroshi and Daisuke flanking her. "We're Ranma's support. If she can knock a few of us off by getting us suspended or expelled, it makes getting access to Ranma that much easier."

"Surprised Hana's willing to take that kind of risk just to help Himura out a little," Akane crossed her arms.

"It's how people like Himura work," Nabiki said. "Start off by promising you the world. By the time they're done with you, you're the one delivering the world to them and thanking them for the privilege."

"No offense, but isn't that what you used to do?" Ryouga asked, arching an eyebrow.

Nabiki shrugged, unfazed. "I supplied services to answer a need. I charged a premium for it but I delivered. Himura doesn't actually sell anything." She narrowed her eyes. "It's all just a cult of personality and manipulation. You pay into the golden idol and pay more for the privilege then get told all those rewards you've been promised will be right around the corner if you pay just a little bit more."

"Want Shampoo go break camera again?" Shampoo asked, cracking her knuckles.

"Don't bother. She's already uploaded all of the pictures," Akane said. "You'd get in trouble and Himura would just buy her a new one."

"Uploaded?" Nabiki raised an eyebrow. "To the school's network, I presume?" She glanced in the direction of the school. "Let her have this one. She didn't get anything particularly good or damaging. In the meantime… Hiroshi? Daisuke? I need you to source me another talented individual."

'Spending the afternoon with Kodachi' was one of those concepts that ranked somewhere near 'bathing in a vat full of furry feline animals' on Ranma's list of 'Things Not to Do'. The gymnast's obsession with her male side, manic demeanor and tendency to dose everything with some sort of chemical made her someone best avoided.

So she wasn't exactly Ranma's first choice as a companion for buying cute underwear.

Not surprisingly, buying cute underwear was also on that same list, not far below Kodachi herself.

Thankfully the saleswoman at the store had been professionally reassuring about the matter. Ranma was normally unconcerned about being topless in front of people but she found herself bashful and shy as she stood in the booth with the woman wrapping the measuring tape around her ribcage - something about being judged in such a precise and clinical manner.

Fortunately the woman didn't make any of the observations about her figure Ranma had been anticipating and had kept the conversation to the same sort of light fluff a hair stylist would, chatting about the weather or politics or any of several other topics that slipped from memory, being so utterly unimportant as not to be worth retaining. Afterwards she had given Ranma her measurements and several modest bras to try on. Ranma had to admit that the difference was startling. The saleswoman
insisted, however, that she wear the fitted bra when she left.

"I'll not have a customer walk out of the store looking so uncomfortable." She said. "We do have a reputation to uphold. Ms. Kodachi was clear this was all to be covered on her family account, so please," She smiled. "A young girl like yourself shouldn't have hunched shoulders and strap marks!"

More embarrassing, Kodachi had insisted on some rather less practical selections. It all reminded Ranma entirely too much of that horrific shopping trip with Akane when she had been convinced that she was actually a girl - except this felt more real as she was in her right mind - at least in theory.

"Oh come now, Ran!" Kodachi tittered. "You must keep a few lacey things in your closet. Something to reward your fiance with when he's good, hmmm?"

Ranma winced. Oh yes, let's imagine wearing this for Ryouga. That'll make this less awkward! "It… uh… It might kinda be overkill…" She tentatively held up a lacey pair of pink panties that involved entirely too little fabric for her to be comfortable with.

"I do seem to remember the boy being a bit bashful," Kodachi said. Then she noticed what Ranma was holding and snatched it out of her hands. "No, no, no dear! Blacks or reds I think… maybe greens. With your hair color and complexion, pink would be horrendous." She peered a little closer. "That is your natural color, isn't it?" She reached out and examined a strand. "Hmpf. Genetics are profoundly unfair. A natural redhead in Japan, with your figure to boot and not a freckle or spot to mar your complexion? Though this makes it clear where we need to go from here." She released her hair. "You have terrible split ends, my dear. We will have to address that next." She peered a little closer. "Aha… you do have freckles!"

Ranma blinked, jerking back a bit. "Wait, what? No I don't…"

Kodachi smirked and held up a mirror. "They're extremely faint, my dear. But there, just at the top of the cheekbone." She traced over them with her finger to point them out. "Hardly what I would call a blemish, but at least it's reassuring to know you aren't completely flawless."

Ranma grabbed the mirror and stared, bringing it closer, until she could see the faint spots along her cheeks. They weren't noticeable unless you were looking for them, but they were there. She even noticed they were slightly uneven, just ever so slightly more prominent on one side.

She continued to stare, uncomprehendingly at them. For the longest time she had assumed her female form was something created by the magic of the spring - not really hers and not really real but an idealized image of what the magic figured a girl would be. A form with no marks or character - nothing to suggest an origin but something that had come about unnaturally.

Discovering something so simple and so subtle as a faint dusting of freckles on her cheeks was oddly unnerving. It was one of those moments she had described to Ryouga where she lost the assurance of knowing who and what she really was and simply was what she was.

"Was your mother irish?" Kodachi asked, then reconsidered. "Hmmm, not fully I think, but perhaps some there."

"My mother?" For a moment the question confused Ranma as she tried to conceive of what the mother of the girl she was might have looked like, before she realized how ridiculous that was. Nodoka was her mother and the resemblance was obvious.

Does Mom have freckles too?

She swallowed, feeling unnerved without really knowing why. "I… I uh… didn't know my mother.
I was taken away when I was very young. Pops raised me. Us. Me an' Ranma."

Kodachi sighed. "That explains so much."

"You haven't been asking me a whole lot about Ranma, actually," Ranma said. Not that she had been wanting to field questions about how to seduce herself all night, but somehow her girl side being the focus of Kodachi's interest was even less comfortable.

"Oh, I am learning quite a bit," Kodachi beamed. "You are siblings, after all. Learning about you gives me a window into seeing what my Darling Ranma's childhood was like. And it is so much less awkward." She sighed. "It must have been so difficult for him on the road for so much of his life! But it explains why you and he share such tenacity!"

"Yeah… uh… You know, 'Ranma Saotome never gives up', right?" Ranma rubbed the back of her head self-consciously.

"I would not love him so otherwise," Kodachi sighed. "But it does make it so very difficult to win his heart. I doubt even such sights as this would sway him." She held up a particularly nosebleed inducing translucent nightie. "Tell me… what would you suggest? Where should I start?"

Ranma swallowed. While Kodachi was something of a nightmare personality-wise, the mental image of her in that particularly nightie was far from it. That was part of the terror that Kodachi had for her - madness and enslavement wrapped in a very tempting package. "W-well… maybe… just talk to him, you know?"

"Oh, how I would adore that!" Kodachi said, clasping her hands. "But, how might I get him alone? He is perpetually surrounded by those harridans that monopolize his time."

"Well… that's kinda the problem," Ranma said. "He's never alone, and you usually show up and everyone gets all catty and then a fight breaks out. Maybe… you gotta take what you can get? At least to begin with?"

"You mean be civil with those wretches?" Kodachi growled. "Unthinkable."

"You're being nice enough with me." Ranma pointed out. "Even if you do marry Ranma…"

"When I marry Ranma!"

"... When you marry Ranma… he's probably still gonna be friends with some or all of 'em. And most of 'em always got along to some degree," she shrugged. "You don't hafta like 'em. But maybe don't pick fights all the time?"

"I would think my Darling Ranma would appreciate that I consider him to be so worthy of fighting over!" Kodachi replied.

Ranma sighed. "No, no, it… Well, it's like you're there for the fight, not him, you know?" She shook her head. "I dunno why everyone think havin' people fightin' over you makes you lucky. It sucks and half the time I get dragged into it or get hit because I get blamed, or…" She trailed off, realizing she had slipped out of referring to herself in third person. "Uh… I mean…"

"You refer to my Brother's unwanted advances," Kodachi said. "And others as well, if I am not mistaken? I had heard of rumors of that glutton Chardin courting a fiesty redhead."

"You know Picolet?" Ranma asked, surprised.
"We are in many of the same social circles. I may have met him once or twice," Kodachi admitted airily. "Such a bore. To think they've spent generations perfecting the art of removing the last flicker of joy one might extract from those awful dinner parties. You did well to refuse his advances, regardless of how far it might have boosted your social standing." She sighed. "But… I take your point and see you speak not only from sympathy for your brother, but experience. I… will try. That is the most I can promise." She stretched. "Now come along. I feel the need for a little pampering and before we go any further we absolutely must do something about that dreadful hair!"

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Akane was the one who ended up waiting up for Ranma to get home.

Naturally she ran through the whole gamut of emotions. She started with anger and jealousy that Ranma would be spending time so freely with Kodachi when Akane already had to share her so many ways, then on to resignation that it was necessary to neutralize Kodachi as a threat. From there she made her way to fury that Ranma had four girls now and still managed to find a way to be a two-timer, which faded into worry that something might have happened to Ranma at Kodachi's hands and swelled again to rage that something might have happened to Ranma at Kodachi's hands and that Ranma had probably enjoyed it, with a final segue into terror that Ranma might find reasons to rethink being with her in favor of the beautiful, elegant and rich Kodachi Kuno…

She had rather exhausted herself by the time she heard the door open.

"I'm home…" Ranma called, her voice flat, tired.

Akane got up and walked to the front door.

"Oh… hey Akane," Ranma said. Her arms were weighed down with bags and she looked exhausted. She managed a sheepish smile.

Akane ignored it. She ignored all of the observations she could have made in that moment, all of the conclusions she could have jumped to. She had raged and worried in turns so much already that she simply didn't have it in her to go through the cycle again. Instead she walked wordlessly up to the redhead and threw her arms around her in a hug.

"A-Akane?" Ranma squeaked in surprise. She dropped her bags and wrapped her arms around the girl in return. "A-are you… did something…?"

"I missed you…" Akane murmured softly, hugging tighter. All she wanted now was for Ranma to say the right thing. Just for once. Without the fight or the tears or the struggle on both sides.

Just this once.

Ranma seemed to sense it too. Her arms tightened around Akane's waist and she closed her own eyes. "I'm sorry," she whispered in Akane's ear.

The tension drained out of Akane's body. Thank you… She drew back from the hug just a little but only so she could cup Ranma's face and give her a deep, heartfelt kiss. This was better… they had been down this road so many times before but finally, finally they had done better!

Ranma stiffened for a moment, not having expected this but she quickly melted into the kiss. It wasn't as passionate as some of the others but it was heartfelt and warm and reassuring and it drove the chill of all of those dark thoughts and doubts from her mind at last.

They finally broke. Ranma ducked her head and blushed a bit, still getting used to this side of Akane.
"Hey yourself," Akane smiled. She was feeling much better now and she found she was enjoying Ranma being off-balance and subdued for once. She trailed her fingers through Ranma's hair. "Did you get your hair done?" She noticed Ranma's hair was unbound. It felt softer and silkier than usual, too, and it definitely had more body to it.

Ranma's blush deepened. "Kodachi insisted." She held up her hand, showing off beautifully manicured and polished nails. "This is gonna be such a pain to clean off and get my hair so it doesn't look weird as a guy," she whimpered.

Akane giggled. She slid her arms around Ranma's neck, a sly grin appearing. "You could just leave it for now," she purred. "I certainly don't mind my fiancee making herself pretty. Especially if I get to pretend she did it for me."

Ranma's eyes widened and her breath caught in her throat. She still had absolutely no defenses against Akane being seductive like this. "I-I-I… if… if you like it," she stammered, fidgeting cutely. "I… I wouldn't mind… for you…"

Akane was savoring this. There was something endearing about Ranma being flustered, boy or girl, especially when she didn't immediately default back to insults or teasing to escape it. "I see you did a lot of shopping? She loaded you up with girly stuff, didn't she?"

Ranma merely nodded, cheeks burning.

"I noticed a couple of bags are from that upscale lingerie boutique at the mall," Akane quirked an eyebrow. "Anything cute?"

"A-Akane…” Ranma squirmed.

Her grin widened. Oh this was fun. She leaned in and whispered in Ranma's ear. "Show me."

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The impromptu late-night fashion show had quickly devolved into a rather intense make out session and ended with them tangled with each other under the covers of Akane's bed. Things still hadn't quite crossed the line into lovemaking; Akane could still feel some hesitancy from Ranma and hadn't wanted to push the half-girl. Truth be told, she was still getting comfortable with these feelings herself. But it did a lot to erase any doubt about where her preferences lay, and it was reassuring that Ranma seemed to be as responsive to her advances as she had been as a male.

Both sides want to be with me. Ryouga can't say that! She thought smugly as she buried her nose in Ranma's hair. "Did you happen to find out what shampoo they used? It smells nice."

"It's a little... fruity smelling, isn't it?" Ranma asked sheepishly.

"So? The only ones who are going to be smelling it aren't going to judge. Besides, I asked because I want some," Akane giggled. "What do you think the chances of you convincing 'Ko-chan' to play nice enough to pay for a spa day for all of us?"

Ranma shuddered. "Please don't call her that. It's weird enough that she has a pet name for my girl side. And she's only so nice because I'm not competition anymore."

"Oh, I don't know. I think you could have a lot of influence on Ranma's final choice for his bride, don't you think?" Akane kissed her forehead gently, earning a mumble and another blush from the
"She didn't even ask all that much about her 'Darling Ranma' or how to win him," Ranma admitted. "She seemed… I dunno… she was really getting into the whole dressing me up and coaching me on how to look and act more 'refined' thing. That and just… talking I guess."

"That doesn't sound like Kodachi at all," Akane said.

"I know! She hardly even did the creepy laugh! She was just… you know how her brother gets super enthusiastic about stuff sometimes? It was like that. Like she was showing off and I was the first real audience she'd had in a long time."

"Maybe showing off for the cronies at St. Hebereke's wore thin after a while. She at least respects your female side as an equal," Akane said. "Her brother was quick enough to make peace with your guy side when he didn't think you were a romantic rival anymore either. And remember how worked up he got when Sasuke quit?" She shrugged. "Maybe she's just lonely?"

"Trust my luck that my biggest nightmare is because Principal Kuno couldn't just get his kids a puppy," Ranma groused. "I don't know if I really wanna go down the rabbit hole of feeling sorry for Kodachi right now. Especially if Nabiki's plan needs me to do something really scummy to get her out of the fiancee running."

"I'm not her biggest fan either, trust me," Akane muttered. "But Nabiki has a point… if we can use this to get early warning on whatever nasty scheme she comes up with for the next omiai interview, it's worth it. As long as she doesn't get any ideas."

"I'm pretty sure she's not into girls," Ranma replied.

Akane gave her a stern look. "Are you? Sure, I mean?"

Ranma swallowed. "... I hope so. That's… I don't wanna imagine that, please."

Akane smirked. "You sure? She's probably all kinds of into whips and chains and fun spikey things."

Ranma buried her face in the pillow. "Doooooon't…"

Akane giggled and patted her head. "So, what else did you do? You guys were out for a long time!"

"Dinner at some high-end restaurant where the plates have like two bites plus sauce on them, arranged in artful designs you're supposed to wax philosophical on rather than eat," she grumbled, remembering the dirty looks she had gotten from the other patrons. "Then a movie. Something in French with subtitles. Didn't make a lot of sense even with 'em. At least there was popcorn."

"It's like Picolet all over again, huh?"

"We actually talked about him a bit. Apparently Kodachi doesn't think any more highly of him than we do. Probably less," Ranma sighed. "In fact, she spent a lot of time trash-talking other rich-types. What is it about having a lot of money that makes you hate other people with a lot of money, or go out of your way to make them hate you, and then lie about it to each other's faces?"

"Ask Nabiki when she gets rich," Akane replied. "What does she think about Himura?"

"Called her 'New Money'. Guess that's a bad thing? Said she thought she was a creepy psycho."
"Ouch," Akane mock-winced. "At least that means they aren't likely to team up against us." She ran her fingers through Ranma's hair, earning a soft noise of pleasure from the smaller girl. "Hope you don't have to go through that too many more times."

"Akane?" Ranma mumbled, starting to feel sleepy.

"Yeah?"

"I have freckles."

Akane smiled. "I know."

Ranma raised her head a bit to look at her. "You do?"

"They're hardly noticeable, but... when you look into someone's eyes enough you notice things about them," Akane replied.

"I never noticed them. My guy side doesn't have them."

"No," Akane gave her a searching look. "Does that bother you?"

Ranma looked thoughtful. "It... I'm kinda used to thinking of my girl side as just my guy side that's been transformed and that every time I change it's just shifting everything over. But... this makes it feel like this body is a separate thing, somehow." She shook her head. "Today has been kinda surreal, you know? Playing the role of 'Ran,' this girl who doesn't even exist. I kinda... forgot what it's like to be a guy for a while. It's as if it got... I dunno, disconnected. I started to think of 'Ranma' as a separate person to keep from slipping up with Kodachi and... then the freckles... the fact that it's something Ranma doesn't have... it just made it a little too real." She gave Akane a timid look. "Is that weird?"

"I don't know," Akane admitted. "For you? Probably not. I mean I know sometimes really good actors can lose themselves in a character... think and act like they are the character for a while."

"Yeah, but I'm not a good actor," Ranma admitted.

"You're actually pretty good when you don't bog down in chauvinistic stereotypes," Akane replied. She cocked her head a bit. "So... what is this 'Ran' like?"

Ranma swallowed visibly. She blushed a little, but her arms around Akane tightened. "She's... Her name is spelt with the kanji for 'Orchid'," she said softly. "And she gets embarrassed when people spend a lot of money on her."

"So, not like you at all."

"Ha ha," Ranma scowled, then continued slowly. "She never got fitted for a bra before today or really had girly things that were... hers, you know?" She closed her eyes. "She's really close to her brother but... but she's kinda starting to wonder what it would be like to have a life separate from his..." Her voice lowered, hushed now, almost a whisper. "She likes playing volleyball, and... and... she liked... she likes having her hair styled for her, not just to match her brother's. And... she likes having freckles... because... they're something that will always be just hers."

She was trembling a little, her voice soft, almost as though she was in a trance. Akane kept silent, just listening. She could feel in her gut that this was one of those important moments that she kept missing, when Ranma just needed her to listen and to understand.
Ranma shuddered slightly and opened her eyes. "I'm sorry," she whispered, looking a little shaken. "It's… I'm…"

Akane gently touched her forehead to Ranma's. "It's okay."

Ranma swallowed again. "I must sound crazy. I feel kinda crazy, sometimes."

Akane didn't reply at first. She ran her fingers through Ranma's hair again, letting the redhead calm down a little. Part of her was reminded of the time Ranma had hit her head, but that girl had been cartoonish and ridiculous and almost intentionally opposite to everything Ranma was. This was… what she had imagined seeing once, like the echoes she'd kept glimpsing. Except… this wasn't just an echo anymore, was it?

Or was she just seeing something she wanted to see?

"I don't think you're crazy, Ra…" She swallowed, suddenly not wanting to say a name and push things one way or another. "I don't think you're crazy."

The redhead looked at her uncertainty.

"I think… I'm glad you have freckles," Akane said finally. "Just you."

The redhead's breath hitched softly.

"And I think it's okay for Ran to be here sometimes instead of Ranma," Akane said carefully. "Maybe… because I've always suspected she was there… and I've always loved her just as much as her brother. Maybe… because she was the one I fell in love with first."

The redhead clung to her a little more tightly. She hiccuped softly and trembled.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner," Akane said softly.

"Mom will kill me if she finds out," Ran said. There was something deeper than just the fear of the seppuku contract there. Something older.

"No," Akane said fiercely, cupping her cheek. "She won't."

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The residents of the Tendo dojo went about their morning business the next day, completely unconcerned by the sounds of a fierce battle in the backyard where two teenagers hopped about, traded blows and often switched between the roof and the yard as they vied for the advantage.

Akane parried a punch from Ranma by deflecting it to her right and stepping into it while she reached down for an uppercut. Ranma weaved back but, instead of the backward leaning dodge that was one of his signatures, he rolled backwards and stuck his legs up to catch her arm between his feet. She yelped as her world suddenly started to tumble as he finished the roll, using his momentum to yank her off her feet and throw her across the yard. She hit hard, bounced and flopped gracelessly on her back, panting.

She felt a tap against her forehead.

"Damnit," Akane muttered as she sat up and rubbed at her wrist.

"Not bad, tomboy," Ranma said, crouching next to her. "Good parry. You're getting faster. You prolly shoulda used it to bind my arm, though, and throw me instead of going for the uppercut."
Akane sighed. She had actually thought of that. "That wouldn't work on Ryouga. He'd just overpower a shoulder throw."

"Yeah, well you ain't sparring with Ryouga," Ranma said, tapping her forehead again. "Use the right tricks for the right opponent."

Sometime during the night, whatever alchemy that had resulted in 'Ran' faded. Ranma woke up, slightly sheepish and disoriented, and immediately left to change. He remembered everything that had happened but he claimed Kodachi must have dosed him with something to make him act odd. He griped about his hair and nails but decided that morning sparring was more important, since he was just going to have to switch to girl form for school anyway.

Part of her wondered if it was just some powder or toxin. But the fear she had seen in the girl's eyes had been very real. If she was some deeply buried aspect of Ranma, it would explain a great deal. She'd keep an eye out to see if there were any more signs of 'Ran'.

"You jealous of pig-boy?" Akane asked, smirking.

Ranma looked like he was going to protest, thought about it a moment, then shrugged. "You know what? Yeah, I am! I haven't had a decent fight with anyone in… in… forever!"

"Hey!" Akane scowled. "Uhh… no offense! You're gettin' real good Akane, but I don't think you're ready for me to really uncork yet…" He rubbed the back of his head sheepishly.

"Ryouga thinks I'm good enough to use the Bakusai Tenketsu on!"

Ranma's eyes went wide. "What!? That little…! I'm gonna wring his neck!"

Akane walked up and tapped him on the forehead, exactly as he had done to her. "No fighting on school grounds for you, remember?"

"I…" Ranma deflated and sighed. "It's not fair…" He sulked for a moment then took a deep breath, folded his arms much like his father did and nodded. "All right then, just means we gotta get you into shape to beat him, right?"

Ranma rubbed his chin. "Okay… lemme think. No point in teaching you stuff that doesn't go with your fighting style. You're a ground fighter, teaching your more speed ain't really gonna help unless you totally change how you fight. Gonna hafta go for power to blow through his defense."

"Ranma! Akane! Breakfast is ready!"

Akane smiled and nodded. She leaned up and kissed him on the cheek. "Thank you for training me, sensei."

"I… uhh… I didn't…" Ranma blushed, stammering and fidgeting. "Don't call me 'sensei' yet. I ain't earned it. I'm makin' mistakes all over the place here."

Akane felt her smile widen. Just as cute when it's 'Wild' who gets flustered as it is when it's 'Orchid'. "You're a better teacher than your Dad. And you're the only one I want teaching me from
now on." She skipped back towards the house, calling over her shoulder. "Oh, and since I got the last hit in today, I win!"

"Wait, wha…?" Ranma looked puzzled a moment, then his hand went to his forehead. "Hey, that doesn't count! That was cheating!"

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The walk to school and the morning classes were thankfully uneventful, though there was considerable buzz in the school as the first game would be right after classes.

Nabiki had scraped together what she could on the other teams Ranma's team would be facing. She sat under their usual tree, having finagled a free period before lunch that she was using to study her file.

Fuji Senior. Eliminated in the Quarterfinals last year but were favored to go further. Three of the five starters from that team carried over. Other two spots were filled by alternates who were also part of the Championship run and played in a number of games. About as senior and serious as you get in High School Volleyball.

That was just the first school Ranma and her team were going to have to face. Unfortunately there hadn't been enough time to get more useful information on them. She hoped Ranma's usual ability to improvise and adapt would be enough to carry this round.

She glanced at her other file, the one that detailed the schools Himura's team was going to face. They were all jokes - teams that got eliminated early on. Most had poor sports programs or were more heavily focused on academics. One was even a reform school whose team members typically failed to meet the requirements to be allowed to play competitively. Another was a drama school that fielded their team as an ongoing bit of performance art rather than a serious attempt to play the game. Then there was the boarding school for foreign students which suffered from an unfortunate team name, language barriers and a history of prejudice from referees stemming from the school's less than stellar reputation.

… Hold on. Nabiki opened the file and flipped through it, plucking out the information on the last school. Cobblepot Preparatory Academy. Lots of military brats from American bases, foreign businessmen and a smattering of reform school students. The team is the last one Himura is scheduled to play before the challenge to decide who Furinkan's official team gets to be. She considered. No obvious reason why their athletics would be terrible, except… ah, they haven't actually had a real Gym teacher since 1983. The job is covered by whichever other teacher has time that period. Nabiki tapped her chin with her finger. I wonder if I can do something with this?

"Hey boss."

Nabiki looked up, seeing Hiroshi and Daisuke had snuck up on her while she was preoccupied. She closed the folder and put it back into her bag. "You two have been busy, I hope?" she asked.

Daisuke nodded. "We've put out feelers. There's no one in the school with those sorts of skills but our photographer says he knows some people who know some people online."

Nabiki nodded. "Keep me posted. But for now, keep our photographer quiet. I don't want Himura knowing about him. You said you had someone outside of the school picked out? Can they be at Friday's game?"

"You mean Himura's team?" Hiroshi said. "Yeah, sure. Why?"
"Documentation, mostly. Partly to see if Himura catches on or not, partly to see if she's doing anything sneaky in her own matches," Nabiki sighed, "...and partly to keep busy because, at this point, there's not much else I can do until I find a new angle." She let her head thunk back against the trunk of the tree and closed her eyes.

Hiroshi and Daisuke exchanged a worried glance then sat down opposite her.

"You okay, boss?" Daisuke asked, leaning forward a bit.

Nabiki smiled, eyes still closed. "Yeah. This is the problem with being personally involved in the outcome. A smart businesswoman stays detached and hedges her bets and balances things so that she can eke out a 'win' regardless of the outcome. You can't lose if you've figured out a way to profit from any possible end result. But… this isn't business and those sorts of tactics don't work here." She shook her head. 'I'm a reed in the wind. Posturing aside, I'm not used to applying force and taking a stand, like Ranma."

"I'm a leaf on the wind - watch how I soar." Hiroshi said with a smirk.

Nabiki cracked open an eye and gave him an annoyed glare. "You would quote that. You realize he dies, don't you?"

"I didn't know you watched Sci Fi!" Daisuke yelped.

"Also… spoilers! Some of us haven't seen the movie yet!" Hiroshi finished.

"What, you figured me for 'Slice of life' anime perhaps?" Nabiki smirked. "Anything that isn't at least as crazy as my actual life just doesn't seem realistic anymore. Also… River Song is Melody Pond."

"Aaaaugh!"

"Get a better torrent site."

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Himura's phone started buzzing as soon as the lunch bell rang. She knew the timing wasn't coincidental and let it buzz while the teacher dismissed the class. She had been expecting this call, after all, and knew they would wait until she could pick up.

She made her way nonchalantly to the student council room, not bothering to fish her phone out of her pocket until she was inside.

"I do hope you have good news for me, Ms. Sasaki."

"Y-yes, Ma'am." The voice on the other end sounded relieved. Most likely negotiations had been rather tense but Himura had expected that. "They recognized the scroll immediately and I believe they are interested. However… they would like to speak with you before they will agree to anything. In... in PERSON, ma'am."

Himura sighed. This would be a strain on the limited resources her stipend afforded her, but it was not unexpected. "Can they wait until Saturday? I have business here that I cannot simply leave. Getting to China is not as simple as hopping on the family jet anymore."

"Y-yes, ma'am, I believe so. There merely said they will await your arrival before they give an answer."
"And they've agreed to discretion? It would be unfortunate for me if the Nerima contingent learned of this before I was ready."

"Yes, ma'am. You were correct about the political situation here. I believe that as long as they feel dealing with us is advantageous to them, they will be discreet."

Himura sighed softly. With her resources so severely curtailed by her Grandfather's ridiculous contest 'rules', what had originally been a tertiary backup plan was now vitally important. This meeting would have to be flawless.

"I'll need you to send me a full briefing - everything I'll need to know before I meet with them. I can't afford a cultural gaffe at this point."

"Yes ma'am. Uhh… Ma'am? They… they're quite skeptical. I don't believe they are taking this very seriously. I think…" her voice lowered to a whisper, "I think they are just doing this to try and get the scroll. I… I can't guarantee your safety if you DO come here."

That explained the woman's nervousness. "That's to be expected, Ms. Sasaki."

"If anything should happen to you, your grandfather…! He was VERY clear about what would become of your staff should any harm come to you."

Himura's jaw tightened. "Then you had best hope my negotiations go well. For both our sakes."

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"Welcome, Keki and Wahine!"

Ranma scowled as the Principal's voice boomed over the gym loudspeaker. She tugged at her uniform bottoms, to make sure they were in place. Being as tight at it was, the wedgie potential was awfully high but at least there was plenty of freedom of movement.

"I kind of wish we had gone with something less tight..." Riko groused, rubbing her stomach with a grimace. She twisted to glance at her own backside and sighed.

"You worry way too much," Yuka said, smacking her bottom and earning a yelp. "You fill that out better than I do!"

Riko crossed her arms and blushed. "I would be happier if the jiggle factor wasn't quite so high, thanks!"

Rin put her hands on her own flat chest and sighed dejectedly.

"Ranma, how do you deal with it?" Riko asked, still blushing. "I mean parading around in outfits like this with all of your flaws on display to the whole world?"

"Simple. She doesn't have any flaws," Yuka sniffed.

Ranma smiled sheepishly. Self consciously, she reached up a finger and brushed it across the faint line of freckles she knew were dusting her cheekbones. "I dunno about that, but I can tell you guys ain't noticing all these 'flaws' you're so worried about," she shrugged. "Most of the stuff you're worried about doesn't even get noticed."

"You know, that's a good point," Sayuri said, adjusting her top. "You've got an inside track on that. What do guys notice?"
"Boobs and Butts," Yuka said dryly.

Ranma rolled her eyes. "Well... yeah. But more'n that. A lot of it comes down to attitude and demeanor. These guys...?" She thumbed towards the doors leading to the gym. "Confidence is a huge turn on. Why do you think they completely lose it over Akane? A girl struts out there, acts like she's the hottest thing since fire was invented, and that's what they see." She shrugged. "That's not the only thing that works and there's different approaches of course... tsundere, cutsey, haughty... but all of 'em got the confidence thing in common."

Yuka raised an eyebrow. "That... actually makes sense."

Riko beamed and clasped her hands. "You're our own secret weapon! An informant with all the secrets of the boys' minds!"

Ranma snorted. "Ain't no secret. Guys're simple. Look, just go out there with the attitude that you got what they want. 'Cause you do. You can do what you want with that and, whatever that is, they'll eat it up as long as you're confident."

"Th-that's easy for you Senpai..." Rin said, fidgeting a little.

"We be havin' de big fun yeah? YEAH!" The crowd outside roared in response. "Now, to introduce da teams, here is our Volleyball team captain, Himura Tanaka!"

"I do so love the idea of Himura introducing us every game," Yuka growled.

"Sayuri is the Captain," Rin huffed.

Sayuri grinned and ruffled her hair. "Not yet... but give us five or six games." She held out her fist. "All right. Remember the Team motto..."

"We have a team motto?" Riko asked, confused.

"I'm making one, right now." Sayuri said. She glanced at Ranma. "In honor of the spirit of Anything Goes, and the theme music Hiroshi and Daisuke chose for us. 'No member of this team may, under any circumstances, ever give up.'" She put her fist forward. "Got it?"

Ranma smirked and put her hand on top. "It's how I live."

Rin put hers on top next, nodding. She looked at Ranma, her expression uncertain, thoughtful, but it quickly changed to her usual exuberant confidence. Yuka was next, finally followed by Riko.

"Break!" Sayuri said, then motioned them to follow her to the door.

Ranma was about to follow, but Rin caught her shirt.

"Senpai... are... are your parents going to be watching?" She asked.

Ranma cocked her head. "No... why would they?"

"B-because you're playing? To cheer you on?"

Ranma shrugged. "Why? There's nothin' in it for them." There was no bitterness or sarcasm in her words. Just statement of fact. "Honestly, they'd probably be pretty horrified by all this."

Rin's expression darkened a moment, but she covered it with a reasonable facsimile of her usual smile. "W-well I'm rooting for you!"
Ranma gave her a lopsided smile. "Yeah, I know. Thanks Rin."

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Himura stood in the middle of the court, wearing her training jumpsuit and waving to the crowd, mic held high as she basked in the spotlight that was rightfully hers.

"Now for those of you who were naughty and not listening to the announcements. Furinkan is currently maintaining TWO volleyball teams in order to ensure that only the best of the best serve our school in our run to the Championships!" Himura said, waving to the crowd. "So, if any of you are hoping to see me play tonight, I'm afraid you'll have to wait until Friday."

There was a chorus of 'Awwws' and 'Boos' from the crowd.

"BUT, those of you hoping to see Furinkan's own star martial artist Ranma Saotome play, you're in luck!" Himura smiled as the cheers rose. "It gives me GREAT pleasure to present to you Furinkan's team for ALL of the home games for the first half of the season, THE FURINKAN BUSTER CORP!"

The loudspeakers kicked into Saikyou Yuusha Robo Gundan as the locker room doors opened. Himura had even arranged for a smoke machine and some colorful light choreography.

It would have been so easy to leave them to their own devices but she didn't want that. Nabiki had already demonstrated that she was more than capable of turning Himura's attempts to make the other team look poor against her, so she would go the opposite direction. She'd build it up, give the students a spectacle and fan the flames of interest and rivalry. Showing honest support for the team would serve to make Nabiki more paranoid and, in the end, it didn't really matter, did it? The real game had nothing to do with a silly game of volleyball.

Sayuri trotted out first. Himura scowled a moment before she could cover it. She didn't like Sayuri's presumption. She didn't like that she had usurped the position of Team Captain from Ranma nor how comfortable she seemed in that position. She especially didn't like how the crowd roared for her as she ran out or the confident smirk she wore. "And first, Acting Team Captain for the home team, Sayuri Kamei!"

Sayuri was one of those difficult people who wouldn't play the game properly. Himura had tried to train the girl - to educate her as to her proper place in things. Everyone had a station they were destined for, be it by skill, breeding, social standing or wealth and Sayuri had none of these things. But the girl not only refused to acknowledge the rules surrounding her proper place, but seemed hell-bent on circumventing them, substituting flair, defiance and pride for actual substance.

What was even more infuriating was that it was working. And now Himura was in the galling position of having to acknowledge one of the lowly sheep as an equal, however temporarily.

When this was all over, Himura resolved to ensure that Sayuri's future prospects were as dim as they deserved to be.

Next were Riko and Yuka. Himura saw them simply as hangers-on, caught up in the wake of their more flamboyant friends. Might do well to show them mercy when all was said and done, depending on how quickly they retreated to their proper places. Himura suspected without the support of the others they'd snap back to their proper level of anonymity quickly enough. For now, though, they seemed to take on a disconcerting glow as the roar of the crowd reached them. The spotlight could give unfortunate notions of grandeur to those who were in the midst of their allotted fifteen minutes. "Next up is the midfield, Riko Shimizu and Yuka Toshima!"
Then came Rin. Again Himura needed to struggle to maintain her smile. "And the team's infamous little striker, Rin Ito!"

Himura had little direct quarrel with Rin, but the girl's family was like Sayuri - defiant, reaching for things beyond their station, and her own father had utterly failed to deal with them properly, instead stumbling into abject failure himself. Rin herself was innocent enough, even talented, but her ambitions needed to be blunted here and now to ensure her father's legacy was not further rewarded. It was a matter of pride at this point, something Himura's father had had entirely too little of.

It was… disconcerting how much the crowd shouted Rin's name, however. She could be a problem if she proved too popular. Her facade of innocence and her admittedly tremendous skill made her a danger for that.

And finally out came the last. Ranma. The prize of Himura's little contest.

Himura smiled. Already things had progressed better than she had hoped. All of the pieces were falling into place and with Ranma herself blossoming more than she could have dreamed. "And lastly, the girl you've all come to see play, RANMA SAOTOME!"

She wondered if, deep down, Ranma knew? It was unlikely, but… she imagined it must be there somewhere, driving all of this.

The crowd roared. The rumours going around casting doubt on Ranma's true gender certainly hadn't hurt. Himura hadn't even needed to help those along, though she had been sure to make Ranma's supposed 'engagement' to the Hibiki boy public enough to give them some credibility. Ranma so perfectly fulfilled the fantasies of the male populace of the school that they were certainly eager enough to cling to the slightest hope that the fantasy might be real.

There was a delicious irony there.

For now, though, she would let her prize enjoy her limelight and enjoy the meaningless game Himura had arranged to entertain her. It would all be moot soon enough.

By the time she noticed the Principal, it was too late. She shouted a warning anyway but the large cooler was already upended, the visibly steaming water about to strike the redhead and profoundly ruin everything.

Ranma did her best to twist out of the way, but it was already impossible to avoid. The deluge of hot water drenched her from head to toe.

"Heh heh! It's an old American sports tradition, ya!" Principal Kuno laughed in triumph. "Just tryin' to enrich the kekis and wahines with some foreign culture."

"You're supposed to dump the cooler on the coach. After the game! And why is it full of hot water!?" Yuka demanded

"Honest mistake," Principal Kuno replied, grinning hugely. "But, I'm afraid one of your members is…" He blinked as he looked over the dripping wet, thoroughly enraged form of Ranma Saotome.

Water dripped from her very red bangs, down into her face. Her uniform, now soaked, clung to her obviously feminine curves, thankfully not quite thin enough to go translucent. Her blue eyes burned with rage.

Himura's smile returned full force, a nasty edge to it as she gave the Principal a smug look. Oh my, it seems Ranma and I are in full agreement about something. I am sorry, dear Principal, but I'm
afraid I WILL be enjoying this. "Well! I don't think that was at all agreed upon, Principal Kuno!"

"B-but... but..." Principal Kuno stared at the girl in confusion. "This be some sort o' trick! This wahine should be a keki!"

"I would think Ms. Saotome's gender would be OBVIOUS," Himura replied. "While I can understand this may have been a misguided prank on your part, I'm afraid since Ms. Ranma was not party to it, this would qualify as an assault. And under the new bylaw you signed off on in the Student Charter, there is a zero tolerance policy for violence by OR TOWARDS members of the sports teams by students OR faculty."

"Wait..." Kuno gave her a panicked look. "It includes da Headmaster?!"

"It does, thanks to your signature," Himura replied. "And not only will I be forced to ask you to leave for the duration of the game but any retaliation Ms. Saotome chooses to take would, under the provisions of the bylaw, be considered self-defense..."

Himura barely got the word 'defense' out before Ranma suddenly blurred in an explosion of motion. There was the staccato sound of impacts, almost like the machine-gun fire. The Principal wheezed and skidded backwards as the enraged redhead pummeled him. A savage uppercut clacked his teeth together and lifted him off the ground, before an airborne spinning roundhouse kick slammed into his head and sent him spinning. His trajectory carried him through the gym's double doors that two students had thoughtfully held open for him, and solemnly closed again after his body sailed through.

"...Well, it seems I won't have to worry about an escort for our dear Principal. Thank you, Ms. Saotome," Himura gave Ranma a wink which earned a satisfyingly confused look from the redhead. She decided to give a bit extra; she thumbed her mic off for a moment and said "Seriously... thank you. You have no idea how much of a pain he's been!"

"You're... welcome?" Ranma replied, earning a quick elbow in the ribs from Sayuri.

Himura grinned and flicked the mic switch back on. "Now that the usual Furinkan fun is over with, let's meet our opposing team! All the way from Fuji Senior, the team that made it to the Quarterfinals last year, the Fuji Senior Ratels!"

The speakers erupted into blaring rap music and a quote in english of "Honey Badger don't give a F***". The visiting team locker room door burst open and a quintet of girls strode out. Their uniforms were black two piece garments, consisting of a pair of shorts and a halter top with a white stripe down the back.

"Team Captain, Hitomi Uzaki!" The first girl had short white hair, reddish eyes and was curvy and well toned, much to the approval of the hooting male audience. She had a fierce, almost hungry grin. She was wearing a jacket over her top, but pulled it off and flung it off to the side and waved to the crowd. Her gaze passed over the girls present and immediately locked onto Ranma. She licked her lips, her expression predatory.

"Striker Ui Inaba!" The next girl had an almost timid air about her but she was smiling brightly. She was average height and build, shorter than Hitomi, with a shock of dyed pink hair and pink-tinted contacts.

"Midfield Eruza Nakanishi!" The next girl had brown hair tied in short twintails and was slightly shorter than Ui, though she seemed considerably more confident. She had a cheetah-print sarong worn over her shorts and mimed cat paws at the crowd as the Fuji fans in the crowd chanted her
"Kaori Rikujo, Midfield!" The next girl was the tallest, with short blond hair and a statuesque figure. She had the strut of a supermodel down and seemed to be earning her fair share of cheers from the Furinkan side as well.

"And finally, server Ryoko Araka!" the final girl was a redhead with long hair that cascaded down her back. She was smiling brightly, but there was something definitely off in her eyes and smile, a glimmer that went somewhat beyond predatory.

"If the team captains will step forward we will have the coin toss to determine who goes first!"

Sayuri stepped forward. She seemed somehow small before Hitomi as the silver-haired girl stepped up to face her.

"Cute spacesuits," Hitomi said. "My little brother loves that anime. I'm sure you can make good use of them at the next anime convention."

"I get the feeling we'll be too busy this year. Maybe after the season is over," Sayuri replied, managing a confident grin of her own.

"Oh? I knew Himura's team had some teeth but I figured you were the trash she sent out to wear yourselves out in the early season."

Himura held out the coin. "Visiting team gets to make the call."

"Heads," Hitomi replied, never breaking eye contact with Sayuri.

The coin flipped and was allowed to hit the floor where it spun, wobbled, and fell, heads up.

Hitomi quirked an eyebrow. "Well. Our ball. Guess it's time to see if you have any fangs in that mouth of yours." She grinned, showing her own exceptionally sharp canines while she accepted the ball and turned back to her team and tossed it to Ryoko.

"Good luck!" Himura said brightly.

"What's with the nice routine, Himura?" Sayuri asked as Himura turned to walk away.

Himura turned, giving her a sad smile. "Oh Sayuri... Can't I support the members of the team I am captain of? Don't fret if this all gets too much for you, by the way. I know Nabiki has you in over your head. Just try and have fun, hmm?" Without another word she sauntered off, smile remaining on her face for once.

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Sayuri seethed as she returned to her team, something which was apparently quite obvious, to Yuka at least.

"Himura say something nasty?" Yuka asked as Sayuri took up the server position.

"She doesn't want me to worry my pretty little head by trying too hard," Sayuri growled. "I think she's afraid I might catch a bad case of the vapors or something."

"Well, she's gone almost an entire 30 minutes without being a bitch to one of us. I imagine it was either that or her head would just explode," Yuka replied as she turned and got ready.
"Oooh, don't you put some beautiful images in my head, Yuka." Sayuri tittered, immediately feeling better.

"Speaking of heads exploding…" Riko said. "Ranma… how?" She motioned at the still wet girl.

"Waterproof soap," Ranma grinned. "I figured pineapple-brain would try something like this."

"You mean you can just use this stuff to keep from changing?!" Yuka said, shocked.

"Kinda. It's hard to get and I've only got the one bar," Ranma said sheepishly. "Also, it takes a couple of days to wear off, so once I use it I'm stuck. Which can get awkward if my parents are around and I'm in the wrong form."

"Senpai doesn't have a wrong form," Rin said, almost growling. "Only the form she's in, which is always the right form whichever it is because it's always senpai."

Ranma smiled and ruffled her hair. "I think that's the closest you've come to acknowledging I'm a boy, Rin."

"Senpai is a boy sometimes," Rin said, looking perplexed. "Just… not right now."

Sayuri smiled briefly then put her game face on. "All right, Ranma… We went over this in practise, but since you missed it, I'll give you the short…"

"Don't worry, I've got this," Ranma said, giving her a grin.

Sayuri blinked. "No, that's not what I meant…"

Hitomi beckoned to Ranma from the other side of the net. "Let's see what you've got, little red."

Ranma's attention immediately snapped to the silver-haired girl. "Oh, you'll see what I've got!"

"God damnit Ranma…" Sayuri muttered.

Ryoko took the exchange as her cue and served the ball, dropping it neatly mid-court. Yuka got under it, popping it up for the strikers.

"Mine!" Ranma called, earning another wince from Sayuri. She leapt for the ball, but seeing Hitomi was there to block, pivoted slightly then slammed the ball, sending it to Hitomi's right, where it landed mid-court.

"Point, Furinkan!"

Ranma smirked. "Heh… Not so tough. Where are those fangs now, huh?"

Hitomi grinned, opened her mouth and flicked one of her canines. "Right here, little red. Got anything else or should I just end this quick and go home?"

Ranma scowled then laughed dangerously. "Oh you have no idea!"

Sayuri gritted her teeth. She knew what Hitomi was up to but she also knew Ranma well enough to know she wasn't going to listen just yet.

Sayuri served back, carefully watching the other team. Eruza was pacing, impatient. Ui had been shying away from Ranma's spikes so was probably timid about getting under the ball. Kaori and Ryoko were harder to get a read on. And Hitomi was focused on Ranma. That could be a decent size
hole to take advantage of if Sayuri could get Ranma to listen. She intentionally dropped the ball practically right on Ui, who sure enough seemed a bit off-balance with actually having to set. She set it a little shakily for Hitomi, who made an insultingly weak spike, right to midfield again.

"Gonna let the middle-schooler get that for you, red?" Hitomi asked while it was still in the air.

Ranma didn't answer. She practically leapt over Rin, who yelped in fear, and spiked the ball savagely, narrowly missing Hitomi in the process.

Hitomi didn't even flinch.

"*Point, Furinkan! Next point is Round!*"

Hitomi yawned and buffed her nails against her top. "I had heard you were some kind of martial arts wonder, little red. Guess that just translates into being a mediocre volleyball player, hmmm?"

Ranma was incredulous. "I'm kicking your butts here!"

Hitomi grinned. "Everyone gets one, little red."

"*Stop calling me that!*"

Sayuri put the next serve near the back of the court, though she had a pretty good idea what would happen next. The other team popped it up in an amateurish lob over the net, far corner from where Ranma was, but perfect for another spike. Ranma sprinted, made a leap that a pro basketball player would be envious of, and actually made the spike while upside-down in mid-air, driving it savagely into the floor between the two mid-fielders who seemed perfectly content to let it happen.

Sayuri noticed Hitomi watching and as Ranma made the move, she nodded.

"*Point Furinkan. First round goes to Furinkan!*"

She's gauging Ranma. Speed, jumping ability, reaction time, how she responds to goading. Sayuri thought, narrowing her eyes. She beckoned Rin to drop back, calling the girls over.

Ranma didn't notice, too busy staring down Hitomi.

"Looks like you're going to go home early tonight," Ranma said, smirking. "I'm barely having to work for this!"

Hitomi still wore that maddeningly confident smirk. "Yeah, you're definitely showing us something, little red. Tell you what, when this is all over, maybe I'll take pity on you and explain to you why you lost, hmmm?"

"What is with you?!"

Sayuri scowled as Ranma ignored her. She pulled the others into a huddle. "Okay, they're playing Ranma and ignoring the rest of us. They probably figure we're window dressing."

"So far we are," Riko said.

Sayuri shook her head. "They're not even trying. They're figuring out what Ranma can do so they can get around her. Next round they're going to keep playing it to her, but they're going to stuff it back down her throat when she tries her usual tricks."

"So how do we counter it?" Yuka asked.
"We don't. We give them the round."

"What?!” Yuka hissed. "Sayuri, these guys are championship-grade. We can't just give whole rounds to them!"

Sayuri shook her head. "We need Ranma on board, so… we give them the round. Ranma will figure out she's being toyed with. Then maybe she'll remember she's part of a team and we can start using some of those strategies we worked on. For now, play it easy, let Ranma have the ball and watch them for openings and weaknesses. Third round we go for real, with or without Ranma, got it?"

"I don't like this…" Rin said nervously, stealing a glance at Ranma.

"I know, Rin. Just hold off on the Thunderbolts, okay? I'll tell you when it's time," Sayuri replied, patting her shoulder. "Okay, everyone clear? Break!"

They all returned to their positions. Sayuri accepted the ball from the referee. *Okay, nothing fancy but no reason to make it too easy.* She served, aiming for the far left corner of the court.

Ryoko got under it, bunting it back up to midfield. Kaori set it, evidently for Hitomi, but seemed to muff it, the ball sailing just over the net on Ranma's side, perfectly set up for a smash.

"Heh," Ranma smirked and jumped for it, not seeing anyone in view as she slammed the ball down… only to have a pair of hands pop up and block at the last second, sending the ball sideways.

Ui had slipped in unnoticed and popped up with impressive jumping ability to block, sending the ball…

Straight to Hitomi, who smashed it directly at Ranma, who was still in mid-air and out of position. The ball struck the redhead square in the face, sending her tumbling backwards as it bounced off out of bounds.

"Point, Fuji!"

Sayuri winced.

"What the hell was that?!" Ranma demanded, coming right up to the net.

"That was the rest of the game, little red," Hitomi said, smirking. "I hope you enjoyed those three points you scored, because those were the only ones you'll get."

Ranma scowled, but took her position again.

Ryoko served. This time Ranma was wary, letting Riko set it up for her. She eyed Ui and Hitomi, then went for the spike again, managing to get between the pair mid-court.

Eruza blurred forward with surprising speed, dropped to one knee and bunted the ball back up perfectly for Hitomi, who drove it back down savagely, narrowly missing Ranma.

"Point, Fuji. Next point is round."

Hitomi sniffed. "You understand, don't you? Just doing a clean sweep of you losers wouldn't be any fun."

*They're keeping it away from Rin. Sayuri thought, watching. They know about her, too. Using Ranma's ego to keep her hogging the ball. They don't seem to see me, Yuka or Riko as a threat.*

Sayuri smiled. *Perfect.*
Ranma yelped as a third and final spike was shut down, then ball hitting the court and skittering away.

"Point and Round to Fuji. Score is now 1-1!"

The other team laughed. Ranma glowered and gave them the finger, then looked back at her own team a bit sheepishly.

Sayuri crossed her arms and waited as Ranma trudged back over, head hung.

"Ummm… Okay, I'm ready to hear what I'm s'posed to do now," Ranma mumbled, looking embarrassed.

"Ranma… look, this is a team sport, okay?" Sayuri said. "I know that's not usually your thing…"

"I played basketball and softball all the time last year," Ranma said, confused.

"Yeah, and you more or less played by yourself against the other team! That's fine when it's just gym class against the regular kids in your class, but these girls are high-level." Sayuri put a hand on her shoulder. "It doesn't matter how good you are, you can't cover the whole court at once."

Ranma sighed. "I know, I know. We did this before, remember?"

Sayuri nodded. "Yeah, but you actually played with us that time. You're back to trying to do it all yourself. Look, we've been practicing for this, we have a plan. Last time we followed your lead, but now I really need you to follow us, okay?"

"Hey, are we going to play, or would you rather forfeit now?" Hitomi called, spinning the ball on her finger.

Ranma snarled and glared over her shoulder at her. Sayuri grabbed her head and turned her back to face her.

"She's baiting you," Sayuri said sternly. "Ignore her. Listen to me." She leaned in and quickly whispered instructions to Ranma. She wasn't sure she could convey an entire week's worth of strategizing to Ranma in a few hurried words but as she straightened she saw comprehension dawn on Ranma's face.

"We good?" Sayuri asked, uncertain. She knew she was asking a lot of the redhead's ego.

Ranma seemed to be running through the possibilities. It was fascinating watching the process in her head as she took what little Sayuri had given her and extrapolated strategy from it. A smile spread across her face. "Yeah… yeah, I'm, uh… I'm sorry…"

"Come to practise more," Sayuri smirked and gave her shove back out onto the court.

"So, little red, shall we get this done so we can go home?" Hitomi said, crossing her arms and tapping her foot. "I've got movie tickets for tonight."

Ranma smirked, gave her a salute, then stepped back, and let Yuka take her position up front as she moved to the midfield.

Hitomi raised an eyebrow at the shuffle. "What the hell is this?"

Yuka grinned. "Oh, just giving you someone more your speed."
"My speed?" Hitomi gave her an incredulous look. "If that wasn't so delusional, I'd be insulted."

Yuka waggled her eyebrows. "Oh you have no idea."

Ryoko served, sending it to Riko's side of midfield. Putting Ranma midfield gave her fewer good options for where to put a shot. Riko easily set the ball to Yuka, who then set it again for Rin. Rin leapt and spiked, but with nowhere near her usual power, allowing Ui to dig for it and pop it back to the midfield.

"So... 'Honey Badgers', eh? So was that to reflect the general intelligence of your team, or is it referencing the smell?" Yuka asked.

"Trying to mess with my concentration, little girl?" Hitomi asked, giving her a fierce grin. "Is that what they sent you up here for?"

"Nah, I just like pointing out the obvious. Like those uniforms worked better when the team was called 'The Skunks'." Yuka's own grin got nasty.

Hitomi's eye twitched. "... Shut up."

"Oh, sorry... that was never official, was it? Just what they called you after you choked in the quarterfinals..."

"Shut up!" Hitomi snarled and grabbed the net.

"Foul! Net contact Fuji. Point to Furinkan."

Hitomi jerked her hand off the net as if it were burned. She stared at Yuka then snarled. "You're going to pay for that..."

Yuka's smirk widened. "How about we just call dealing with your breath making us even? I know real honey badgers eat rotting things but that doesn't mean you need to."

Sayuri nodded in satisfaction as she watched Yuka do what she did best. She accepted the ball and considered her options. She gave Ranma and Rin a nod. They had set up this idea without Ranma present, but she figured Ranma could improvise as soon as she figured out what was happening. She served the ball, aiming a bit further back.

Ryoko bunted the ball back to her own midfield for Kaori to set. The tall girl popped the ball up to Hitomi for a spike.

"One of your fake fangs fell out." Yuka said.

Hitomi hesitated just a moment, hand going to her mouth before she snarled and leapt for the ball. But it had already dropped too much, and she was forced to angle her strike, making a much weaker one to Riko, who dug it out easily, sending it forward to Rin, who leapt... and set the ball again, rather than spiking, sending it high and to the mid court, causing a moment of confusion for the Ratels.

Confusion Ranma took advantage of as she made one of her impossible leaps and smashed the ball, missing the top of the net by a hair and landing it right in the back left corner of the court in a completely unreachable shot.

"Point, Furinkan. Next point is round."
"I bet you think you're clever," Hitomi growled at Yuka through the net.

"Nah, I'm just a bitch." Yuka said casually. "Sayuri's the clever one." She got a thoughtful look. "Which is probably why I'm guessing she matched me with you. I'm also terrible at volleyball. Again… perfect match."

"I'm going to feed this ball to you," Hitomi snarled, pacing a little back and forth.

"Sure, but could you wash it first? I'm allergic to cheap press on nails and bad dye jobs."

Sayuri shook her head to Rin at a questioning glance. No Thunderbolt. Not yet. Sayuri took a deep breath. She hefted the ball, feeling an odd sense of certainty as her hand struck. She felt something pass from her hand into the ball. A second after leaving her hand, the ball's arc suddenly changed. It actually seemed to speed up, and dive for the floor, though Sayuri knew that was impossible. It hit the ground between Eruza and Kaori and spun away crazily, as though it had an unreasonable amount of topspin.

"Ace! Point and round goes to Furinkan!"

"What the hell was that?!!" Hitomi screeched, glaring at the ref and pointing at the ball. "That ball is rigged!!"

The referee picked up the ball, looking it over and tossing it in his hand a couple of times. He shook his head at Hitomi. "We'll swap out the ball, but there's no signs of tampering or weighting. The point stands."

Sayuri grinned as the new ball was tossed to her. She beckoned her team over for a quick huddle.

"Looks like that's 2-1 for us. Just two more and you get to make your movie date," Yuka said with a wink and waved as she trotted off to join her teammates.

"Okay, so far so good…" Sayuri said. "But we still need another two rounds."

"It looks like they're rotating their own team," Riko said, glancing over. Hitomi had moved back to the server position while Ryoko had come up to the front.

"I thought you had come up with a bunch of strategies?" Ranma said, suddenly concerned.

"We had like two decent practise sessions, neither of which you were present for - what do you want from me?!" Sayuri growled. She sighed and gathered herself. "Okay, okay… Anything Goes, right? Improvise. Riko, move to the front. You and Yuka are going to block and stuff their spikes. Just that."

"Just block? No attack?" Riko asked uncertainly.

"No, we'll attack, but from mid-court. Ranma, they're going to look for the gap Riko and Yuka leave and try and spike through that. I need you to get under it and get the ball up for Rin to spike in one bunt. We want to hit back while they're still out of position." She glanced at Rin. "No Thunderbolts, though. We'll save that for if things get dicey."

They all nodded and took their places.

"That little blonde you have there is cute," Ryoko said with a gentle smile.

"She isn't into girls." Yuka said with a smirk.
"Oh, that's not what I meant," Ryoko cocked her head slightly. "She just looks like she would be a bleeder to me." She winked, that cheerful, serene smile still on her face.

"...What?"

"You'd be surprised how much blood there is even in a small girl like that… or how red it can be," Ryoko continued, as if discussing a new miso soup recipe.

Ryoko's expression and demeanor reminded Yuka entirely too much of Kasumi, and the dissonance between that and the slasher talk distracted her enough she didn't notice Sayuri making her serve. She saw a momentary glint in Ryoko's eyes, then saw them flick to the right, and realized the ball was in play. She scrambled, but she was too late to get into position as Ui spiked the ball between her and Riko. It impacted the gym floor and bounced away, the whole team watching.

"Yuka, what the HELL?!"

Yuka slowly closed her eyes. "This is gonna be a long game, isn't it?"

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Nabiki tapped her chin as she watched the game unfold. She didn't know much about Volleyball, but the premise seemed simple enough. Ranma's team had gotten off with an early lead, but Fuji's team was closing the gap quickly.

She wondered what Himura was up to with her little 'truce' at the start. Something about it bothered her. While it did make sense that Himura wouldn't want Ranma disqualified from playing entirely any more than Ranma did, she kept playing up like she was concerned about Ranma, like she had at the Hospital.

This stinks of a Narrative. Nabiki though glumly. It's like she's trying to lay the groundwork to try and spin things. Rattled by her Grandfather's conditions? She glanced over to the team seats where Himura watched with her own group of 'Elites', as well as a number of other girls from the team. Now that there's more at stake, she's trying to hedge her bets, maybe? Generate sympathy so even if she loses the games Ranma will still play for her out of pity?

Her brow furrowed. Not that she particularly wanted to win her supposed competition with Himura. Being a person of interest to the Yakuza was a potential nightmare she wanted nothing to do with. But she hadn't accepted Himura's offer of an easy out because something felt wrong about it all. She didn't have anything concrete to base that on, but there was no reason to just give Himura what she wanted for literally no benefit.

"How game going?"

Nabiki looked up as Shampoo settled into the spot next to her. Most of the Fiancée Brigade had scattered through the gym and bleachers in case Himura or the Principal tried something beyond hot water. Ukyou'd had the foresight to decide to pair with Ryouga to keep him from getting lost and Akane had been happy enough to stay near the team bench. Shampoo had been prowling around Nabiki's side who knows where since the game started.

Nabiki shrugged. "Okay, I guess?" She winced as Fuji scored another point. "... Maybe not."

Shampoo peered at her. "Nabiki look preoccupied again."

Nabiki sighed, though she did crack a small smile. "Expanding your vocabulary a little, huh?" She sighed and pulled out her notebook, scribbling a few notes about who she saw on Himura's bench.
"Ever have that feeling you're missing something but you can't figure out what?"

Shampoo nodded. "Shampoo never come across good word for it, though."

"Someone probably forgot it," Nabiki said. The ghost of her old smirk appeared briefly then faded. "I don't trust all of this. Himura playing nice, helping Ranma without asking anything in return, offering truces… Aside from Hana's little annoyances, she hasn't done anything to screw with Ranma and I can't even clearly flag Hana's mischief as having Himura's hand in it, or it's Hana just doing her own thing to try and impress her. It's certainly nothing that would give Himura a major edge." She motioned to the bench. "Himura hasn't been watching the game seriously for about half of the match." She snapped her notebook shut. "She doesn't appear to be taking any of this seriously."

"Good… what saying… 'Poker face'?" Shampoo asked, following Nabiki's gaze.

Nabiki shook her head. "Even with a good poker face you can tell the person is paying attention and they have a stake in the game. This…?" She waved in Himura's direction. "... She doesn't seem to care about the outcome of this." She chewed on the end of her pen. "Which means she's got something else going on. But what…?"


Nabiki gave her an incredulous look. "Since when did you become my mother?"

Shampoo scowled, a little color raising to her cheeks. "Nabiki bad at taking care of self. Good teeth important in village. If be with Shampoo, need start paying more attention," she wagged her finger scoldingly.

Nabiki's eyebrow rose as her incredulity deepened. "Since when did you become my mother…?" A more lively grin tugged at the corners of her mouth. "... Kitten."

Shampoo's blush deepened but, rather than her stance wavering, her jaw set harder. "Nabiki not first girl Shampoo kiss. Not be last. Good kiss not change Shampoo's point. " She poked Nabiki in the collarbone. "Nabiki sleep bad. Eat worse. Exercise okay, but could be better. Not live to 300 that way."

Nabiki chuckled. "I'm not entirely sure I'd know what do with myself if I lived past 30."

Shampoo reached up, took Nabiki's face in her hands and forced her to look her in the eyes with a gentle but surprisingly strong grip. Her reddish eyes were flashing. "Shampoo planning to live as long as great-grandmother. Not let Ranma, or Nabiki, or any other sisters die before Shampoo. Nabiki need make better plans."

Nabiki considered a snarky comeback but she saw something in Shampoo's eyes and decided to drop her usual attitude to play straight for the moment. "Why is that so important to you?" She put her hand over one of Shampoo's and cocked her head curiously.

Shampoo looked away and quickly removed her hands. "It… it nothing."

Nabiki found her own gaze falling away. "We… should talk, Shampoo." Her eyes flicked to the side, realizing that there were a number of people who were paying far more attention to them than they were to the game currently. Damnit… "Later. Somewhere private."
"Awww…" A disappointed sound came from a few seats away.

Without looking at the source, Nabiki plucked her black notebook from her bag. "Don't I still have that marker pending from you, Shibata?"

"... I'll be good!"

She smirked and put the book away again. She glanced back over at Shampoo, who was once again uncharacteristically subdued.

Himura and her scheming could wait. For now, Nabiki had a more interesting puzzle to solve.

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I apologize for splitting this in the middle of the volleyball game. The chapter would have been huge otherwise.

I originally had a scene in Clara's Leaf where the volleyball team learned about all of the various ugliness of Ranma's past but, honestly it was all rehashing and didn't serve the plot very much, so I cut it. I think Ranma has made it sufficiently clear to them that it's a sensitive topic and bringing it up will only aggravate her further, at least for now. Naturally it'll come up again, but essentially I just wanted to show that the volleyball team was now up to speed on all of this.

I am intensely curious about the reaction this chapter is going to garner.
Ukyou gave the Lost Boy a curious glance as they walked around the outside of the gymnasium. So far they hadn't noticed any oddness. Hana was taking pictures inside, but that was her right as a Student Newspaper photographer, so there wasn't much they could do unless she decided to try and snap a few in the change rooms. There were a few Principal Kuno traps they had disabled but they didn't seem to be anything other than the stuff that was always littering the school grounds - certainly nothing that appeared to be specific to the occasion. It looked like the night might be unexpectedly quiet, which gave Ukyou the leisure to ponder her friend and sometimes partner in scheming.

"If you're going to ask a question, just ask it," Ryouga said as he peered around the corner, then relaxed, having spotted nothing.

"I was trying to be discreet and feel out your situation first, sugar," Ukyou replied, crossing her arms and slightly annoyed that she had gotten caught in her contemplation.

"Not sure that 'discretion' is really your thing, Ukyou," Ryouga replied.

She scowled. "Would you rather I bonk you on the head and call you a jackass?"

"It'd be less weird," Ryouga admitted. "How just about everyone else talks with me these days is ~DORF~" He was cut off as a large metal spatula impacted the top of his skull with considerable force.

"Jackass," Ukyou muttered and re-holstered her spatula on her back. "Now can I ask my question, or is there a form I need to fill out, too?"

"Funny." Ryouga rubbed the top of his head. "Let me guess; This is either about Ranma, or about Akane, right?"

She folded her arms. "Neither. It's about you." She cocked her head. "Are you okay, sugar?"

Ryouga was momentarily taken aback. He sighed and rubbed the back of his head, feeling like a bit of a heel all of a sudden. "I… I think so. Things have been weird lately."

"That's an understatement and a half," Ukyou replied. "But… I heard about what happened… the shi shi hokodan that put you in the hospital. Ryouga… why didn't you tell me things were that bad?"

"They weren't… At least, I didn't think they were. Stuff… piled up all at once. Mom coming home, digging up all the stuff about Dad… Finding out Akane knew about my curse all along and how she really felt about me… Nearly losing Akari…" He leaned against the wall, studying the ground. "I mean… one of those things I could deal with… Or even if I could get it out in a good fight with Ranma. But then Ranma changed, and… and it just didn't have anywhere to go." He gave her a sad look. "I didn't intentionally cut you out or anything, Ukyou. I just… it all happened so fast and I just… I was in the hospital before I even knew I was in trouble."

Ukyou nodded. She stepped forward and put her hand on his arm. "It's okay. It's not your fault. That must have been scary."

Ryouga swallowed. "That was the worst part, I think. It wasn't. Not really. I'm not… I don't think I'm suicidal. I mean, I get anxious and humiliated and sometimes I wouldn't mind if the earth just opened up and swallowed me… but I've never really considered… you know. But when I was in the forest, and it just all came up… all of it… it was just too much. And… and somehow I couldn't even
conceive of it ever being better. I just… I just saw an entire lifetime of this…" He gestured at himself. 
"... of nothing ever changing or getting better… and I couldn't even conceive of how things could… I couldn't imagine a future that was anything more than just the present but steadily getting worse. And… letting go didn't just seem like a good idea, it seemed like the only one. So… I did."

"Until a certain stubborn redhead grabbed hold, huh?" Ukyou said, smiling a little.

Ryouga didn't meet her gaze. "Something like that."

"So now the positions have been switched? Akane is the Rival, and Ranma is… the one you're in love with?" Ukyou probed gently.

Ryouga shook his head. "It's not that simple." He squeezed his eyes shut. "Thank god it's not that simple. When I think about what an idiot I've been…" His jaw tensed. "... It's not like that, not really. It's more I wasn't… I wasn't seeing them before. Akane was… she was like this angelic figure, like looking at something with the sun behind it and the light is so bright you can't really make anything out, but you think you see something. Your mind kind of creates something. And then the sun sets and you see what it really was. And… it almost doesn't matter what the reality is because it's not what your imagination says it was and all of the things you felt about it are just… foolish and childish and humiliating." He relaxed a bit. "I'm… still sorting out how I really feel about Akane. I don't think I really had any clue who she was. It's almost like the Akane I knew is gone and suddenly I'm dealing with a stranger. And she's kind of a jerk."

Ukyou giggled in spite of herself. "And so you pick fights with her?"

"She picks fights with me. I just don't stand still and let her land a punch like Ranma does," Ryouga grumbled. His expression became more thoughtful. "Actually… I think it's kinda how I'm processing things. Dealing with people in terms of martial arts challenges is something I'm comfortable with. It's a way to understand someone that is easier for me. Plus it's maybe a way for me to at least respect her again. Maybe all the angelic choirs are gone when I look at her, but she can still throw a punch."

"She actually that much better now?" Ukyou asked, a little surprised.

"She'd have given the me or the Ranma of a year ago a decent fight at her current skill. Now… well, me and Ranma have progressed a bit," Ryouga said. "But she picks things up fast. It's actually kind of fascinating watching her figure things out in the middle of a fight. So I slow things down, ease up the pressure just enough so she can keep up."

"So you still let her land the punch like Ranma does, you just make her work for it," Ukyou said with a smirk. "You're a softie, just like Ranchan."

"I hit back," Ryouga said crossly. "I just don't put her in the hospital just because I can."

"Akane learns by doing. You tell her what to do, show her… you hit a block because she jumps right into trying to do it herself in her head before you're done explaining. It's like that with her cooking, too. And since she never tasted what she made, it was just all nightmares until I started forcing her to do it. But once she starts to find that connection between what she's doing and the results she gets, she learns very quickly. I'm guessing that's why Genma's training worked for her, as stupid as his methods are." Ukyou cocked her head. "You're training her. And you know it too, don't you?"

"More to training that fighting," Ryouga shrugged. "But if giving her practical experience is a decent workout, why not? I can leave the rest of her training to Ranma."
"Speaking of which… What about Ranma?" Ukyou asked softly. She took the spot next to him leaning against the wall and searched his face as he chewed on an answer.

"I don't know Ranma Saotome," Ryouga said finally. "I knew a loudmouthed, arrogant braggart who was good at martial arts, and was otherwise a selfish dick."

"That description could cover pretty much every male martial artist in Asia, sugar," Ukyou replied. "And most of the female ones, too. Including both of us."

"Yeah," he chuckled. "'Cept… I never looked past it with him. I never really looked at him, to be honest. It was like… someone glued a cardboard cutout over the picture I had of him in my mind, so that it didn't matter who he was or what he was doing, he was just that macho dumbass martial artist stereotype. Even when he was a girl."

"Is that why you almost never got nosebleeds when he went topless girl-side?" Ukyou asked.

"Never even saw it," Ryouga said. "Unless she tricked me and I didn't recognize her right away. Then…" he shook his head. "She was someone totally different. It was like I had to know it was Ranma to even recognize her, no matter how many times I saw her." He looked up at the sky.

"Then… When I was in that… that bad place I was in… Someone came to pull me out. And I knew it was Ranma, but at the same time…" He shook his head. "I didn't recognize her. I didn't know why there was this… this crying, scared, desperate girl in front of me that couldn't in a million years be Ranma, but somehow was."

"I kinda know how that is, I think." Ukyou said softly.

Ryouga gave her a skeptical look.

"Hey! I went through my own 'Ranma Saotome, prepare to die!' phase too, y'know!" Ukyou said hotly, blushing. "I know all about the whole mental 'cardboard cutout' thing." She hugged herself. "When Ranma and his father left me behind… It changed my whole life. I was always a tomboy, but suddenly it felt like that was a crime that I was being punished for. All of the other girls said that was why Ranma ran away - that I wasn't good enough for him. And… that made sense to me. It hurt, but it made sense and it gave me someone I could be angry at. So I grew up with my own cardboard cutout of this guy who only liked girly girls and who thought he was so much better than me because he was a guy. So… I set out to beat him at that… to be a better guy."

"Then when you show up and he calls you cute, that's it?" Ryouga scoffed.

"It was more than that, dumbass," Ukyou glared at him. "How many guys do you think called me cute before that?"

Ryouga blinked, then rubbed his chin. "Well, uh…"

"... While I was pretending to be a guy?" Ukyou added, cutting him off. "Yeah. None. And even if they did… they'd be complimenting my cardboard cutout; The one that I'd made for everyone else to see." She looked down at the ground. "When I fought Ranma… I fell apart. My bindings got sliced and I couldn't get away and suddenly… the cutout was gone and it was just me there… plain old 'Ucchan', with her boy's clothes and her boy's speech and a girl's body, and all of those boyish mannerisms that just become awkward when it's a girl who has them, and… I felt naked. And here was Ranma, seeing all of it."

Ryouga reached up, pinched his nose closed and closed his eyes. "Uhh… j-just for the record… you weren't actually…?"
"No! And I swear to god, if you visualize that I'm filling your sinuses with concrete!" Ukyou huffed, crossing her arms over her chest self-consciously. "But… he was the first person who had seen me in so long… all of my flaws, all of my awkwardness, all of my stupid unfeminine charms… just a silly girl playing at being a boy because she didn't know how to be what she was…" She smiled. "... And still he called me cute. After seeing all of that."

"He was probably just saying it to get you to stop trying to kill him," Ryouga said gruffly.

"When have you known Ranma to be able to convincingly lie to anyone?" Ukyou scoffed, then at Ryouga's puzzled look, qualified it. "When he wasn't sporting boobs of his own and dealing with teenaged boy… You know what? I am talking to the wrong person about this."

Ryouga sighed. "Did it ever occur to you that it works both ways with Ranma? That when he's a guy you girls are just as bad?" He crossed his arms and gave her a scornful look.

Ukyou glared back. "This was different, Jackass!" Her hard look faded and she looked down. "I… I thought of that, you know?" She wrapped her arms around herself more tightly. "Part of me figured that was why he did it. It didn't matter. Just… just knowing that he knew that's what I wanted to hear." The smile crept back onto her face. "And then… he kept saying it - even when he didn't need to - even when it didn't get him anything." She looked up at him. "Tell me another girl he called cute without any prompting or reason."

Ryouga's eye twitched. "A month ago I'd have insisted there must have been plenty," his eyes dropped "But… That's the cutout I'd be talking about. Ranma never said stuff like that. She was too terrified of the trouble it'd get her into."

"I guess he trusted me enough I wouldn't drug him and drag him off to Kansai or something," Ukyou said. "Not that I didn't consider it. But… it wasn't about possessing him. I never wanted Ranma to love me through some messed up Stockholm Syndrome."

"So… the Harem is better?" Ryouga quirked an eyebrow.

She shrugged. "After a year of fighting this out and going nowhere? Be honest Before Akane dropped her little emotional bombshell on you, if she had indicated she wanted you and Ranma, and that would have made her happy, would you have gone for it?"

"What? No!"" Ryouga said, frowning. He crossed his arms quickly but Ukyou could see he was slipping into deeper thought on the matter.

"What if your relationship with Ranma was the way it is now?" Ukyou amended, giving him a little extra push.

She could almost see his mental image of the cocky, dark haired male drop away to be replaced by a curvy, redheaded female; a suspicion confirmed as Ryouga grabbed his nose and squeezed his eyes closed again.

"That's… that's different!" He protested. "That's stupid male fantasy stuff!"

"And you're a stupid male," Ukyou added helpfully.

"Exactly! Wait… dammit Ukyou!" he growled, still holding his nose. "Look, you can't honestly tell me…"

"Girl who 'hates' boys, who reacts badly to romantic overtures from males and has only ever reciprocated feelings for a 'boy' who happens to be a hot, redheaded girl half the time…"
Ukyou started ticking off on her fingers. "A female warrior from a female-dominated culture derived from Ancient Greek practices, including a fair bit of inspiration from the Spartans, aaaand… a girl who spent most of puberty trying very hard to be a boy. All of whom not only accept their fiance’s curse that turns him into a girl but have no compunctions about showing affection towards him regardless of form. What do you suppose that implies, Ryouga?"

"That assuming anything will get me a spatula to the back of the head," Ryouga muttered, rubbing the spot in question. "Like when I made assumptions about transvestites in your shop one time."

"That, and you were segregating male and female transvestites in your attitudes." She patted his shoulder. "But good to see you actually remembered that. Still… we're the ones that Girl Ranma wasn't a deal breaker for and we stood by that even when there was a risk of Ranma getting stuck that way."

"Love for a person and physical attraction aren't the same thing," Ryouga countered, smirking a little. "You hit me for that one, too. Unless you're saying that you're only interested in Ranma for her body?"

"Oh my god, you are an insufferable pig, Ryouga," Ukyou scowled, all the more infuriated by his increasingly smug little smirk as he deflected her rationalizations with her own previous arguments. She rubbed her forehead. "Fine. I'm okay with the Harem because Shampoo and I have already slept together and I thoroughly enjoyed it, and us sharing Ranma seemed like an easy and logical solution. After that it just kinda snowballed. I don't know why Nabiki is okay with it, but Akane probably is because she's got a thing for Shampoo and apparently thinks I'm pretty and part of me really likes that. Shampoo is in because I can tell you from personal experience that if she ends up with only one partner for an extended period of time she'll end up killing them from exhaustion. Happy?"

She glanced at him to see he had hurriedly pulled off a bandana and stuffed it into his face to deal with the consequences.

"I thought you'd say that," Ukyou replied.

They were silent a few minutes. Ukyou listened to the soft sounds of crickets as the sky turned orange-red, and the snuffling sounds as Ryouga blew his nose.

"You should probably see a doctor about that, you know." She casually pulled out a handkerchief and handed it to him.

"Yeah, yeah…" he muttered, accepting the offered hankie.

"So… What about you?" Ukyou asked.

"What about me?" Ryouga tucked the handkerchief away for later washing.

"How do you feel about all this?"

Ryouga folded his hands behind his head. "Why should that matter? It's none of my business."

"Come off it, Ryouga. I know you better than that," Ukyou said, eyes narrowing.

"You know, I'm getting a little sick of being told that," Ryouga growled at her. "Nabiki, Akane, and now you. Look, I'm not here to mess things up, okay? I've got no place in all of this and I know it. Once Ranma and I fix my direction curse, I'll make sure Mom's taken care of then…" he trailed off, realizing he really had no idea. Most of his long-term plans had involved simply surviving whatever extended journey his directionlessness led him on until chance led him back. Not having to plan on
extensive travel times to do simple things left a disconcertingly large void in his future plans. "... I
don't know."

"What about Akari?"

Ryouga winced. "Yeah, well... maybe she's better off if I just... never find my way back to her
grandfather's farm."

"And you're okay with that?!!"

"Her grandfather seemed to agree with me," Ryouga set his jaw. "You don't need to patch me up
with Akari to make sure I don't turn into competition. I'm not after Akane anymore and I'm really
not after Ranma, so ~DORF~"

Ukyou removed the spatula from his head and glowered at him. "I'm not 'patching things up to get
you out of the way', jackass! I'm your friend. I care about you."

"... She says as she bludgeons me half to death..." Ryouga winced and rubbed the top of his head.
She had put some real effort into that one!

"When something isn't working right you do what fixes it and you're the sort who responds best to
percussive maintenance every now and then, like my TV remote," Ukyou said dryly. She sighed and
her expression softened. "Tell me what happened. Maybe I can help. And even if not... well, better
to tell someone rather than bottling it up until you explode again, right?"

Ryouga sighed, leaning back against the wall. "Shouldn't we go back inside and watch the game?"

"Ranma was winning last I checked. This one is in the bag, trust me."

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"We're doomed."

The team was clustered around their bench, taking one of their last time outs. The scoreboard was '3-
3', and they had just lost another point to the opposing team. Yuka had just proclaimed their fate as
they all slumped, exhausted. Even Ranma felt her usually boundless reserves of energy dimmed.

"They've not let up the pressure all night!" Riko complained, sitting on the bench. "My legs feel like
they're going to fall off!" She rubbed them for emphasis.

"At least you've been spared Madam Ryoko's fun facts about human anatomy and all of the
delightfully horrible things you can do to it," Yuka replied with a shudder. "I can't even tell if it's just
a routine she does to put her opponents off-balance, or if she's actually literally that warped."

Sayuri was looking haggard. She had come up with several strategies, shuffled the team, thrown
every trick she could think of at them. Typically anything she tried would only work once before
Hitomi and her team shut it down. She gave Ranma a sheepish look. "Umm... remember what I said
about following our lead? Well... uhh... If you happen to have any brilliant ideas..."

Ranma sighed. "Sorry Sayuri. I improvise, remember? I'm not so good with team strategies."

"You've always found a way through before, Ranma," Akane said, handing her a towel. She turned
to Sayuri. "And you still have Rin's thunderbolt."

"That'll work once, maybe twice before they figure out a counter," Sayuri said. "They've got their
teamwork on point and if a rally goes back and forth more than a couple of times they'll get their shot through."

In fact, Hitomi's team was a well-oiled machine. Their strength was in teamwork rather than any individual talent. Ranma chewed on the problem in her head. *Volleyball as a Martial Art… Volleyball as a Martial Art… if this were a fight you'd attack their weaknesses and try and undermine their strengths… so you'd isolate one of the team - separate and confuse them… but how do you do that smacking a ball around?*

"Sayuri?" Ranma asked, realizing she needed another perspective. "If you wanted to single out one of their team, how would you do it in Volleyball?"

"Other than say they've got thunder thighs?" Sayuri crossed her arms. "I dunno… spike the ball at their face?" Sayuri blinked, her eyes widening. "Hold on… hold on…! You're talking about attacking their teamwork, right?"

Ranma nodded. "It's a little dirty but we're kind of out of options."

Sayuri's eyes flicked back and forth as inspiration sparked. "All's fair in love and volleyball… Teamwork is our weak point - that's what we should have been attacking on their side the whole time." She locked eyes with Ranma. "*Just this once you are free to call me an idiot, Ranma. Thank you!* I've been approaching this all wrong!" She turned her gaze to Rin. "Rin, next rally, I want you to thunderbolt the *hell* out of the ball. Right at Ui's feet. Make it look like you're going for her face if you can."

"Y-you want me to *hit* her?!" Rin squeaked, glancing terrified at the pink haired girl on the court.

"No, no…" Sayuri said reassuringly. "Just make it look like you're trying. Lock eyes with her when you spike it. And *kill the ball*. Then just keep looking at her, keep making eye contact. She's the nervous one."

"I-I… "Rin fidgeted. "I don't think I can look *intimidating*…"

Sayuri shook her head, grin forming. "You don't *have* to, that's the beauty of it! Your thunderbolt takes care of that. You just have to make it clear that she's the one you're aiming for." She glanced at Ranma. "*You* need to be intimidating. Can you put the ball into Hitomi's face? *Hard*?"

Ranma smirked. "Definitely. I'll need a run up though."

Sayuri nodded. "You're serving, then. Yuka, Riko and I will get the ball to you and keep it live. Even if you gotta muffle up to rattle them, *do it*. I want them thinking we've given up and are just out to wreck them for the season." She held out her fist. "Ready?"

Ranma slapped her hand on first, quickly followed by the others.

Akane gave them a thumbs up, holding their towels. "Go kick their asses!"

They scattered back onto the field with Ranma taking the server spot this time as Sayuri took mid court.

Hitomi served, clipping the top of the net and causing the ball to drop just on the Furinkan side. Rin dug for it, popping it back to Sayuri and Riko, who were in position to set it and position it for Rin or Yuka to spike.

Instead, they stood aside at the last second as a red and white blur flashed between them and leapt.
Ranma sprinted in from the back of the court with all of her considerable speed, leapt upwards and smashed the ball so hard that she folded double, putting all of her upper body into the strike.

Hitomi's eyes widened as she felt the rush of wind just past her ear. It ruffled her hair and left a slight tickle across her earlobe. There was a bang behind her as the ball slammed into the back wall of the gym and bounced off.

"Error, Furinkan. Point Fuji! Next point is Round and Match!"

Hitomi reached up to her ear. There was no blood, but the air pressure from the sheer speed of the ball had popped out her stud earring and knocked the backing off as it passed. Her fingers trembled a little as she realized what that shot could have done had it been on target. Then her fingers curled into a fist.

"What the hell was that!?" Hitomi charged the net.

Ranma just shrugged. "Missed, I guess."

"You aimed that shot at my head!"

Ranma just grinned.

The referee tossed Hitomi the ball. "Play is still going. Call a time-out or serve the ball."

Hitomi growled and returned to the end of the court, glaring daggers at Ranma. Then her eyes flicked around as she calculated a place to serve the ball.

"She'll aim the next one left or right of center, away from Ranma," Sayuri said to Riko. "Be ready."

Riko nodded grimly.

Hitomi served. She pulled the hit a bit, having to adjust for trying to drop the ball near the left or right sides of the court to be sure she gave Ranma a wide berth. Sayuri ran for the ball but held up her hand as she realised where it would fall. "Out!"

The ball thunked onto the floor just past the line. There was a shrill whistle blow.

"Error Fuji! Point Furinkan, score 2-1. Furinkan's ball."

Sayuri and Ranma exchanged a glance and a nod. The plan was working!

Ranma bounced the ball a few times, like a basketball. She was starting to really wish she had gotten more practise in. She had some ideas for some trick shots but she wasn't confident she could pull them off without a chance to play with the physics of serving a volleyball a bit more and one more error would sink them. She just needed to get the ball over the net now and let the rest of the team handle the next two points.

This is a weird feeling, not having direct control. She shivered a little, not liking it. She glanced over her teammates and took a deep breath. Gotta trust... gotta trust... Don't WANNA trust, but... gotta trust. She tossed the ball in the air, leapt up slightly to give herself a better angle over the net and struck.

The serve was near perfect. It just barely clipped the top of the net, changing its trajectory but leaving a good deal of its momentum intact, which made it hard to predict. The Fuji team scrambled for it, just managing to dig it out and recover, setting it for a spike back over. Riko dove for the ball, got
under it and popped it back up to Yuka, who set it for Rin. Ui moved to block as Sayuri predicted.

It looked like it was a clean block as they both jumped for the ball. Ui’s eyes were already flicking to her left to look for who might pick it up while Ryoko crouched on the other side of the court, waiting.

Rin’s eyes narrowed and, with a shout, she smashed the ball. The impact sounded like a report from a gun. The ball hit Ui’s outstretched hands and flung her back. The momentum nearly flipped her over and left her to drop to the floor with a yelp of pain while the ball simply powered through her block and retained enough force to strike the floor with a resounding *bang* and bounce off towards the rafters of the gym.

Ui sprawled on the floor and clutched her injured hands to her chest with a whimper as the rest of her team clustered around her and called a time out.

Oh crap… Ranma ran forward to Rin, the rest of the team not far behind as the diminutive striker stared at the pink haired girl while her hands were examined.

Rin's breath was coming in short hiccups and she was trembling by the time Ranma got there. She didn't look up when Ranma reached her side and put a hand on her shoulder.

"Rin, are you okay…?"

"I-I-I h-hit it too… t-t-too hard," Rin stuttered between spasms for air, her eyes still locked on the fallen girl and an expression of horror frozen on her face. "I-I… I was t-t-trying to be mean, s-so I th-thought about your D-dad…"

Sayuri gently took Rin by the shoulders and turned her to face her. "Rin, are you okay? Can you keep playing?

Rin slowly raised her head to look at Sayuri then turned back to look at Ui again. The other girl was standing now and shaking her hands, the palms of which were still red. There were tears in the corners of her eyes, but at a spoken question from Hitomi she nodded. It seemed she felt well enough to keep playing.

The referee walked over, verified she was good to play, then called out. "Point Furinkan. Score is 2-2, next point is Game Point."

Rin turned back to Sayuri. She appeared to struggle for a moment and her trembling got worse. Tentatively, she shook her head.

"D-dad warned me… S-said I needed to control it b-better," Rin mumbled.

Sayuri closed her eyes and sighed. She was silent for a good three count, then opened her eyes again. "Rin, I don't have anyone to rotate in for you so I have to keep you on the field. But you don't have to play anymore if you can't. I'm going to put you in the midcourt with Riko, okay?"

Rin’s closed her eyes and, after a moment, nodded reluctantly.

Ranma walked over to Sayuri and handed her the ball as Riko escorted Rin to the mid court.

"Look, Sayuri…” Ranma looked her in the eye. "I'm sorry I didn't help you more with this. Now there's no time and I'm realizin' there's a ton I should have been workin' on with you guys. But you do something with the ball sometimes when you serve - I'm not sure how. You're not a martial artist and I was meanin' to figure it out with you, but I let myself get distracted. If I'm right, though…"
"You gotta be mindful of your feelings when you serve. Pick one. Pick the strongest feeling you got and put that into the ball." She bit her lip. She had a suspicion about what Sayuri was doing but she had never confirmed it. If she said anything more, she was liable to mess things up.

"R-ranma…?" Sayuri looked startled.

"If I tried to explain now... well, I might be wrong or I might make you overthink it. You gotta just trust me on this. Pick a feeling, a strong one. Put everything you got into that. Then hit the ball. Okay?" She pressed the ball into Sayuri's hands and let go.

Sayuri scowled. "Geez, no pressure or anything, Ranma."

Ranma winced. "Look… I want nothin' more than to do it myself… to take the ball and win the game. But… but…" she struggled a bit with what she had to say. "... I can't. You're the server. If I had a few points to play with so I could learn, then maybe... but I don't. We gotta have an ace or they're gonna feed us that ball on the rally."

"You know, this is the second time you've put me on the spot for this," Sayuri said. "But… it's also the first time I've ever… ever heard you admit someone could do something better than you."

"Temporarily. Temporarily!" Ranma hissed, glancing about nervously in case anyone might have heard. "I promise I'll make it up to you! I… ice cream or something? My treat?"

"Ice cream for the team," Sayuri replied, quirking an eyebrow. "Otherwise it looks too much like a date and your wives would get mad."

"Fiancées," Ranma said through gritted teeth.

Sayuri smirked and spun the ball on her finger. "That's not what Amazon Law says, girlfriend. But, for an extra scoop, you can call it whatever you like." She winked and walked back to the end of the court.

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"Time in, Game Point," the Referee called and blew the whistle.

Sayuri took a deep breath and bounced the ball a few times. She mulled over Ranma's words in her head. She needed a strong feeling.

Confidence? Hah! Not a chance… She kept bouncing the ball as she thought. I'm not depressed like Ryouga... Anger? I mean, I'm pissed at Himura, but she's not who I'm playing and I've never really been the type to rage...

She glanced at the stands, over to the bench where the rest of 'her' team sat, the Volleyball regulars, laughing, joking and ignoring her. All except Himura, who had that insufferable smile on her face - the one that spoke of how far beneath her the girl saw everyone and everything else. She was smug and arrogant and, most of all, intolerant and condescending toward anyone else who dared show a scrap of…

… Pride. Sayuri realized. She stopped dribbling and held the ball in her hands. Pride in what me and my friends are trying to accomplish. Not the hubris of someone like Himura, but the feeling that comes from honestly believing you are doing something great - something important.

She looked across to the other side of the net, at the other team. I wanted to do this. That's why I joined the volleyball team. I wanted to play teams like this, and now... now I'm actually DOING it.
And we're one point away from winning. Just one. And that's because of ME. That's something Himura said I could never do.

A slow smile spread across her face and a warm feeling spread out from her chest to make her fingertips tingle. Yeah... that's the one. Pride. No matter what happens next. She lofted the ball, leapt up after it and swung, eyes on the other side of the net as she focused all of that sense of pride into one moment of impact.

The ball spun away from her hand. She watched in horror as it arced upwards, the serve high, slow and amateurish. Time slowed to a crawl as she saw the smirk grow on Hitomi's face and her team moved to receive and get in position to stuff the ball down the Furinkan team's throats.

Then, just as the ball crossed over the net, she felt a tug, as though a thread had been drawn taught and suddenly pulled loose. Some imperceptible connection had snapped and she could see the ball pivot and flatten slightly as some restrained force was suddenly unleashed to act on it. The ball's spin changed with a complete disregard for conventional physics and it changed course, accelerating downwards to hit the floor in the middle of all the Fuji players. It didn't bounce - rather it stayed there, spinning and grinding against the floor until whatever energies had possessed it were expended left it to return to its normal shape and behaviour. It rolled slowly away from the mark it had ground into the gymnasium floor.

The Fuji team simply stared.

"Point, Furinkan!"

"What the hell!? Hitomi wheeled and stormed over to the ref. "You can't tell me that was legal!?"

"The ball was regulation," The ref said, folding her arms and narrowing her eyes. "Look, this is Furinkan. Just be glad the building still has a roof." She blew her whistle shrilly. "Game goes to Furinkan High and The Buster Corps!"

Sayuri stood frozen and stared, eyes on the spot where the ball had landed until her line of sight was broken by her team as they practically tackled her to the floor.

Rin had been first, flinging her small frame bodily at Sayuri, very nearly in tears. Riko was right behind her, followed by Yuka and even Ranma, of all people. Sayuri laughed as they babbled over each other, gestured excitedly and generally made no sense that Sayuri could currently work out. Her gaze shifted back to the benches and her eye caught Himura's.

The tall blonde was glaring at her, a mixture of anger, disbelief and... was that a touch of worry creasing that fine blue-blooded brow?

Sayuri smirked and winked at her which caused Himura's eyes to widen then narrow as rage overrode everything else. She barked something to her underlings and stalked off.

"See you after we win game five, Himura," Sayuri said softly.

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The next day, Nabiki was sitting under the usual tree after class. She finished tallying her figures for the take from the latest game, tapping her pen against her teeth. Running the betting pools herself was a distraction for sure, but she couldn't help but feel they'd need resources. Hana had given up her own attempts though it hadn't stopped her from trying to imply Nabiki was working for her now.

Not that anyone buys that. She snapped her ledger closed and tucked it back into her bag. A nice
close game like last night kept the betting lively and it also made the odds for the next game that much juicer. She opened her mouth reflexively to chew on her pen, then stopped. She looked at it, noting the teeth marks she had already left in it, then sighed and put it back in her bag as well.

"Nabiki!"

She looked up to see Ranma trotting towards her, the rest of the volleyball team in tow. They were mostly smiles, though Rin seemed somewhat subdued.

Ranma dropped to her knees on the grass next to her. Nabiki noted Kasumi was probably going to be fighting with grass stains for the rest of the term at this rate.

"Hey, we're just headed off for ice cream. Y'know, victory celebration?" Ranma said. "Did you want to come?"

Nabiki raised an eyebrow. "What about the rest of the herd?" she asked dryly. It was slightly snarkier than she intended but she had noticed Ranma asking her to join her for things had dropped sharply since Fiancée's Tea had started happening.

"Well, Akane is headed to the Ucchan and Ukyou is already there tryin' ta make up for being closed during the dinner rush yesterday," Ranma said. "Shampoo said she had something planned for today, an' we're gonna grab Ryouga once his cleanup detail is done. They got him cleaning up the mess he made with his Bakusai Tenketsu a few days ago."

Nabiki folded her arms. "So… You asked everyone including Ryouga before me?" She gave Ranma a cold glare.

Ranma's eyes widened and she shrank back. "I-I-I didn't mean… I mean, it was just who I ran into on the way out, I wasn't trying to…!

Nabiki smirked, reached out and caught the back of Ranma's head, preventing her from retreating further. "Ranma? I'm kidding."

Ranma blinked owlishly, then scowled. "I really wish you'd stop doing that, Nabs!" she groused. "You keep complaining about how skittish I get about pissin' any of you girls off an' then you go an' play the pissed off fiancée role, and mmmmph?"

Nabiki cut her off by pulling her in for a kiss. It was rapidly becoming her favorite way to interrupt Ranma. Especially as a girl since it seemed to catch her so badly off balance still. I need to enjoy it while I can. She's getting wise to my tricks. She slipped the other arm around her and pulled her a little closer, not wanting this to be just a quick kiss. Ranma's smaller girl form was a lot more manageable that way. If Ranma were a guy she'd likely be scooting into his lap to get the same effect. She found it a little amusing that she had developed her own version of the Amazon glomping technique to counteract Ranma's flight reflex from public displays of affection.

She felt Ranma start to press back into the kiss. It usually took a few seconds to get her past her initial freeze up. Nabiki felt slender arms slide around her neck, felt the smaller girl pull herself in closer. In the small part of her mind that was always gauging the public she imagined this was likely quite the show.

Good. Mine.

She gently broke the kiss. Not because she wanted to, but because she was aware they were liable to start forgetting other people were watching if they kept going. She stayed close, though, her hand moving down to gently play with Ranma's pigtail. "I'll accept that in lieu of ice cream."
"You're not coming?" Ranma pouted and Nabiki felt a little lurch in her chest.

"I've got business to take care of," Nabiki replied softly. "I'll see you tonight, promise." She smirked. "Unless Ryouga makes his move, in which case my spare camera is in the top drawer of my desk."

Ranma blushed, but managed to look more annoyed than anything. "I'm starting to think you want something to happen between me and Ryouga!"

"You're young, you're liable to experiment and, of all of the males around, Ryouga is at least decently trainable. You could do worse," Nabiki winked. "And if that doesn't work out there's always that packet of instant nannichuan I traded Shampoo for."

"How long have you had instant nannichuan!?" Ranma squeaked, twitching back a bit but unable to escape with Nabiki's hand on the back of her head. Something predatory in Nabiki was definitely enjoying the nervousness in her eyes.

"About six months before we started dating." Nabiki grinned. "Not everything is about you, Ranma. I was curious. I also used to have two packets."

"I..." Ranma blinked then relaxed a little as curiosity overcame her nervousness. "... You tried out being a guy?"

"Mmmhmm."

"What... I mean..." She fidgeted. "How did...?"

"It was interesting. Eye-opening in a few ways," Nabiki replied. She kissed Ranma's nose. "Kind of awkward and less fun than I figured. And more than a little scary. I wouldn't mind showing you if you ever get curious, but I don't think it'll be a 'thing' for me. It did give me a lot more respect for how you handle your curse, though. Especially since yours doesn't go away after a single hot bath."

Ranma cocked her head, a thoughtful expression on her face. "What did you look like?"

Nabiki shrugged. "Nothing exciting. Certainly not as hot as I hoped. This hairstyle doesn't suit guy-me well at all," she smirked. "I took some pictures I can show you."

Ranma blushed a bit. "I... well... I mean... as long as it's not weird..."

Nabiki chuckled. "Ranma? Everything about the curses is weird. But this isn't any weirder than anything else." She spared a hand from behind Ranma's head and reached into her bag. She pulled out her wallet, plucked out a few crisp bills and offered them to Ranma, "Here. For the ice cream."

Ranma boggled. "I... but... I mean... you don't..." Nabiki could see Ranma was trying very hard to fight the urge to ask what the catch was.

"You're broke and you promised your team ice cream," Nabiki said plainly. "And don't deny you're broke because I know your finances better than you do. But we also made a decent profit on the betting pool and you guys deserve a cut of that. Besides..." She deftly popped the top button of Ranma's blouse open with one finger and tucked the bills inside. "... I'm sure I'll find some way for you to repay me."

Ranma blushed and swallowed, then nodded timidly. "Th-thanks Nabiki." Shyly, she refastened the top button of her blouse and stood to turn back to the group.

Nabiki watched her go and felt a pang of regret. Socializing wasn't really a big thing for her - you
didn't make a lot of friends and have a reputation for being a mercenary - but that didn't mean she didn't enjoy it now and then. She had somehow ended up as part of a group now and she found an odd sense of loss when she couldn't be with them that was at odds with her usual 'lone wolf' self image.

Of course she had a good reason and she looked up to see that reason walking towards her. The normally bubbly, energetic and cheerful Amazon was subdued, almost sullen. She looked like someone walking towards a punishment.

Nabiki packed her things and stood. "You ready, Shampoo?" She smiled but was careful to keep her expression as Kasumi-level of non-threatening as possible. She had a hunch that Shampoo's tolerance for teasing was currently virtually nonexistent.

"No," Shampoo said. "But that not going to change." She balled up her fists and glared at the ground. "Let's to to shed, get cold water, and get over with, please."

Nabiki nodded sympathetically and let the Amazon girl lead her towards the utility shed.

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"So… Sayuri…" Yuka said conversationally as she polished off a spoonful of something composed entirely of vanilla ice cream, fudge and a dietician's nightmares, "You maybe wanna explain what the hell that last ace was?"

"Not that we're complaining," Riko said quickly.

"But it means a lot less work for us if you can just telekinetically win the game, y'know?" Yuka finished.

"It's not telekinesis!" Sayuri scoffed. Her eyes dropped to her sundae and she busied herself stirring the strawberry syrup into the partially melted ice cream. "... I think."

"You think." Yuka said skeptically.

Everyone's eyes immediately locked onto Ranma.

"Hey, what makes you think I know what it was?!" Ranma said, holding up her hands defensively.

"You told me how to do it!" Sayuri protested, outraged.

"I told you to put your feelings into the ball!" Ranma shot back. "I figured you were doing something with your ki, but…" she shook her head. "I've never seen anything like that." She popped a spoonful of her colorful parfait into her mouth and cocked her head, a thoughtful look on her face. "Mebbe something like the iron cloth technique? Whatcha think Ryouga?"

"I was outside when the shot happened," Ryouga admitted. He glanced around the shop nervously. "Is… is it okay for me to even be in here? I'm getting a lot of stares…"

Ranma smirked. "You're in an ice cream shop with five girls, Ryouga. You're either a player or a pet."

"And I bet most of the guys here envy you either way," Yuka added.

"Bwee," Ryouga muttered, dropping his chin to his hand and dejectedly shovelling a spoonful of his sundae into his mouth.
Yuka's expression darkened. "Which reminds me, you're not totally absolved for that whole 'P-chan' scam either, bucko. The only reason you're not on the receiving end of a mop right now is that it's rude to beat up a teammate's boyfriend."

"He's not my boyfriend!" Ranma protested.

"... sorry, fiance," Yuka amended.

Ranma and Ryouga both groaned in almost perfect synch.

"You guys do realize that's a cover story, right? We're not actually engaged?" Ranma pleaded.

"I remember hearing that about you and Akane too..." Riko said innocently as she took a sip of her milkshake.

"Ever get the feeling the universe derives amusement from your suffering?" Ryouga muttered.

"Hey! You'd be lucky to end up with a hot fiancee like me!" Ranma huffed, her pride prickled.

"You're actually arguing for this now!?" Ryouga gaped at her.

"I... uh..." Ranma blinked at the stares she was suddenly getting, quickly becoming flustered and embarrassed as she saw the sly grins spreading amongst the other girls. "I-it's not like that! I'm just saying if he was engaged to a girl like me! Which he's not! Because I'm not a girl!"

"And we're not engaged," Ryouga added firmly, poking her shoulder.

"Yes! That! Also... ow!" Ranma turned and punched him on the shoulder. "You don't need to be a jerk about it!"

"What!? I barely touched you!"

"You shatter concrete with your pokes! And that was before you learned the Bakusai Tenketsu!" She folded her arms and raised her chin, sniffing. "I'm a delicate flower and you should treat me better."

There was a chorus of choking sounds from around the table.

"Delicate flowers' should be planted in the ground. Give me five minutes and I'll take care of that!" Ryouga growled, cracking his knuckles.

"Oh yeah? I've been itching for a decent fight! C'mon pig boy, heard you slowed down enough for Akane to force you to use some of your special techniques. Let's see how sloppy you've gotten!" Ranma grinned, preparing to flip out of the booth and lead Ryouga outside.

A folded menu bapped her on the head, then smacked Ryouga.

Sayuri glared at them both before putting the menu down. "No fighting. Not until you two martial artists start explaining what the hell it is I actually did in that game."

Rin quietly excused herself from the table as they all started an animated discussion of the mystery of Sayuri's unusual ability. She headed to the back where the bathrooms were, but instead of going into one, she continued down the hallway to the fire door that led out into the alleyway behind the store. After checking to make sure the door wasn't alarmed, she silently opened the door and stepped outside. Letting it close behind her, she took a seat on the back step.

She pulled her knees up to her chest and hugged them as she rested her chin on them. She squeezed
her eyes shut and tried to keep the tears from coming, sniffling softly as she gradually began to lose
the battle, as she had known that she would.

"Rin Ito?"

Her eyes snapped open. She looked up to see the familiar face of Mousse regarding her curiously.
He had an ice cream cone in his hand and was leaning against the wall next to his delivery bike. She
had been so preoccupied with her own thoughts she hadn't even noticed him!

"Eeep," she squeaked. She looked away, frantically rubbing her eyes to try and banish the tears that
had escaped with one hand while with the other she fumbled in her pocket for the worry stone
Kasumi had given her.

Mousse held out a white handkerchief to her. "Is something amiss?"

Rin stared at the handkerchief, then at him, then back, getting redder with each iteration as she did.
"I-I-I-I-I... I... I!

Mouse simply waited patiently for her.

Rin whimpered and was no longer able to look directly at him as she tentatively accepted the
handkerchief. She curled up a bit more as she used it to scrub at her face. The hand in her pocket
gripped her worry stone tightly as she tried to avoid another mental short circuit.

He shook his head as she held it back out to him. "Keep it. I have plenty." He popped a few colorful
handkerchiefs from his sleeve, tied together in a long line. "What is a magician without an ample
supply?"

She sniffed and giggled softly in spite of herself. "Thank you."

He inclined his head in a slight bow. "I don't have much opportunity to practise my sleight-of-hand
outside of martial arts battles anymore. Think nothing of it."

She shook her head. "N-no... th-thank you for being concerned..." She curled up again, blushing
once more as her innate shyness warred with the conflict that was raging inside her. Finally, the need
to speak to someone who might understand won out. "D-do you know Senpai... Ranma... well?"

Mousse leaned back against the wall and licked his ice cream cone, a scowl crossing his face. His
eyes were hidden by the light reflecting off his thick glasses, but she got the impression they had
narrowed. "As well as I care to."

"You know about the... the things that have happened in her life, right? Her Dad dragging her away
from her mother, all of the training, not having any friends or even a home... getting called
names..." she hugged her knees tighter. "You're the same, right? Running away from home to join
the circus because no one accepted you. Is that... Is that what it's like? To be a martial artist? Is it like
that for everyone?"

Mousse gave her a surprised look. That hadn't been the question he had been expecting. He studied
her a moment longer, considering.

"Martial Arts requires drive - a singular focus," he said finally. "It requires sacrifice, struggle and
pain. I suppose... that just comes more easily to those who already suffer. What is sacrifice when
you don't have anything to begin with? What is suffering when that's already all you have?" He
shrugged. "Martial Arts is just a shape to give to that."
Rin shook her head. "That's awful…"

"That's just how it has to be," Mousse replied.

"Why?" Rin asked. "That doesn't make any sense to me!" She uncurled a bit and looked at him. "My Dad was an Olympian. He had to struggle and sacrifice and suffer to get there, sure, but… He often said he only made it because of all of the people who supported him - his family and friends. The teachers and co-workers who understood why he had to spend all that time hitting a ball around or working on conditioning training. He said the only reason he made it was because he was doing it for them."

"Martial Arts is a different world," Mousse replied.

"Why!?" Rin demanded again. "You said yourself you learned everything you did because the Circus treated you like a family, right? You wouldn't have the skills you do if they hadn't." She glared at him, then blushed and hid her face again. "I-I'm sorry…"

Mousse studied her again. "... Perhaps you have a point," he said finally. "I can only attest to my own experience. The… intolerable condition I found myself in was motivation to improve myself."

"So is that why Senpai's parents do it?" she mumbled. "Do they make her life intolerable because they think it'll make her better at martial arts?"

Mousse scoffed. "Ranma Saotome is showered with praise and adoration from women and men depending on what his inclinations drive him to and, regardless of what choices he makes now, his golden future is all but guaranteed - be it with the Tendos, with Kuonji or returning to be the shining hope of the Joketsuzoku." He tossed his half-finished cone into the dumpster in disgust. "He has no concept of suffering. Much as I would love to teach him."

Rin's eyes narrowed. "Why do you have to hate him? Just because you think you suffered more? Why not hate me?" She huffed, annoyance briefly overriding her usual shyness. "I've got a good Mom and Dad. Dad supports me and trains me and I got good at what I do. And it was hard, but I didn't suffer. So shouldn't you hate me even more?"

Mouse blinked. "Because… well… I…"

"It's because you like Shampoo…" Rin said dejectedly.

"It's because I love Shampoo," Mousse said firmly. "And Ranma Saotome is unworthy of her."

"... Nabiki likes Shampoo. Do you hate her, too?" Rin asked finally.

Mousse made a small strangled noise in his throat. He closed his eyes, took off his glasses and polished them with the end of his sleeve. "That's… a matter between women and is none of the business of a male like me."

"What if Ranma was a woman?"

Mousse chuckled. "The curse might fool Outsiders such as yourself, but we Joketsuzoku…"

"I'm not talking about the curse," Rin said, annoyed. "Just pretend. What if Senpai was actually a girl and Shampoo wanted to be with her?"

Mousse's jaw tightened. "Again… that would be none of my business. It would not preclude…"
"Even if she *just* wanted to be with Senpai?" Rin cocked her head. "What happens with Amazons then?"

Mousse swallowed. He put his glasses back on, not liking the direction this conversation was going. "Shampoo… as the heir to Cologne… would be expected to take a husband regardless in order to ensure the lineage continued. Such things…" he sighed. "... Such things are not uncommon."

"Would it make you happy to be her husband then? If you knew she was just doing it for a baby?" Rin demanded.

"If… it was what she wanted," Mousse said stoically.

Rin continued to gaze at him skeptically.

"... No, it wouldn't make me happy," he admitted finally. "It's a possibility I had considered given how… cold she has been to me my entire life. I would do it if she asked me, but it would be joyless." He closed his eyes and leaned back against the wall. "I don't want a *position*, I want… a family. And I want her to be part of it. I have for as long as I can remember."

"Then why is it different if she's with a man? Why would beating Senpai up as a boy change things when there's nothing you could do if she were a girl?"

Mousse chuckled dryly. "It *doesn't* change things. I just don't know what else to do. What *do* you do when the girl you love falls in love with an Outsider just because he defeated her? Because he proved he was strong? What... except prove you're strong too?"

"Are you sure that's the only reason why she fell in love with senpai?" Rin asked.

Mousse was a little tired of being on the back foot in the conversation and decided to push back a little. "Well… why do you love Ranma?" He asked, quirking an eyebrow at her.

He expected a stammered denial, a timid confession, a stunned silence. He didn't get it.

"I don't love Senpai. Not like that," Rin said simply. "She's someone I want to be like. She's my age but she's seen and done all these incredible things." She stared out across the alleyway at the far wall. "I used to think, seeing her fight or just jump from rooftop to rooftop or doing some other incredible thing like it was nothing, that being a martial artist must be like… like living in this magical world. And I wanted to be like her. I wanted to be strong like her and be able to fly like her and… and be *special* like her. But now that I've seen what it's like… What senpai's life is like, what everyone around her thinks is normal what..." She lifted her hand and looked at it, shuddering a little. "... what it's like to *hurt* someone… I don't *want* to be in this world anymore. I don't belong here. I don't belong in *Furinkan* even."

She dropped her hand and hugged her knees tighter. "But… but if I run away, that means leaving senpai… b-because I can choose but she can't, and that's not *fair*. A-and… I just want to show her that life doesn't have to be like hers is but I don't know *how*. So… I'm scared. I'm scared that this might all seem normal to me one day - that I might be like Kasumi and just… *accept* the awful things… that I might *have* to because I can't do anything. I'm scared that volleyball won't be volleyball anymore - that it'll be like martial arts and people will get hurt of maybe even d-die over it. I'm scared that I might forget it was ever anything else."

"Why do you stay, then?" Mousse asked, mirroring the question she had asked him at the Tendo Dojo.

"I..." she sagged. "I don't know. Because I don't know what else *to* do… Because it's not right
and... and even if I can't do anything about it, looking away doesn't make it go away." She shivered. "It's like... when you're a little kid and you think you see a monster in your closet. You could hide under your blanket but it'd be worse because it's still there and now you can't see it or what it's doing. So... you just stare at it and hope that something will change, or a light will get turned on, or your Dad will come in and save you or that morning isn't too far away."

Mousse was silent a moment. "Rin Ito... can I show you something?" He extended his hand to her.

"Mnh?" She looked up at him and blinked owlishly. With a blush, she uncurled from her ball and timidly gave him her hand.

With practiced ease, Mousse swept her into a bridal carry and leapt for the roof of the ice cream shop. He felt her clutch his robe and cling to him, but he was sure and secure in his hold on her and didn't slow down, leaping from building to building to gain more height as he worked his way up the taller buildings. She was surprisingly light and easy to carry. He found the one he was looking for, one that had a tall radio tower extending further up from the roof, and bounded up the latticework structure until he reached a small maintenance platform at the top.

"Eeeeeeerrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr!" Rin squealed, eyes shut tight as she clutched his robe for dear life.

"Rin Ito, open your eyes," he said, keeping a firm grip on her. "I've got you."

She stopped squealing and cracked an eye open to look up at him. Tentatively she turned her head, not slackening her grip on his robe, and looked.

The sun was just starting to set over the city. There was a little cloud on the horizon, enough to catch the light of the sun and spread it so it appeared the curve of the earth itself was on fire and the rest of the sky took on a reddish hue. All of the taller buildings were alight as their windows reflected brilliant reds and golds.

Rin's grip on his robes slackened and her eyes widened. "Ooooooh..."

He felt her relax and knew the sunset must be as spectacular as he imagined. He eased her down onto her feet on the platform next to him, keeping an arm around her to keep her secure. "I know you can probably see it a lot better than I can. But... this is where I go when I don't know what to do. Sometimes I go higher, as a duck." He pushed his glasses up onto his forehead, not caring that it worsened his view. Sunsets were something you felt. "My eyes aren't as good as yours, so when I was a child, I, too saw the monster in the corner of my room. And I remember being too afraid to look away, too afraid to hide. So my parents, being open to such things, gave me a flashlight along with my glasses. It was old, and sometimes I had to rattle it to get it to light... but it gave me the power to make the monster go away. So it was enough. It was magic. The monster always came back the next night but now I could do something. There are monsters and unfairness and unhappiness in the world and, no matter how bright it is during the day, they always come back. And once you see them... you can't pretend they're not there anymore. So martial arts is my flashlight. It can't make them go away forever but... for right now it gives me something I can do. Even if it doesn't seem like it's enough. Maybe that's what volleyball should be for you? Even if it doesn't seem like it's enough... it's what you can do."

Rin was silent, just absorbing his words.

"I watched you play yesterday," he continued after a moment. "You're right, I don't think your art is meant for hurting people. I don't think you are meant for hurting people. But that doesn't mean you aren't fighting in your own way and it doesn't make it any less important."
"The only places I've been able to see the sunset from this high up have always been crowded," Rin said softly. "This was the kind of thing I imagined Senpai could see all the time when she flew." She glanced up at him. "I guess… this must be kind of ordinary for you?"

"Not at all," he replied. "I always loved sunsets, even if I can't see them all that well."

"Did… did you ever bring Shampoo up here?" She asked shyly. "O-or anyone else?"

"Shampoo wouldn't come," Mousse replied. "I'm sure she has her own places to watch the sunsets. I didn't have anyone else I felt like sharing it with."

"S-so… I'm the first," Rin said. She blushed but kept her composure, watching as the sun continued to slip past the horizon.

Mousse looked at her again, lowering his glasses, so he could see her better. She was the first, wasn't she?

An odd realization came over him as he studied her, watching how the last light of the day played over her hair, transforming straw into gold as the wind played with her bangs. The red-gold of the sunset reflected in her green eyes like flames in emeralds. She was petite - almost frail - and had a childlike innocence about her… the opposite of Shampoo, his ideal, in almost every way.

And yet here he was, in what was probably the first real romantic moment he had ever shared with someone else… and it wasn't with his beloved Shampoo, but this odd girl who wore her heart on her sleeve. And for some reason, he found he simply couldn't imagine anyone else in her place. Not even Shampoo.

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The train ride had been a little tense. Technically, pets weren't allowed on the train outside of their carriers, but Shampoo had not been willing to go into it and Nabiki was not about to force the issue. She kept the cat on her lap and, thankfully, the train was empty enough that no one raised a fuss. She pet her to keep up appearances, but she could feel how tightly bunched her shoulder muscles were through the fur.

Shampoo was not a happy cat.

The tension got worse as they approached the veterinary clinic. Thankfully it was nearing the end of the day and there were no other animals about, though there was one curious resident cat who came over to sniff the odd-colored cat in her arms. Shampoo growled at him but he simply wandered off disinterestedly, being one of those cats that was perturbed by very little.

"So, this is Shampoo?" the receptionist asked, her face lighting up. "Oh my goodness, she's precious! She's just a kitten, isn't she? How old is she?"

"I… uh… I'm not sure." Nabiki admitted. She did a little quick math in her head. "About… seven or eight months?"

The receptionist reached over and scratched behind Shampoo's ears, an indignity the Amazon kitten tolerated. "And you're sure you don't want to make an appointment to get her spayed?"

Nabiki felt warning claws dig through her blouse sleeves. "Absolutely sure," Nabiki said quickly. She had the sneaking suspicion that, even as a cat, Shampoo could probably do some severe damage to her.
"All right… we'll need to have you sign this waiver and there is a considerable extra fee for registering a non-fixed female." She pushed forward the paperwork. "Sorry, new regulation from City Hall to try and limit the stray cat population."

Nabiki winced at the fee on the sheet but she had been prepared for this. She put Shampoo on the counter and pulled out her wallet, payed for the registration and the procedure, and found her wallet distressingly flat and slender afterwards as she tucked it away.

"All right, if you and Shampoo would come with me to the examination room, the vet will be with you shortly. I'll get your tags made and be right back."

Nabiki picked up Shampoo and was led to one of the examination rooms. The receptionist closed the door once they entered, leaving them alone inside.

Nabiki put Shampoo down on the metal table and sighed.

"Miaou!" Shampoo said insistently.

"No, it's fine, I've got the fee," Nabiki replied.

"Miaou."

"Yes, I know you aren't broke like Ranma and can cover it. It's fine. This was my idea, I'll foot the bill."

The pink cat turned and looked at some of the posters on the far wall. One of them covered some fairly unsettling potential ailments pets could be afflicted with. "Miaou…"

"Yes, well maybe it's a good thing they said we had to get all your vaccinations done at the same time. We don't know if you're susceptible to cat diseases or not. Better to be safe than sorry, right?"

Shampoo turned and glared at her. "Miaou!"

Nabiki rolled her eyes. "Yes, even if it does involve six needles instead of one.

There was a knock at the door and the vet herself stepped in afterwards. She was an older woman with glasses and a bit of gray at her temples.

She smiled at both Nabiki and Shampoo. "Well, hello! This is our first time seeing Shampoo, isn't it?"

Nabiki nodded and stepped aside to let the woman get close. She stayed near though, as she could see Shampoo was looking a bit nervous.

"Let's take a look, shall we?" She let Shampoo sniff her hand (Which she dutifully did to keep up appearances) then gave her a rub behind the ears. With her other hand, she made a quick examination, keeping Shampoo distracted with the ear rubs. "Hmmm, she appears to be in excellent health… good muscle tone. Coat is… frankly, exquisite." She checked in Shampoo's ears then did a brief check of her teeth. "My goodness, do you brush her teeth? These are the cleanest I've ever seen!" She chuckled. "Is she going to be a show cat? I imagine her lineage must be impressive!"

"Oh it is," Nabiki replied easily. "She takes after her great-great-grandmother."

"Ah. Showcats," The vet said with a smile. "I was a bit concerned about your reluctance to have her spayed but now I believe I understand. I would recommend you keep an eye out as she gets older,
though; Purebreds can develop some nasty congenital defects."

"Miaou," Shampoo huffed, managing to sound rather offended.

"You're certain you wish to forgo the ear tattoo as well?" the vet asked. "They're quite inconspicuous and they're not something they mark down for in show cats."

"And it would be entirely too visible when she's in human form. THAT'D be fun to explain to her Great-grandmother!" "No, thank you," Nabiki said. "Just the microchip and registration is enough."

"All right. If you could hold her?" The vet motioned Nabiki to hold Shampoo as she prepared the first hypodermic.

Shampoo looked over her shoulder, her eyes widening as the vet moved in with a needle which, although small by human standards, probably looked enormous from the perspective of a small cat.

"Miaou…" Shampoo whimpered. She started to pull away, losing her nerve.

Nabiki gripped her head and made her look at her. "Shampoo… calm down," she said, looking into the cat's eyes. "You're fine… trust me, okay Kitten?" She gently stroked her head. She knew that she was talking to a person like a cat and that, by all rights, this should be making Shampoo even more agitated, but for some reason she could feel the cat responding.

"Good girl…" Nabiki caught the vet doing the first injection without reaction from Shampoo. Good, she barely feels it. I just have to keep her attention. She cursed herself for not thinking of this; the people in Shampoo's village were experts in traditional medicines and herbal remedies. Needles were probably not something she had dealt with much before.

"All right, that wasn't so bad, was it?" The vet finished with the shots. "Now the chip itself goes in the back of the neck." She took out one final needle; one quite a bit larger than the others.

Shampoo saw it coming and pulled away, eyes wide.

"Shampoo," Nabiki said firmly, getting her attention again.

The girl turned cat froze and looked at her again. Nabiki held her gaze, distracting her long enough for the vet to insert the needle. Shampoo protested and flinched but otherwise held still as Nabiki kept her gaze focused.

"Good girl. That's always the worst part," the vet said. "The chip itself is smaller than a grain of rice, so she won't even feel it." She ruffled Shampoo's fur a little.

There was another knock at the door and the receptionist walked in, carrying a collar with some metal tags on it.

"Ah, good. Now, you'll probably want to get her something fancier than this, but I do recommend you get something with the same features, and with enough room for her to grow," the vet said, taking the collar. "These are designed to break away should they get snagged on something, but they're still durable enough for most outdoor cats. I would recommend keeping her inside though, and away from the toms." She took the collar and moved to put it around Shampoo's neck.

The Amazon kitten had had quite enough at this point and straight up hissed at the doctor, drawing back a paw in warning as she growled.

"Oh… my," the vet blinked and relented. "Perhaps you should put the collar on?" She handed the
collar to Nabiki.

"I'll... do it later when she's in a better mood," Nabiki said sheepishly, mindful of the glare Shampoo was giving her.

"All right. Please keep in mind even with a microchip it's best to have a collar with tags, especially without an ear tattoo. Not all shelter workers are dutiful about checking strays for microchips before they spay them," the vet cautioned.

"I'll keep that in mind," Nabiki replied, looking the collar over. It was a simple fabric weave collar with a buckle and a couple of metal tags hanging from it. Her name was listed as the owner, along with Shampoo's name and Nabiki's phone number. The second tag had a QR code that she understood had her address and contact information when scanned.

She ran her thumb over her name on the tag. THIS would probably raise some eyebrows with anyone who knew about the curse.

She collected Shampoo and bid farewell to the vet, still holding the collar. She noticed Shampoo was very subdued on the ride home and unconsciously stroked her and cuddled her the entire way. It didn't really register as anything significant when Shampoo began softly purring part way through the trip until she was nearly back at the Nekohanten with her.

She blinked and looked down and realized that Cologne or Mousse would likely have something to say about seeing her walk in fondling Shampoo in such a familiar way. For her part, Shampoo had her eyes closed and seemed to have relaxed into a boneless sprawl in her arms. Nabiki knew Shampoo had never objected to being petted as a cat - probably as an extension of her uninhibited nature - but she did wonder if the girl might be a bit grumpy about it given the vet trip had obviously crossed well out of her comfort zone as far as being treated like a housecat.

"We're almost there, Shampoo," she said softly, intending to rouse the catgirl. Shampoo made a soft noise, blinked sleepily then peered up at her.

"How do you want to play this?" Nabiki asked. "I don't suppose you explained what we were doing to Cologne, did you?"

Shampoo looked away sheepishly and made a soft 'mew' to the negative.

Nabiki sighed. "I figured." She took a deep breath. "Well, she'll probably figure we were up to something, it's just a question of whether she feels it's worth investigating. I don't suppose you'd be okay with us just coming out and telling her?"

Shampoo quickly shook her head.

Nabiki mentally ran through a number of potential cover stories but the idea of lying to the elder Amazon again made her palms sweat. There was no 'airtight story' when it came to Cologne. So she decided to forgo one entirely.

"All right... I think this is our best shot," she said finally. "It's either this or go back to the dojo and try and come up with a cover story to give Kasumi."

Shampoo sighed and covered her head with her paws, obviously not liking the idea of trying to lie to the elder Tendo either.

"All right, just play casual then," Nabiki resumed scratching Shampoo behind the ears, blew out a breath, then walked into the Nekohanten.
"Hello! Welcome to the… oh, good evening Nabiki Tendo," Cologne croaked. She noticed the cat in her arms. "And my Great-granddaughter as well!" She hopped over to them on her staff and scowled. "I was wondering where you had gotten to! That idiot Mousse wandered off on his deliveries as well. I've been stuck working the dinner rush by myself!" She reached out with her staff and poked the cat, who had the good sense to look sheepish. "What do you have to say for yourself?"

"... Mew?" Shampoo replied, shrinking back in Nabiki's arms.

"If you give me a minute to get her upstairs and get some hot water, I can get her back down to help you out," Nabiki replied casually.

"Feh. There's hardly any point now," Cologne muttered. "I do expect you home more promptly tomorrow evening though, child!" She poked the cat again.

Shampoo miaou'd obediently and nodded.

"As much as your customers wouldn't mind if I poured hot water on her right now, I imagine it'd be best for your 'family restaurant' status if I got her upstairs," Nabiki said, and started to walk past the old Amazon.

"Aren't you going to tell me what you two were up to?" Cologne asked, looking over her shoulder at her. "You are coming home rather late. And with my great granddaughter as a cat, no less."

"I'd rather not," Nabiki replied without looking back. "It's personal."

Cologne turned fully and raised an eyebrow. Then she chuckled dryly. "Ah, youth. I'll assume the details are best left to the imagination. Or… perhaps not. I won't judge."

Nabiki winced a bit but figured this was just the price of admission. Besides, being the willing organizer of a literal harem marriage didn't leave one much room for benefit of the doubt in such things. "I… appreciate it."

She took another step before she heard the thump of the staff on the floor and froze.

"Nabiki Tendo… I will expect you here after school as well," Cologne added as she hopped past her. "Wear comfortable shoes; you will be on your feet most of the evening. I'll need to make up for tonight's loss of revenue. That I'm sure you understand."

"I… uhh…" Nabiki blinked. "I… don't really need or have time for a part time job, Elder. I'm sure we can work out some sort of reparations…"

Cologne tapped her on the shin with her staff. "Did you forget our agreement, child? This will be training."

Nabiki's eyes widened. Cologne had done this sort of 'training' once before with Ranma… and nearly beaten the resilient martial artist into submission with it. "I… uh… I'm not sure I'm ready for this level of training, Elder…"

"Feh, you're respectful, and you have the good sense to be nervous about the training. You're already ahead of son-in-law or Ryouga in that regard," she smirked. "I've been training acolytes for almost 300 years, child. I'm reasonably certain you'll survive this. Reasonably. I'll have a uniform ready for you when you get here after school. And do be sure to keep your after school schedule clear from now on. There are certain standards you will need to meet if you are to join my family… daughter-in-law."
Nabiki swallowed. She wasn't sure why that appellation was ominous, but somehow it was. She understood now why Ranma objected to it so strenuously. "I'll... do my best."

"You'll do a fair sight better than that or you won't last long I'm afraid," Cologne cackled and then waved them away. "Go on, off with you. I have three people's worth of work to finish and two people's worth of suitable punishments to devise."

It's was Shampoo's turn to swallow nervously.

Nabiki scuttled up the stairs quickly before Cologne came up with any more decrees. She was mentally cursing her luck; she had hoped to negotiate a somewhat more relaxed training schedule with the Elder Amazon. She probably should have known Cologne wouldn't be willing to wait.

She dropped Shampoo in the well-appointed bathroom and retreated to Shampoo's room to wait for her to return. She pulled Shampoo's Furinkan uniform out of her pack and hung it up, hoping the wrinkles smoothed out by morning. Losing my after school time isn't a fatal problem but it means I'll need to rely on Hiroshi and Daisuke more. Akane is still working with Ukyou and Ranma will probably be monopolized by Sayuri to get ready for the next game. Which doesn't leave a lot of time to get together to discuss the whole Omiai thing or to keep tabs on Kodachi or Himura... Not to mention Tatewaki will be getting out of the hospital sooner or later. She flopped onto Shampoo's bed and sighed heavily. The corkboard in her mind was a frantic tangle of colored lines now. Too many factors up in the air all at once and nothing to do but keep juggling and hope I can keep up. NOT the best strategy.

She felt something in her pocket poking her and reached in to fish out the cat collar. She ran her thumb over the engraved characters of her name again. We haven't even had a chance to really sit down and sort out how we feel about all this... or each other, she thought glumly. We all are pretty sure about where we each stand with Ranma, but that's not enough. Shampoo's mischief still triggers Akane, but at least she and Ukyou seem to get along okay. I imagine things are still kind of awkward between Ukyou and Shampoo... She dangled the tags over her face. ...Then there's ME and Shampoo...

Nabiki reached up with her other hand and turned the stainless steel tag over, back and forth. She had been considerably more comfortable when there had been something of a 'professional distance' between the other fiancees and herself. She would manage the schedules, ensure that everyone got enough time with Ranma to keep them happy, defuse any conflicts and then maybe grab a few moments with him herself at the end. It was going to be like a business. That way it would be fair and orderly and keep the chaos to a minimum. Even the playful banter or flirting was well within her usual 'business casual' demeanor.

Everyone else is right. I didn't account for me having feelings about all of this. She caught the tag and read the inscription fully.

"Shampoo"

"Owner: Nabiki Tendo"

"Contact..."

Nabiki had never been squeamish about getting physical with someone, boy or girl. Getting over that had worked to her advantage after all; grinding on another girl at the dance club would get the boys drooling and loosen their grips on their wallets. Acting interested in a seller would drop their guard and get her a better deal. She had learned to turn the sultry seductress routine on and off like a light switch. She prided herself on being able to be draped over a guy or girl one moment, looking about
They called her the 'Ice Queen' for a reason.

So why had she cracked when she kissed Shampoo? She had done similar things dozens of times before she had gotten together with Ranma - with more than a few boys (and at least one girl when she had been feeling experimental). She held it as a matter of pride that she could leave them dishevelled, panting and looking lost and abandoned while she skipped away with nary a hair out of place. She'd give them just enough to leave them horny and confused, but not so much that they might feel possessive or entitled. She had planned to teach Shampoo a lesson about her casual playfulness that way, but…

She could understand if Shampoo had just been better at the game than her and swept her off her feet with some ancient Joketsuzoku martial arts make-out technique, but that hadn't happened either. She had felt Shampoo collapse. The Amazon girl had been completely unprepared for Nabiki's tricks and had simply folded. She had surrendered to it, exactly as Nabiki had intended and far more easily than she had expected.

Except… the feeling of having this proud, powerful girl submit like that… to willingly give Nabiki that kind of control over her, even if it was just in the moment and heat of a kiss… it had sent a jolt of electricity into something sleeping deep within her - something primal that didn't listen when she tried to turn it off.

And now seeing her name below Shampoo's, listed as 'owner', it was stirring again.

This is a bad thing. Nabiki said to herself firmly. In other circumstances? Maybe I could afford to indulge this… this FEELING. But I have to stay as impartial as possible right now, even with Ranma! I have to keep a level head. She closed her hand over the tag. Shampoo would agree with me. She's pragmatic when it comes down to it.

The door opened and Shampoo stepped inside then closed the door behind her again.

Nabiki sat up and mentally winced.

Shampoo was wrapped in a large fluffy towel… which was only barely large enough. Her full breasts were bulging over the top and it was just long enough to cover the tops of her thighs and keep her decent. The photographer in her brain was already pointing out that this image alone could be worth more than the entire take from the volleyball game.

It was her expression, though, that was giving Nabiki problems.

Her eyes were downcast. She had one arm crossed under her breasts and holding onto her other arm just above the elbow, and her hair was still damp and slightly mussed. She looked almost timid.

Not a good look for someone trying valiantly to banish fantasies of a submissive Shampoo from her mind.

"I… guess you're all good now?" Nabiki asked. "You feel anything from the chip?"

Shampoo didn't look up but rubbed self-consciously at the back of her neck. "No… little bit of a bruise, but not feel anything inside."

Nabiki sighed in relief. "Okay, good. Hopefully it won't cause problems with you changing then."

She found herself fiddling with the collar and forced herself to put it down on the bed. "I guess we're ready to let them take her home, and then be cold as ice as soon as she had gotten what she wanted, no matter how attractive she found them.
good then?” She swallowed. "I should probably get going and let you get dressed…” She stood, but noticed Shampoo wasn’t moving from the door.

"Joketsuzoku have strong feelings about slavery," Shampoo said finally. "Amazons come from women who flee such things. Mongols, Musk Dynasty, Chinese Emperor… all try and enslave Joketsuzoku. All fail because we rather die than submit. Fail because we take ten, twenty, a hundred for every one of us. Learn to leave alone, even if stronger, because they know we never be slaves.” She swallowed. "Today… today hard for Shampoo. Willingly accept brand. A-accept ownership."

"Shampoo, this is just a bit of paperwork to protect you in your cursed form, it's not…” Nabiki began, but Shampoo held up a hand.


Nabiki swallowed. She stepped forward, but stopped, unsure exactly what to say or do. She felt a surge of hot shame for viewing the entire matter like a kinky little game between them. "I…"

Shampoo looked up and Nabiki could see tears in those red-hued eyes.

Nabiki closed her eyes, not able to look into the Amazon's anymore. "Shampoo… I didn't intend for this to be… to be this significant. I just wanted to give you some protection because I saw an angle Himura might try and exploit. I wasn't…" She deflated slightly. "... I wasn't thinking."

She felt Shampoo step closer. She opened her eyes and nearly jumped back to find the Amazon almost nose to nose with her. She sucked in a breath, eyes widening.

"You lie," Shampoo said softly. "You want this. Maybe you think idea to protect, but felt in kiss. Want to possess. Want to own."

Nabiki felt her mouth suddenly dry. Guilt and shame twisted in her guts, warring with sudden arousal and that greedy little voice in the back of her mind hissing Yes!

She tried to moisten her lips with her tongue, feeling those eyes burning like coals. The intensity of Shampoo's stare was like a physical thing, drilling into her. She struggled and cast about for an easy lie, a casual misdirection, a half truth - something she could say to escape the answer she didn't want to give - the part of herself she didn't want to acknowledge. But all of her cleverness and wordplay and Art had fled, leaving her alone with nothing but the truth she didn't want to admit.

"...Yes," She finally said softly.

It was the most terrifying syllable she had ever uttered - the worst admission possible. Everything she had ever sought, even Ranma, had been measured - balanced - a carefully crafted exchange where she knew what she sought and what she offered in return, and there was symmetry to it all. She knew that she had what they wanted and had the confidence of knowing she had that leverage, that power.

But, ironically, she had nothing to offer Shampoo - no power - nothing to trade. She could conceive of nothing the Amazon girl might possibly want or need from her that she wasn't already getting. Just naked want and the near certainty of rejection.

"You ask Shampoo give what she die rather than allow to be taken by force?” Shampoo asked in a low whisper. There was danger in her voice, menace. Anger and Pride flashed in her eyes.
Nabiki closed her eyes and steadied her breathing. She felt betrayed but had no one to accuse save herself. She had brought about the very calamity she had sought to prevent. And still she couldn't kill the ache in her chest that hoped that maybe, maybe... "It isn't worth anything if it's forced," she said softly. "Even if I could... why would I? It would just be... empty."

She felt Shampoo's warmth slip away as she moved. Part of her wanted to reach out, pull her close, apologize, beg forgiveness, try and deny the ugly, covetous self she had shown her. She trembled a little, expecting a slap, or a demand to leave or just to be left alone in the room.

Instead she heard the slight clink of metal on metal. She opened her eyes and turned to see Shampoo behind her at the bed, holding the collar, looking at it pensively.

The Amazon looked up at her. The anger, the pride, were gone. They were replaced with... sadness?

"Then no hide," Shampoo said softly and held out the collar to Nabiki. "Nabiki ask. Shampoo give. Is shameful? No want to give... unless Nabiki proud."

Nabiki felt paralyzed a moment, overloaded with conflicting emotions, impulses, desires.

*Walk forward.*

Shampoo's eyes held hers a moment then started to dip, disappointment filling them as she saw an answer in Nabiki's hesitation. "Shampoo see... a-ask too much..."

*Walk FORWARD damn it!*

The collar started to slip from Shampoo's fingers.

*MINE!*

Nabiki's hand caught it just as it slipped, clasping Shampoo's hand and earning a startled look from the Amazon.

Slowly, reverently, Nabiki brought the collar up and wrapped it around Shampoo's slender neck. Tenderly she fastened the buckle, just tight enough to remind her of its presence, the tags dangling against Shampoo's throat, just above her elegant collarbone.

"I'll get you something more stylish later," Nabiki said, her voice barely more than a breath.

As Nabiki leaned in to kiss her, Shampoo gave the towel a gentle tug, letting it fall to the floor.

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"So... how did we lose Rin in an Ice cream shop?"

Nobody answered Sayuri as they stepped out the front door of the store. The sun had recently set and they hadn't found hide nor hair of their striker.

Ranma felt a pang of guilt. Rin had obviously been going through a lot of emotional turmoil lately and pretty much all of it lead right back to her. And yet she had just let the girl slip from her notice at the first hint of a distraction.

"She can't have gone far... right?" Riko asked, looking to the others for confirmation as they started to walk.
Yuka stopped short, her eyes widening as she spotted something going on in the alleyway. She quickly motioned for everyone to stop.

The entire group hurriedly bunched up at the edge of the building, peering around to watch.

Rin was there with the biggest smile they had seen on her face since the sleepover. Next to her was Mousse, who was holding her hand as if he had just helped her down from somewhere.

"Thank you for indulging me, Rin Ito," Mousse said, releasing her hand and tucking his arms into the sleeves of his robe. "I don't get many chances to have a conversation with someone who has a sympathetic ear."

"No… please, thank you," Rin said. "Thank you for everything you said. A-and thank you for letting me watch the sunset with you." She blushed and ducked her head.

Mousse smiled and sketched a small bow. "It was my pleasure. I can't think of anyone else who would appreciate it as you did. I imagine… it must be quite different to your eyes."

Rin cocked her head. "Mr…" She closed her eyes a moment, gripping a rounded purple stone in her hand tightly a moment. "… Mu Tsu… Did you know that there are ways now to fix eyes like yours? So you won't need glasses?"

He raised an eyebrow. "I… did not? Something new?"

Rin nodded enthusiastically. "Sort of. They do something to your eyes with lasers. I had an aunt who had it done and I'm pretty sure her vision was worse than yours!"

"Ah," Mousse sighed. "It has been my experience that such 'miracles' tend to cost a great deal."

"I… Yeah…" Rin deflated a little. "I didn't think of that. I'm sorry…"

He shook his head. "Don't be. It's something I can work towards perhaps. A better flashlight, maybe. Providing options is always welcome, Rin Ito."

She blushed and fidgeted, looking away. "Y-you can just call me 'Rin'… i-if you like…"

Mousse was silent a moment, then inclined his head again slightly. "… Rin. I will keep that in mind. Take care. Perhaps I will see you again sometime soon."

She turned, but he had already jumped up the wall to the roof of the building and leapt away. She clasped her hands around the stone and watched him go. "… Please do."

"RIN!"

Rin jumped, spun and crossed her arms in front of her defensively. "Yiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii!"

Yuka stomped up to the diminutive striker, hands on her hips. "What the hell is this?!"

"A-an alleyway?" Rin stammered, looking scared and confused.

"Here we are worried sick about you, and you're off on a date!"

"I-I-I-It wasn't a date! I-it was j-just…" Rin stammered, looking panicked.

"Yuka, give her a break, wouldja?" Sayuri put a restraining hand on Yuka's shoulder. Yuka huffed and looked away, folding her arms and grumbling.
Rin breathed a momentary sigh of relief, then was startled as Sayuri leaned in.

"Seriously though… nicely done! I want details!" She said conspiratorially. She held up her fist, offering a bump for the shorter girl.

"I-I-I…" Rin whimpered, then timidly bumped Sayuri's fist with her own. "It wasn't a date, honest! We… I just ran into him back here, and we talked…"

"... And watched the sunset together?" Yuka asked archly. "That's a date, Rin."

"I've got the picture set of him from Nabiki." Riko said, sighing. "He's so built under that robe! You're so lucky Rin!"

"Seriously, Riko?" Yuka raised an eyebrow at her. "Mousse too? You're shameless, you know that?"

Riko smirked. "I'll share share share.

Rin's face was burning red and she gradually curled further in on herself, clutching her amethyst worry stone desperately. "Eeeeeeeeeeeee…"

Ranma and Ryouga remained at the mouth of the alleyway, watching.

"I don't know about you, but I don't think I'm really up for sitting around listening to a bunch of girls gush about Mousse," Ryouga muttered.

"Yeah, let's go," Ranma replied. "There's only so much brain bleach can do in one day."

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Ranma walked a bit in front of Ryouga, her hands clasped behind her head as they made their way leisurely in the direction of his house. She wasn't entirely ready to head home yet, to be honest, but couldn't really think of what else to do with her evening.

She glanced back at the Lost Boy. Ryouga had his schoolbag slung over one shoulder and was looking out over the canal as they walked, seemingly lost in thought.

You could grab his hand and find out what he's thinking.

Ranma shook her head to banish the errant thought. Yeah, but then I'm walking holding Ryouga's hand.

He wouldn't mind.

Ranma rolled her eyes and let her gaze return to the route they were walking.

You wouldn't mind either.

Shut up, Ranma thought gruffly. She was getting tired of these intrusive thoughts and feelings slipping through whenever she was alone with him.

Perhaps some company to help insulate her would help?

"Hey Ryouga, you peckish?" She glanced back at him.

"Seriously, Ranma?" He raised an eyebrow. "You just polished off a bowl of ice cream the size of
my head. And a parfait or two!"

"Aww c'mon, that's just sweets. The dinner rush should be ending soon. You wanna drop by Ucchan's and see how Ucchan and Akane are doing?" She walked backwards, folding her hands behind her back and giving him her best 'kawaii pleading' look.

Ryouga huffed and looked away, but there was a bit of color in his cheeks. "... Fine. But you're paying. I don't get the 'Fiancé Discount'.'

_Funny how that works on him now._ Ranma thought, smiling. _Guess Ryouga really DOES think I'm cute._ For some reason that thought didn't bother her, though she had the nagging notion that it probably should. "Sure. Just don't snark off to Akane, okay? Don't want you an' her wrecking the restaurant."

"Heh," he said, smirking a bit, then went quiet again.

Tired of walking backwards or talking over her shoulder, she dropped back to walk even with him. "You okay? You've been quiet a lot lately."

"I'm not exactly a big talker, if you haven't noticed." Ryouga slipped the straps of his schoolbag on fully and jammed his hands in his pockets.

She cocked her head, trying to read his expression. She had that weird urge to grab his hand again and find out. "You seem to talk plenty with me."

"_I argue_ a lot with you," Ryouga replied dryly.

"Not lately."

He was quiet a moment, staring at the sidewalk ahead of them. He stole another glance at her, another blush appearing and looked away. "... yeah, not lately."

She scowled. "Why are you being so weird around me?"

"You _know_ why!" he growled.

"'Cuz you see me as a girl now?" She hopped around in front of him to try and meet his gaze again, a bit frustrated that he was so much taller than her. "So? I'm okay with that. I'm not the only girl you know! You're fine around Kasumi or Nabiki... heck, you hang out with Ukyou almost as much as I do and you don't get like this! You're even cool around _Akane_ now, even if you argue a lot."

"Yeah, well I don't get inside their heads if I happen to touch them, either," Ryouga said, poking her forehead with his finger. She got a brief flash of emotion from the link. Annoyance, embarrassment, a little of that confusion that seemed to bubble up around her... and _happiness_?

She smirked. "You _like_ hanging around with me."

"Yeah, _see_?" He gestured at her, frustrated. "I don't get any privacy in my own head with you around!"

"It's not like I look all that deep anyway," she pouted and turned away, resuming walking. "It's just... reassuring, I guess. If I gotta be alone with my thoughts it's nice to have someone there with me."

"That doesn't make any sense, Ranma," Ryouga sighed in resignation.
"Yeah, well... neither do I," Ranma replied. "You said so yourself, and... I think you make more sense out of what I'm feeling than I do."

"... Are you asking me to hold your hand?" Ryouga asked finally.

Ranma slowed a bit, dropping back to walk shoulder to shoulder with him again. She was silent for a moment as she pondered. Finally she shook her head. "Not right now. I just wanted you to talk to me. I've been a girl nonstop since yesterday morning and I won't be able to change back until the soap wears off, which'll be sometime late tomorrow if I'm lucky," she said finally. "I'm just kinda slipping into that 'girl' headspace again and it's nice to have something to distract me from broodin' on it."

"Hnh," Ryouga replied, not really having a decent response to that.

"How's your Mom doing?"

"Surprisingly good. She's got a system figured out to keep her connected to the house. Even a Hibiki can't get lost if we're attached to something with a string." He smiled a bit. "She seems really excited about this cure and even if not, she's made good friends with the neighbors. It's been... well... paradise - having a home to go to with someone waiting there. It kinda reminds me of what it was like when Dad was alive..."

Ranma smiled a bit in spite of herself. It was nice seeing a bit of genuine joy on the Lost Boy's face. The flash she had gotten through the link seemed a lot lighter too. "Kinda reminds me of what it was like when Pops and I first showed up at the Tendo's." She paused and added. "... without the part where Akane smashed a table over my head."

Ryouga chuckled. "Yeah, she'd be doing that to me now, I guess. Or maybe she'd hit me with it a bunch of times with the amaguriken... Don't think I didn't notice some of your tricks showing up the last time I fought her. You're coaching her!"

"Yeah, well, if you're gonna bust out moves like the Bakusai Tenketsu on her, I figure that's fair!" Ranma shot back.

"I didn't say it was a bad thing. Just... well, you always used to flat out refuse to train her in the past. Kinda surprised you slipped into it so easily now. Not like I'm the first tough opponent she's faced."

"I... well..." Ranma blushed. "It's... ah, it's a bit different between us. It's easier to talk without one of us settin' the other off."

"Really?" Ryouga raised an eyebrow. "I figured it was because you were always competing with her and were worried that if you actually gave her any decent training she'd end up better than you."

"Hey!" Ranma slugged him in the arm. "There's no way I'd be worried about losing to Akane!"

"So you say..." Ryouga smirked, holding up his hand with his pinky extended. "Wanna pinky swear on that?"

Ranma blinked then blushed and looked away. "... No fair usin' the link like that!"

"Ha! I knew it!"

"It's not really like that..." Ranma grumbled. "It's more... I didn't really have the first clue how to teach someone, y'know? I sure as hell didn't wanna do it Pop's lousy way."
"So… what changed then?" Ryouga stuffed his hands back in his pockets.

"I guess… after seeing her train with Pops, I realized she wasn't gonna wait anymore. If I didn't help her she was gonna do it anyway and she was even willin' to resort to gettin' Pops to teach her." She shrugged. "Plus Pops got her to a point where I'm not so scared of hurtin' her by accident."

"Yeah. She's improved fast," Ryouga said thoughtfully. "But… that was always kind of her thing. I remember training her for her rematch with Kurumi."

"It's like once she gets over the hump with something, she just snowballs." Ranma looked thoughtful. "Heh… who knows? Give her a couple of years and she might actually be a decent fight for me."

"Just a 'decent fight'? I'd bet by then she'll be better than you, Ranma." Ryouga elbowed her gently. Ranma smirked at him. "Never gonna happen, Hibiki. But I'll bet she'll be kicking your ass."

A pensive look crossed Ryouga's face. "Are… we just having our rivalry by proxy through Akane now?"

Ranma considered. "... Maybe?" She looked up and saw the familiar Ucchan's storefront. The sign was down already but the lights were still on. "Why don't we ask her in person? If she hits me, then yes, if she hits you, then no."

"What if she hits both of us?"

"Then we need to go on a training trip for a week or so to let her cool off."

They both walked up to the door. Ryouga was going to reach out and pull the door open, but Ranma caught his hand and held up a finger to her lips to indicate he should be quiet.

"Let's… let's see how the cooking lessons are going first," Ranma said, looking a little pensive.

"I thought you were all over the moon about how much better Akane's cooking was?" Ryouga hissed, glowering at her.

"Yeah, well, one success in a whole stream of crimes against nature ain't a trend, and I don't wanna discourage her if it's bad and I can't fake it." Ranma glared back at him, holding his gaze until she was sure he would play along. "... Besides, what if it's pork?"

Ryouga blinked then shrugged. "What if it is?"

Ranma gaped at him. "You cannibal!" she hissed.

"What?! I'm not actually a pig!" Ryouga protested. "I've eaten way more questionable stuff out in the wilderness. As long as it's not an actual person who cares? It's not like you stopped eating pork or anything when you found out about my curse, right?"

Ranma didn't answer, instead ducking her head a little and trying in vain to hide a blush.

"... Wait… you seriously stopped eating pork?" Ryouga asked.

"I only eat it when I'm mad at you," Ranma replied curtly. "Which is a lot."

Ryouga stared at her then finally said, "... That's possibly the most tsundere thing I've ever heard in my entire life."
"I am not…! Look, would you just shut up? I don't want them to hear us," Ranma growled at him.

The two of them crept up to the door. Ranma inched it open a crack, and then both peered inside.

Ukyou was standing next to the counter, a plate in her hand, holding a pair of chopsticks in the other and chewing thoughtfully. Akane was standing in front of her, wearing an Okonomiyaki chef's outfit that matched Ukyou's and a nervous expression on her face. Her hands were clasped in front of her and she seemed to be waiting for Ukyou's verdict.

Ukyou sighed and put the plate down, laying the chopsticks on top without a word.

"... That bad?" Akane whimpered.

"Well, sugar..." Ukyou took a deep breath. "... it seems that someone is going to be serving the customers deluxe okonomiyaki tomorrow."

"Yeeeeeeeesss!" Akane hooted with joy and tackle-hugged Ukyou, who swung her around to avoid toppling over and giggled at her enthusiasm. "ThankyouthankyouTHANKYOU!"

"You earned it, Akane," Ukyou said, managing to regain her footing though she was still mostly supporting Akane in her arms. "You worked hard for this. I'm proud of you!"

"I..." Akane looked up into Ukyou's eyes, her own glistening with tears. Overcome with emotion, she pulled herself up and kissed her on the lips.

It was just a quick kiss, but it was a line that neither had crossed before. Both of them looked stunned as it ended, suddenly silent.

"I-I... I'm sorry!" Akane said quickly. "I didn't mean... well, I meant it, but..." she trailed off when Ukyou didn't respond and for a few more moments they were simply silent, looking at each other.

Then they kissed again - more slowly - more deeply - much more passionately. This one lasted until both had to break for breath, panting softly, the stunned expressions replaced with shared expressions of wonder and shy excitement.

"I've been wanting to do that for a while..." Akane said softly, sliding her arms around Ukyou's neck and making it clear she was intent on making herself comfortable in Ukyou's arms for a nice long stay.

"I... half thought we might have already," Ukyou admitted sheepishly. "I can't remember what happened on the roof too well, but I remember cupping your cheek and... well when you didn't say anything about it after, I thought..."

"I guess that would be awkward," Akane giggled. Then her expression got more serious. "It's not awkward now, is it?"

Ukyou gave her a sly smile. "If I say 'yes' are you going to kiss me again?"

"I'm planning to do that regardless," Akane murmured back. She paused then glanced towards the door. "... Did you hear something?"

Ukyou followed her gaze. The sliding door was closed tight. "No... but maybe we should move this discussion upstairs?" She returned her gaze to Akane and tightened her arms around her. "Well, maybe one more kiss first?"
The darkness was starting to settle in over the small park as the businesses in the area shut down for the night. It was getting colder too, but there were still a few insects left to flit around the buzzing lights illuminating the benches and small array of vending machines. Ryouga retrieved two beverages from one of the machines and turned back to the redhead sitting on the bench.

"Here," he said, handing her a can of milk tea. She blinked and looked up at him, then accepted it, staring at it dumbly while he sat down next to her.

"You okay?" he asked softly, popping the top on his own. Her expression was hard to read, and anytime Ranma's emotional state wasn't painfully obvious it was usually a bad sign.

"I dunno," she said softly, turning the can over in her hands. She finally popped it open and took a sip. "How's your nosebleed?"

Ryouga felt some heat rise to his cheeks. "I… think I ruined the handkerchief Ukyou loaned me. Just washed it too."

"Yeah, well… s'what you get for being a perv," Ranma muttered, though without any real venom behind it. She pulled her knees up to her chest and hugged them.

Normally he'd protest that but Ryouga didn't really feel up to debating the point. It didn't help he felt a bit perverted. Watching Ukyou kiss Akane was entirely too much like watching a sister make out with an ex, which was a whole mess of complicated emotions that a nosebleed just wasn't appropriate for.

"Maybe I should see a doctor about it," he muttered. "Otherwise hanging around you is gonna kill me through blood loss."

Not even a chuckle.

"You're jealous?" he asked after a few minutes of silence.

"... No," she said, after a pause. "It's not… it's not jealousy." She continued to look straight ahead. "I mean jealousy wouldn't even make sense."

"Doesn't have to make sense," Ryouga pointed out.

"Mnh," Ranma grunted noncommittally. "It's not jealousy. It's not like they're hiding anything from me. It's not like I didn't know about this stuff…"

"You knew Ukyou and Akane were… uhh…" He scratched the back of his head awkwardly.

"Well, not this, but… Nabiki admitted there was something going on with her and Shampoo." She sipped her tea. "I just… the way they were together, I suddenly got this… this cold feeling, deep down. Like… Like I was alone."


Ranma curled up a little more, resting her chin on her knees. "Like… 'If they feel this way about each other… if they're this happy together… why do they need me?'"

Ryouga snorted. "Ranma… none of them would have even met if it wasn't for you."

Ranma rolled her eyes. "Yeah, so I brought 'em together. Dating services do that too, but that doesn't
mean you need 'em after."

"The only reason they're even getting along now is to try and make you happy," Ryouga countered.

"I'm the reason they fought in the first place."

Ryouga scowled. "Are you trying to find reasons to be miserable? You have four girls who are in love with you beyond all reason, and somehow, against any sort of logic or common sense, you've gotten all four of them and you're upset because somehow this whole thing works!? Or are you just miffed because you're not the focus 100% of the time?"

"That's not it!" Ranma said angrily, glaring at him. Her anger faded away and she looked away, draining her can and tossing it into the trash. "I mean… it's all good now, but what happens in a few years when they get sick of my crap and realize they don't need me?"

"Why would they get sick of you? It's not like you've got any new deep dark horrible secrets they don't all already know about." He finished off his own drink. "If they were going to change their minds they'd have done it by now."

"Because that's how it works? It's why we always kept moving, Pops and me. People'd get sick of us, and we'd move on."

"That's because your Dad is a thief and a freeloader and scam artist," Ryouga replied.

"Oh yeah?" Ranma gave him a challenging glare. "What makes you think I'll end up any different, huh? Besides, you and Ukyou ended up hating me and Ukyou was my best friend!"

"Ukyou thought you abandoned her because your Dad is a jerk and I started off hating you." He tossed his own drink into the trash to cover a slight blush. "You… uh… kinda won me over. And the instant Ukyou found out you didn't betray her she was in love with you again." He shrugged. "Just… don't rob them and abandon them."

"But… what if I do something else?" she sighed. "Or… what if they'd be happier without me? I mean… What do I even bring to all this?"

"Kids?"

"Instant Nannichuan," Ranma said flatly. "Shampoo apparently still has some and Nabiki's got a packet squirrelled away. Or they could adopt. Or… I dunno, I'm sure there's medical stuff these days. I mean… If that's all they wanted out of me they might as well snag Kuno for it. He's at least a guy 100% of the time."

"Uh huh. Kuno," Ryouga said dryly. "You're worried that all four of the girls who are currently madly in love with you are going to suddenly dump you for Kuno."

"I…" She slumped and looked away. "You said it didn't have to make sense!"

Ryouga sighed. It wasn't like he had a lot of room to talk when it came to irrational anxieties… "Look… maybe you should talk to them about this?"

Ranma shook her head. "Nah… You're right, this is all stupid and in my head. It's not their problem, it's mine. I just gotta… sort out my feelings." She folded her arms on her knees and buried her head.

He elbowed her. "Call Nabiki at least."
"Mnh."

"Call her or I will."

Her head peeked out. "You wouldn't."

Ryouga smirked, flipping a coin and then catching it, then giving a nearby phone booth a meaningful look.

Ranma scowled. "You're a bastard, Ryouga Hibiki."

"You can't win 'em all, Saotome," he said, flipping the coin again.

Ranma snatched it out of the air, glowering at him as she stood up and walked towards the pay phone.

The second time the call went straight to Nabiki's voice mail, Ranma knew she had turned off her phone.

She considered calling the dojo to ask Kasumi if she had come home... but she already knew the answer. Both Nabiki and Shampoo suddenly having plans? Would have been suspicious even if she hadn't seen Shampoo head off with Nabiki as they were leaving. She already knew who Nabiki was with. The phone being off just confirmed what they were doing.

It was a weird feeling - like she had been in a crowded room and then looked up to suddenly find that everyone had gone, the place was empty and she hadn't even seen them leave. There was that nagging feeling she had been told, had been invited along, but had been too absorbed in her own crap to listen or retain any of it, and now she had no one but herself to blame.

She hung the receiver up and jammed her remaining change back into her pocket. She looked up, across to the small cluster of benches, to see Ryouga waiting for her.

She could always hang around with him. They could wander a bit, or spar, or even just talk. She didn't need to be alone, right?

Yeah, THAT'S a good idea, she thought, looking down. Use good ol' Ryouga as a crutch again. He's basically halfway in love with me anyway, right? Just play the girl, let him hold my hand, cry on his shoulder, and maybe hope he doesn't notice I'm the reason he's not gone and fixed things with Akari yet?

She sighed and walked back over to him, not meeting his eyes. "C'mon, Ryouga, it's getting late and I should get you home."

"Everything okay?" he asked.

"Yeah. Nabiki will meet me at the Dojo. Just waitin' on you, pork butt." She crossed her arms and did a fair approximation of her standard confident smirk.

He shrugged and got up. She stayed a bit ahead of him, wanting to get him back home without any more fuss.

That cold feeling just kept growing in her gut the whole way.

When they reached the house she was almost relieved. She bowed and waved Ryoga in like a butler.
showing the lord of the house in. "Welcome home, Master Hibiki," she said. "Might I suggest a hot bath, sir? His lordship is a tad ripe." She pinched her nose and winked at him. "See ya t'morrow, P-chan."

She started to walk past him. She almost made it too, before she felt his hand grasp her shoulder.

"You're a terrible liar, Ranma," he said softly.

"... Dunno what you're talkin' about, man," she replied, though it wasn't as forceful as she thought. She tried to shrug out of his grip but it remained firm.

"You even going back to the dojo tonight?"

She swallowed. *Don't. Don't say what I think you're gonna say, Ryouga. Not right now. "What's it matter?"

"Look, Ranma, why don't you…" He started to motion with his thumb towards the house.

"Don't," Ranma said quickly, cutting him off. She finally pulled her shoulder free but didn't look at him.

She swallowed. "Ryouga… it's not a good time. An'... an' I don't mean 'cuz it's late or anything."

"Ranma, look, I'll get my Mom and she can make you something to eat and we'll set you up in the guest room…"

She shook her head. *What am I s'posed to say, huh Ryouga? That if I go in with you, the guy side is stayin' out here? That I WON'T be staying in the guest room? She turned a bit to look at him. She was getting pretty good at reading him even without the link. She knew he wasn't thinking any of those things - not yet, anyway. You probably even think you'd be okay with it, huh Ryo? Acceptin' me over a real girl…*

"Call Akari for me, okay?" she said, giving him a weak smile. "Call her tonight?"

"What? Why're you bringing Akari up?" Ryouga gave her a confused look.

"Trust me. It'll make me feel better. I worked hard to get you two together in the first place, after all." She cocked her head. "Please? It'll help take my mind off my own worries if I know you're doing something about yours."

He opened his mouth as if to say something then closed it again and simply nodded.

Ranma gave him the closest she could muster to a real smile then jumped up onto the retaining wall and off into the night.

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*I've had some concerns raised about the time period I've set this in. I know the original manga was 80's, while the anime was 90's. Because I honestly don't trust myself enough to put something in that time period due to faulty memory, I've nudged things ahead into the 2000's. I apologize for inconsistencies, but having technology being a bit more developed gives me more options for people like Nabiki and Himura, who's weapons are primarily information and communication based.

I also know the Volleyball rules I'm using are NOT correct, and I've tangented off into my own bizarre little scoring system. To keep things consistent, I'll stick with it (Though i may retroactively*
change it later).

Yes, Hitomi's team are all made up of girls from Killing Bites. I'm not going for any sort of real accuracy, it was just bit of a reference since a friend showed me a few episodes recently.
The sound of an antique alarm clock ringing stirred her from her sleep. Normally it took quite a bit more to wake her, but the sound was unusual and unexpected. Her own alarm was electronic, after all.

She reached out, fumbling for whatever it was, but it wasn't in any of the expected places. This was going to force her to open an eye - perhaps even two - and that was as bad as waking up! And she was so very warm and comfortable, too. There was a soft warmth against her, fitting pleasantly in her arms, with soft hair tucked under her chin and resting against her collarbone. Whoever it was smelled nice and, as she stirred, she started making a kind of purring sound that made her want to drift back off to sleep. If only she could find that wretched alarm clock!

Finally she accepted she was going to have to open at least one eye. She cracked it open in the hope that she would see it immediately. Her vision remained fuzzy because focusing was more effort than she was willing to expend just yet.

The colors were wrong. The light from the window was coming from the wrong direction. She opened her other eye as full consciousness and awareness returned and the morning blur came into full focus.

Shampoo's room.

She spotted the alarm clock on the nightstand and reached out to silence it at last, but it was too late; the damage had been done. The memories of the previous night flooded back to explain both her fatigue and the pleasant, pervading sense of warmth and contentment she felt, as well as the warm body pressed against hers.

"Xie xie…” Shampoo mumbled against her neck. Her arms around Nabiki tightened slightly as the Amazon sighed and settled back into a light doze, still purring like a cat.

Nabiki relaxed back against her pillow. The alarm was set early enough that she could indulge in the luxury of taking the time to absorb her situation. She spent a minute moving fingers and toes to sort out which limbs were hers and which were Shampoo's while she let the fog of sleep clear gradually from her mind.

This wasn't quite what she had envisioned her first time being like. To be honest, she had never clung to any sort of romantic notion about it. Before she had gotten together with Ranma, she had always envisioned it as a somewhat cynical hook up with some cute guy for a meaningless and probably disappointing tumble after a party. After Ranma... well… perhaps some of the romantic notions had snuck back in.

An intense night of lovemaking with a female Chinese Amazon was… well, not only was it nothing like what she had expected, it made a lot of her cynical notions seem childish and naive in retrospect. Once again she simply hadn't accounted for her own emotions or the impact upon them.

She unconsciously tightened her grip around the sleeping girl in her arms, her fingers moving to brush across the collar the girl now wore proudly around her neck. This changed everything.

She felt a small pang of loss as she realized that she'd never know what this moment might have been like with Ranma.

*Probably more awkward and disappointing,* she thought with a slight smirk, *with both of us too*
proud to admit we don't know what we're doing. There had certainly been some benefit to the fact that Shampoo was... experienced. It had probably been the most educational hours of Nabiki's young life.

She blinked and remembered her promise to Ranma. I forgot to call Kasumi and tell her I wasn't coming home. I hope Ranma didn't worry... To be fair, by the time Nabiki was aware she wouldn't be home the previous night, she had been a little too preoccupied to make phone calls.

She stretched her arms over her head and felt Shampoo stir again.

"Time to get up, Kitten," she said. She pulled the blanket back a bit and brushed the lavender locks from Shampoo's face. She felt a surprisingly powerful surge of possessiveness and affection.

"Mnn... Call Shampoo that again...?" Shampoo mumbled into Nabiki's neck. She started planting gentle kisses along Nabiki's throat and collarbone, though she was still half asleep.

Nabiki shivered and felt an echo of the fire that had consumed her the previous night. Shampoo had to be cheating and using some sort of pressure point knowledge to be doing this to her with just a little light pressure from her lips! "Nnnh... Kitten..."

Shampoo made a pleased noise then relaxed. "Good. No get up yet, Pintou."

"We have to get up for school, Shampoo," Nabiki insisted, though her willpower was dangerously weak.

"No school today. Stay with Shampoo."

Nabiki sighed. She shifted a bit and could already tell that despite how gentle Shampoo's embrace might be, it was effectively a submission hold - she wasn't going to get out of bed unless Shampoo allowed it. "We need to meet Ranma there, Kitten."

"Airen...?" She murmured. "Tell Airen to come here... join in bed..."

Ooooooh don't tempt me... Nabiki felt a warm surge at the thought. But Ranma's position on the Volleyball team required near-perfect attendance to maintain and there were other matters to attend to. They could ill-afford to spend the day in bed as much as she desperately wanted to right now. "Another day, I promise Kitten. Once we'd gotten a larger bed." She noted that Shampoo's current modest twin-sized western style bed was barely big enough for the two of them, much less a third.

Shampoo finally cracked open an eye and peered up at her. "Can move to floor."

"But then we'd still need to get out of bed, wouldn't we?"

"Mnnnhh!" Shampoo whined plaintively. "... Pintou win. Shampoo get up." She mumbled the last part, closed her eyes and nuzzled against Nabiki's neck again.

"That's not getting up, Kitten," Nabiki pointed out. She gently took hold of Shampoo's earlobe and applied a little pressure in a pressure-point technique of her own, something she had learned by experience from her mother.

"Ow ow ow ow!" Shampoo's eyes flew open as Nabiki pinched.

Nabiki released her grip. She giggled softly at Shampoo's expression of hurt and betrayal and kissed her nose. "Later, I promise. When this is all over and we've got it all sorted out we'll have all the lazy days in bed you want."
Shampoo nodded. She reached up and self-consciously touched the collar around her neck and smiled. She shifted a bit to move her arms around Nabiki's neck as she stretched. "Am glad this not turn out to be happy dream."

"I thought you had plans to bed all of Ranma's wives?" Nabiki noted playfully.

"This special," Shampoo replied softly, her expression suddenly serious but with a touch of uncertainty. "... Pintou know this... yes?"

Nabiki nodded solemnly and gave her a gentle, reassuring kiss on the lips. "I know. At first I was a little afraid it wasn't as... significant to you as it is to me. I think you managed to erase my doubts after about the third hour."

Shampoo smirked. "Need to work on Pintou's stamina," she sighed. "But... not tell Great-grandmother? Not about what this mean, at least." She tapped the tags on her collar.

"I thought 'Sleeping as Sisters' was a common thing for Joketsuzoku?" Nabiki asked.

"Oh, that not issue. Issue is heir of Elder accepting... lower status. Especially to Outsider," Shampoo blushed a bit. "Accept Pintou as Mistress, as head wife to Airen. Is... is..."

"... Scandalous?" Nabiki suggested.

"Is good word for, yes," Shampoo sighed. "Normally only ever happen if Kiss of Death fail. Not hear of one who willingly gave selves before." She blushed and sank back down in the covers a bit.

Nabiki rolled her eyes. "Not publically, no, but if the rest of the Amazons are as horny as you are, I'm sure it happens in private more than you think," Nabiki smiled reassuringly. "We'll keep it discreet though. Did you want to swap the collar for something else, or...?"

Shampoo put her hand over the collar protectively and shook her head. "Bu! ... No... will explain other way to her. For cat side." She curled her fingers around it and ducked her head, dropping her eyes. "U-unless Pintou decide otherwise..."

Nabiki felt another warm surge at Shampoo's protectiveness of her tags. Again, she had to wrestle with the temptation to simply skip school for the day and spend more time exploring those feelings more thoroughly. "I wouldn't dream of it, Kitten."

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Cologne seemed thoroughly amused at Nabiki's appearance at breakfast that morning, though she made no comments directly. Nabiki did notice the title of Daughter-in-law was applied quite consistently now, however. Strangely, she didn't comment on the collar at all, though Nabiki was certain that Cologne had noticed it.

I wonder if she realizes what it means? Nabiki pondered over a bowl of miso soup. Knowing her? Probably. It's not exactly SUBTLE. I guess she simply doesn't give a damn because Shampoo's happy. Not like she hasn't bent Amazon law into pretzel shapes for her before.

Shampoo was happy, quite obviously. She was practically glowing and even greeted Mousse cheerfully as he stumbled down the stairs, bleary-eyed and dishevelled. The nearsighted weapons master merely looked pained and muttered something about cleaning up the storage room before the restaurant opened.

"Looks like he had a rough night. Wonder what he was up to?" Nabiki asked.
"Oh, he actually turned in early," Cologne replied, "but the walls are thin." She smirked. "Do be mindful in the future, Daughter-in-law? At my age I might not need so much sleep, but it appears to be rather hard on the boy."

Nabiki choked a bit as she finished the last of her bowl of soup. "... Oh."

"Shampoo, would you be so kind as to put the rice on? The morning customers will be here soon and the boy is liable to be useless today." Cologne smiled at her great-granddaughter, who nodded and skipped off to the kitchen, humming a tune to herself as she went.

"Ah, youth…" Cologne said, smiling fondly after the girl. She returned her attention to Nabiki. "Interrupted sleep aside, your current sleeping arrangement is otherwise quite advantageous. Having you stay here will certainly help speed your training. I'll give your sister a call to discuss the particulars and get whatever you might need sent over."

"Wait, what?!" Nabiki slammed her chopsticks down on the table. "You can't be expecting me to actually move in?!"

Cologne raised an eyebrow. "After last night I had assumed it was a foregone conclusion?"

Nabiki swallowed. She was getting the odd feeling of things starting to slip out of her control as new developments kept piling on. She wondered if this was how Ranma felt. "I'm… not opposed to it," she said carefully, taking a few moments to choose her words. "It's simply a matter of timing. There are a lot of complicated factors in play at the moment…"

"Which you have elected to add to by branding my granddaughter." Cologne replied, still maintaining that cheerful conversational tone. "I am aware."

I'm dead. Nabiki felt the miso soup that had been so light and tasty just a moment ago turn into a cold, hard lump of lead in her gut.

"At least you were subtle about it. Not many possess the skill to see such disruptions of the aura. Certainly a unique way to do it," Cologne chuckled. "However, if you and she are taking such a step, I must insist that you accept responsibility for it."

"You make it sound like I got her pregnant," Nabiki noted, feeling the bravery that only the truly doomed know.

"Oh, make no mistake, Daughter-in-law, you will be personally ensuring that soon enough - be it through succeeding in securing Son-in-law's participation or directly - even if I must dunk you in the nannichuan myself," she continued, grin widening. "But for now… I have stretched Amazon law to the very breaking point for my Great-granddaughter. No more allowances can be made. You will be made worthy of my Great-granddaughter and of the position you have so impulsively selected for yourself."

"I…" Nabiki could feel the cold strands of inevitability wrapping around her, strangling her precious self-determination. "I won't presume to argue that, Elder. But… I don't have time to learn martial arts right now, much less train intensively! I am still very much occupied with trying to get Ranma disentangled from the matters that threaten your Great-granddaughter's marriage to him! When those problems have passed..."

"I would have thought you were more perceptive than this, child," Cologne sighed heavily. "There will always be a crisis. Son-in-law exists within the perfect storm of Chaos that follows him wherever he roams. It is for precisely this reason that your training must begin now. I will aid you in
the other matters and ensure you have time to give them proper attention, but only if you devote the same effort towards learning what I have to teach." She pulled out a pipe and started packing it with tobacco.

"I've… heard about your training methods. I'm… I'm not sure I'm equal to the task," Nabiki admitted.

"You are of Tendo stock and, if your sister is of any indication, you will be fine. Even if you lack Akane's raw potential, your cunning nature will more than suffice." She lit the pipe and took a puff. "Your elder sister has potential as well, though with her nature she'd be better suited to healing arts. It is an almost unforgivable waste of talent that Soun elected to train only one of you, and so superficially at that."

"None of that requires I live here," Nabiki pointed out.

Cologne raised an eyebrow. "On the contrary, Daughter-in-law, living here is the very minimum required. By rights I should be demanding you relocate immediately to China." She puffed on her pipe and blew a ring of smoke around Nabiki's head. "You have not only laid claim to Son-in-law and co-opted my arrangement for his other paramours for your own purposes, but you have made a wholly separate and entirely binding arrangement with my Great-granddaughter that places her life, her future and her honor entirely in your hands. You are intelligent enough to be aware of this and you made this pact willingly with her regardless. You have made your bed, Nabiki Tendo, and it is here. You will sleep in it."

"I suppose the alternative is death?" Nabiki asked lightly.

"Death would hardly cover your bill at this point," Cologne replied. "You are of the Joketsuzoku now, child. There is no alternative."

Nabiki was silent for a moment. She steepled her fingers, resting her chin on her thumbs and touching her forefingers to her brow, eyes growing intense as she considered. A thousand different factors played out through her head.

"That goes both ways, doesn't it?" Nabiki finally asked. "I'm not chattel or an immigrant, correct? The laws apply equally?"

Cologne raised an eyebrow. "That is the effect of the Kiss of Sisterhood, yes."

Nabiki nodded. "Perfect. I humbly request that my education include Amazon legal precepts and precedents, Honored Elder."

Cologne stared at her a moment then broke out cackling. "Already scheming!" She wheezed as she managed to recover from her mirth. She nodded and locked eyes with Nabiki. "You shall have it, child. Oh yes, you were a good choice. This will be most entertaining!"

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"I can't believe we overslept!" Ukyou howled as she ran towards the school gates. Beside her Akane was running full out as well.

"Well… we were up late…" Akane panted, shooting her a grin.

Ukyou blushed a little in response. "Pervert…" she muttered, though her tone was nothing but affectionate.
They managed to make it through the gate as the bell chimed. They slowed to a stop and took a moment to catch their breaths, having five minutes or so before the class bell would ring.

"Guess we missed Ranchan and the group," Ukyou panted, hands on her knees as she caught her breath.

"At least it saves us from having to make some awkward explanations," Akane replied.

"For now, maybe," Ukyou said, shrugging. She started walking towards the main school building. "We'll have to come clean with them eventually."

"Better to do that at Fiancée's Tea than have it get out to the perverts here," Akane muttered as they walked.

They reached the classroom just in time to slip in before the bell and headed to their seats. Ryouga and the members of the volleyball team were already there and so was…

Ranma, who looked terrible.

Her clothes were rumpled as though she had slept in her uniform. Her hair was mussed and there were bags under her eyes like she hadn't slept well - if she'd slept at all.

"Ranchan?" Ukyou scuttled over to the redhead. "Geez, what happened to you?"

Ranma blinked and looked at her blearily. "Mnnh? Oh, hey Ucchan, 'Kane…” She looked away almost immediately and let her head sink onto her arms on the desk. "Just a long night is all."

"'Long night' nothing!" Akane said, plucking a small stone from Ranma's hair. "Is this gravel? Did you sleep outside or something?"

"Huh?" Ranma cocked her head, looking at what Akane was holding. "Oh… no, 'course not. It's nuthin'. I just didn't sleep well. Too much ice cream or somethin'..." She lay her head back down on the desk.

Ukyou traded a worried glance with Akane.

They'd have said more but the bell rang and they had to take their seats for the start of class.

Over the course of the day, Ukyou was increasingly of the opinion that Ranma was avoiding Akane and herself.

But it wasn't just them. She was avoiding Shampoo and Nabiki... and even Ryouga, who she'd noticed was also shooting concerned glances in Ranma's direction during class.

The final straw came at lunch when Ranma decided that she was going to practise with the volleyball team rather than have lunch with them and trotted off before any of them could do more than sputter.

The first thing Ukyou did was grab Ryouga by the arm and drag him off behind the school.

"H-hey, Ukyou…!" Ryouga flailed but she didn't relent until she got him somewhere out of sight.

"Okay, spill it, Ryouga. What's going on with Ranma?" She put her hands on her hips and stared him down.
"That's what I'm trying to figure out!" he shot back. "Did Ranma get back to the Tendo Dojo last night?"

"I don't know! You were the last one to see her as far as I knew! Ask Nabiki!" She threw up her hands.

Ryouga's eyes narrowed. "Yeah, funny thing about that. Nabiki stayed over at the Nekohanten. She doesn't know."

"Oh… Akane stayed over at my place," Ukyou rubbed the back of her head. "What did Kasumi say?"

"I haven't been to the Tendo Dojo today. Nabiki and Shampoo came and picked me up. Ranma was already here when we got here," Ryouga sighed and rubbed his eyes. "I knew Ranma was lying to me."

"Lying to you? About what?"

Ryouga folded his arms and leaned against the wall. "Ranma was in a… well, let's just say she's doubting herself." He narrowed his eyes at her. "She told me that she'd called Nabiki and was heading back to the Dojo to talk with her, but this morning Nabiki didn't know anything about it."

"But why wouldn't Ranma go home to sleep? I mean… even if she was avoiding us, none of us were even there, right?" Ukyou demanded.

Ryouga was silent. His expression said he was deep in thought.

Ukyou studied his face for a moment. Ryouga had a tendency to brood, so she'd had to learn to read him when he went silent so that she would know when to kick him to get him to spit out whatever he was worrying on in his head. This appeared to be one of those times. She opted to literally kick him, booting him in the shin. "Oi, Ryouga, conversations are two-person jobs. Spit it out. What are you thinking?"

He gave her an annoyed look. "You probably wouldn't understand."

"Try me."

Ryouga sighed heavily. "Fine. You know how when things start to go your way, you start getting worried?"

"... No?"

"Told you."

"Told you."

Ukyou rolled her eyes. "Don't be a jackass. Just… describe it to me, okay?"

"All right, all right… Look, it's like… you know stuff tends to go wrong a lot. The world sucks most of the time. But there's a consistency to it, you know? There's a sort of ebb and flow, like the tides, and you get used to that. It's… safe almost. Things might get bad but you know how bad they can get and you've dealt with it."

"Sugar, I've seen your kind of 'bad',' Ukyou said, giving him a concerned look. "It's hardly what I'd call safe."

"I get by," Ryouga said defensively. "But that's the thing… you can deal with the bad because you
know there's good coming. But every once in a while, things get too good. Everything starts going your way." His eyes fell. "And after a bit, you start wondering… 'if it's this good… how bad is it gonna be when it gets bad?' And… that start eating at you."

Ukyou's brow furrowed. "But… that's not how life works, Ryouga. It's not a zero-sum game! The good times and bad times don't have to balance out!"


She punched him in the shoulder. "It's not how yours works either, dumbass! Is that why you keep on screwing up anything good that comes your way? You're trying to keep the accounts balanced so the bad doesn't get too bad?!!"

"I'm not trying to screw anything up!" he shot back. He closed his eyes and sighed heavily. "Things just… It gets hard to trust anything, you know? At least if you can see the disaster coming you know what's going to hit you. But when it's all good you… you can't relax, you know? You start wondering what you're missing… wondering if it's right there, about to happen, and you just can't see it." He cracked an eye open and glared at her. "And… 'that's not how my life works'?!! Tell that to the scars on my back, wouldja?"

"And you think Ranma feels this way about his life?"

"I know she does. Ranma just hides it better than I do."

Ukyou's eyes narrowed. "Since when did you get to be so in-tune with what goes on in Ranma Saotome's head? It used to be that your only interest in his mind was seeing it splattered across the pavement!"

Ryouga huffed and folded his arms more tightly across his chest in what Ukyou recognized as one of his usual sulks.

"Ranma saved my life," he said finally. "She… deserved a second chance."

"And you use female pronouns for her pretty much exclusively," Ukyou gave him a suspicious look. "Ryouga… Akane's not right about you and Ranma, is she?"

"No!" Ryouga said hotly. "Look… Ranma is a girl right now, isn't she? I just use the pronouns for the form she's in!"

"Okay, okay!" Ukyou said placatingly. "It's just… Odd to see you being concerned about Ranma like this. I mean, really concerned, not that 'You can't die because no one is allowed to kill you but me!' macho bullshit you and Ranma seem so fond of."

"I think you said that to me the last time you found me collapsed outside of your shop…"

"Yes, but conversely shut up!" Ukyou growled. "Okay… you're honestly worried about Ranma? Good. Then you wanna help me figure out what's going on? For real?"

Ryouga raised an eyebrow. "What's your idea?"

"We just follow her… him… augh you've got me doing it now!" Ukyou growled. "We follow Ranma and try and figure out if she's okay or this is as bad as you think it is."

"Not exactly one of your most cunning plans…"
"Yeah? Well I had to make sure you could follow it, so I had to dumb it down a little." She grabbed him by the shoulder. "Come on, just keep quiet and follow me."

"Ranma, are you there? Hellooo?" Sayuri waved her hand in front of the redhead's face. Ranma's eyes were glassy and she was unresponsive as she stared off into space.

"Huh? Oh… sorry Sayuri." Ranma blinked and rubbed her eyes. "Just… kinda spaced out for a sec."

"You sure you're okay?" Sayuri said, concerned. "You look terrible."

"Yeah. Just… didn't sleep well," Ranma said.

"You sure you're okay skipping lunch?" Sayuri put a hand on her hip. "I mean I appreciate the renewed dedication to the team and all but it doesn't do us much good if you end up collapsing or something."

Ranma smiled weakly. "I'm fine. I've gone a lot longer without food than just skippin' a meal or two and kept going. Besides, I wanna figure out this thing with your serve."

"Okay, so… how do we do that?" Sayuri asked.

"Well… you're doing something with Ki. So, prolly the easiest way is for you to serve a few balls over the net with me touching you so I can feel what your aura is doing." Ranma moved around behind her and put her hand on Sayuri's shoulder. "And the others just use it for practise setting up serves..."

Sayuri nodded. "Sounds good." She turned back to the rest of the team on the other side of the net. "Sound good to you guys?"

Rin nodded and clenched her fists. "With Senpai and Captain Sayuri working together, there's no way we can lose!"

Yuka crossed her arms and raised an eyebrow. "Well, someone is back to her genki self."

"I guess now we know how to recharge her," Riko added, patting Rin on the back. "Just call Mousse!"

Rin immediately flushed red and ducked her head. "Eeeeeeeeeee! Don't you dare!"

"What, don't you want to go on another date with your favorite chinese martial artist?" Yuka asked, smirking.

"Yes! I mean No! I-! Mean… Eeeeeeeeee-eeeeoooooo..." Rin dropped down into a ball and hid her face behind her knees. "M-meanies!"

"Could you not break the Rin while we're trying to train?" Sayuri asked coldly. "Five minutes? Can I get five minutes without you breaking her, please?"

"Sorry!" Yuka called sheepishly.

Sayuri huffed impatiently and spun the ball in her hands. "Well, ready or not…" she muttered. She glanced over her shoulder at Ranma who gave her a nod.
She closed her eyes and tried to recapture that feeling she'd had the night of the game. *Pride*… She lofted the ball and hit it, trying to drive her feelings into it with the heel of her hand.

It sailed over the net normally enough, with Riko digging it out, Yuka setting and Rin returning (Thankfully with just a tap, rather than a thunderbolt smash).

Sayuri sighed and picked up the ball. "I don't know what I'm doing different."

"It's not a real fight," Ranma replied. "Ki is fueled by emotion. It's a *lot* easier to use it when your emotions are high, like in a desperate situation. It's a lot tougher to bring it all out when you're just training. But that's why you gotta learn that way, so you can control it and not just flail about."

"Are you sure it *is* Ki?" Sayuri asked. "I'm not a martial artist. I shouldn't *have* any, right?"

Ranma shook her head. "Ki is just life energy. Everyone and everything has it. That's why Ms. Hinako's little coin trick works on everyone." Ranma took the ball from her and spun it on her finger. "Most people just radiate it out without doin' anything with it. A lot of high level martial arts is just about capturing all that wasted energy and redirecting it - *using* it. It's not all ki blasts, you know. That's just the flashy stuff and it's actually kinda wasteful in its own right. It's about learning to spread it through your body, focus it along your limbs to make you faster or to make your punches harder or make your body tougher or make you lighter." She tossed the ball back to Sayuri. "And some people are even able to extend it into objects, allowin' 'em to turn ordinary stuff like cloth or playin' cards or whatnot into deadly weapons. It's how Ryouga does that trick where he turns his belt into a sword or makes his bandanas razor sharp."

"You think *I'm* doing that?" Sayuri asked, cocking her head.

"I *know* you are. But not in a way I've ever seen before," Ranma said. "Some people got a natural talent for this stuff. Me? I had to learn all this the hard way, but it's like how some people are naturally better at math or cookin'... they seem to be able to do stuff without nobody teachin' 'em."

Sayuri gave her a skeptical look. "So you think I'm some sort of... Ki prodigy? Even though the only athletic thing I'm even *remotely* good at is volleyball?"

Ranma shrugged. "Like I said, Ki ain't a martial arts thing. Martial artists just learn to *use* it. But... you think Rin's arm has the muscle to hit like she does without usin' something like that? Don't get me wrong, havin' a special talent for it don't mean it ain't gonna be a lot of hard work to learn to *use* it. It just means... you got a head start, I guess."

Sayuri nodded. "Still..." She looked at the ball. "It's sort of a weird thought... that I'm *special* somehow." She flipped the ball to spin on her finger. "All this time around people like you and Akane, I just figured... I dunno... that I was just a background character in your story."

Ranma paused, considering. "Well... Everybody has a story, right? And... you're the one writing it, right?" She shrugged. "So... who cares if you're a background character in someone else's story? You just can't let yourself be a background character in your own story. Talent's just a part of that. Most of it's hard work and not giving up."

Sayuri raised an eyebrow. "Anything Goes school of inspirational pep talks?"

Ranma snorted. "Aww I'm no good with words. But it's the truth. It ain't magic or destiny that made me who I am." She tapped her chest with her thumb. "It's *me*."

"Says the boy who's currently magically a girl," Sayuri replied.
"Yeah, well, not sayin' magic and destiny and stuff don't happen. But they don't get to decide who you are. You're the one who decides what to do with 'em," Ranma folded her arms.

Sayuri paused then smiled. "Well… I, for one, am glad you did what you did with it. You're a good friend. Guess nothing about being a 'Man amongst men' that means you can't be a 'Woman amongst women' too, huh?"

Ranma blinked.

Sayuri didn't notice the moment of confusion on Ranma's face. "Okay… lemme try this again. Gotta recapture that feeling from game night."

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Ryouga and Ukyou watched them play for a few more minutes until the volleyball team started to clean up in anticipation of the lunch bell.

"Well, aside from being a bit tired, I didn't see anything really wrong there, sugar," Ukyou said, ducking back behind the corner they had been peering around. She crouched down next to Ryouga, folding her arms across her knees. "You sure it was all that bad last night?"

"Yeah… mebbe I read it wrong…" Ryouga said, looking down. "Doesn't explain why Ranma would lie about her phone call with Nabiki though. Or why she'd sleep outside."

"We don't know she slept outside, just that she looks really rough," Ukyou said. "And… to be fair, it's not like fibbing to you to get you to leave her be is anything new, right?"

Ryouga sank down further with a sigh. Did I read all of that wrong? Maybe I've just gotten so used to the link that I think I know what Ranma is thinking better than I actually do… "Yeah, you have a point."

Ukyou cocked her head. "You seem actually heartbroken about that Ryouga."

"I just thought I finally understood Ranma a little better, you know?" Ryouga sighed. "Not that I mind being wrong about this. I just… I've spent so long assuming that I knew Ranma. And then I found out I didn't and I guess… Well, it just felt like maybe I was starting to actually understand her."

"Seriously, Ryouga, I've been trying for a lot longer than you. I'd honestly be kinda pissed if you had her figured out this fast," Ukyou paused, then scowled. "Him… Damnit, how long have I been using female pronouns?"

"Is that a big deal?" Ryouga asked.

"Yes. Respecting which gender someone wants to be referred to as regardless of form is kind of a sticking point with me!" Ukyou glared at him. "Ranma is a guy and is very insistent that he's a guy. It's disrespectful to swap pronouns on him just because it's convenient!"

Ryouga looked away. He debated keeping his mouth shut but he remembered what he had seen in Ranma's emotions the afternoon after the omiai. "... You sure?"

"What do you mean 'Am I sure'?" Ukyou demanded.

"I mean, have you asked him?" Ryouga asked evenly
"What? No! Why would I ask something like that!? Why would I need to?" Ukyou huffed. "He's the first one to shout to the heavens that he is 'Ranma Saotome, man amongst men' even when he's in a girl's body. Why…?"

She trailed off as Ryouga stared at her evenly.

"L-look, just because he says it a lot doesn't mean…" Ukyou stammered, getting flustered.

Ryouga just kept staring.

"W-well, have you?!" Ukyou demanded, glaring back.

Ryouga closed his eyes. An echo of Ranma's words came to mind.

"Some days… I'm not even so sure if that would be so bad… That if I can't find a cure then maybe it would be better to just get locked as a girl rather than be stuck in-between like this."

"... Yeah. I have." He opened his eyes and held her gaze.

Ukyou's eyes widened a bit. "Ryouga…"


Ukyou was quiet a minute. She stared off into space, deep in thought. Finally she looked at him. "... I will. Not right now, though. I've gotta get the restaurant open soon. I can't skip a Friday after already missing a whole day," she sighed. "Look, assuming Ranma walks you home, do you think you can try and steer her towards Ucchan's?"

"I'll try," Ryouga said solemnly. He sighed and then chuckled. "Look at me… playing Ranma Saotome's Keeper."

"You're about the only guy who could do the job, sugar," Ukyou replied. "C'mon, I'll walk you to class before I go. Least I can do."

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Ranma stared at her own face in the mirror. She leaned forward a bit and wiped the steam from the glass. It had been a rough day, dodging her fiancees, Ryouga and Kodachi. She had ended up begging Sayuri to lead Ryouga home for her in an effort to keep clear of a lot of conversations or encounters she just wasn't mentally prepared to deal with.

She traced her finger over her reflection's cheek and the light dusting of faint, nearly invisible freckles there.

_How do I explain something to them I don't even understand myself_? she thought. She knew that if she went to them with her feelings they'd all fall over themselves trying to reassure her and maybe even damage what was slowly growing between them. And that would make it worse.

_Sorry, girl side, but the soap should have worn off by now and I need some guy time_, Ranma thought, giving her reflection an apologetic smile. She didn't know why she was apologizing to her girl side but, after Kodachi's revelation, she didn't feel comfortable with seeing it just as a means to an end anymore.

She filled a wash tub with warm water and poured it over herself. There was a tingle, but no change. She had been through this before with the soap - it usually took more to change when it was still
wearing off. She poured another tubful over herself and the change finally happened.

He sighed and resumed washing himself with warm water and regular soap. He paused and looked in the mirror again, checking his cheekbones. No freckles. He examined his face carefully, trying to commit all the small details to memory for later comparison to his girl side.

He rinsed off, got up and stepped into the furo. He sank into the tub and sighed.

*At least I've got the weekend to be a guy,* Ranma thought. His face soured as he remembered the appointment with Dr. Hirano and Dr. Tofu on Saturday. *Well… most of the weekend.*

Then there was the second *omiai* on Sunday. Sure, he could be a guy for that. All he had to do was sit quietly and obediently while he was utterly emasculated while his mother decided who he was going to marry for him.

*Ugh. He slumped back in the tub. This sucks. I've got NO control over ANYTHING. Not even when I'm a guy or when I'm a girl!*

A rebellious part of him wanted to show up to the *omiai* as a girl and then attend school as a guy the next day, regardless of the obvious consequences.

*THAT would blow poor Kodachi's mind, wouldn't it?* he thought, then immediately discarded it. *Nah, she'd just think it was 'Ran' subbing for her brother again. And Mom would be pissed… which would just match up with our cover story of Mom bein' a 'wicked stepmother'.*

He sighed and closed his eyes. *So tired of the cover stories. Everyone has a different 'piece' of it and no one's got the whole thing, not even Nabiki. It feels like I'm all fragmented.*

He yawned, feeling the fatigue from lack of sleep and lack of food starting to compound with the warmth and comfort of the tub. *Better be careful… I'm liable to… to…* 000

Ranma dodged out of the way of the ki blast as it impacted the ground nearby, tucking into a roll and coming back up onto his feet.

"Show yourself!" He shouted into the blackness. For some reason he couldn't see anything, not even the ground underneath his feet.

"Why should I?" a voice snarled back. "So you can cram me back into my box when it's convenient?!"

"What are you talking about?! Who are you?" he yelled into the darkness. He summoned a ball of glowing ki himself but the light it cast was swallowed up by the blackness. "You're gonna regret messin' with Ranma Saotome!"

There was the sound of footsteps. He whirled, preparing to hurl a ki blast as the figure became visible, more distinct in the darkness but he hesitated as he saw who it was. The ball of ki in his hands flickered and vanished.

"I regret *being* Ranma Saotome," the redhead said, her blue eyes bright and defiant as she glared at him. She was wearing one of his blue silk chinese shirts and his training pants, though they fit her better than he remembered. He glanced down to see that he was wearing much the same, but one of his red shirts instead.
"This is a dream," Ranma relaxed a little and straightened. "Whew! For a minute…"

The air was driven from his lungs as she charged forward and drove her elbow into his gut.

He skidded backwards, holding his bruised abdomen. "Hey! What…" He ducked a high roundouse kick as she continued her assault. He dropped down for a leg sweep, which she backflipped away from. "What's the big idea?"

"What's the big idea?" she yelled back. "You've been beating up on me your whole life!" She circled him in a crouching gait, ready to attack. "Can't handle it when the little girl starts fighting back?"

"Beating you up?!" Ranma turned to keep facing her, his own stance wary. "I ain't done nothing to you, much less my whole life! I've only had the curse a year or two!" He danced forward to make a grab for her but she slipped out of reach, aiming a kick at his side that he blocked with a grunt.

"I've been here a hell of a lot longer than that!" she shouted, dancing back, ducking and weaving as he threw a series of punches. "Where do you think all those feelings or ideas that don't fit in with being a 'Man amongst men' went, huh?"

Ranma hesitated and got a palm blow to his chin for his trouble. He grunted as his teeth clacked together. He stopped holding back and threw a punch of his own but she danced away from it.

"All the times you felt like crying or wanted a hug or wanted a friend?" she demanded. She jabbed at him a few more times but he parried the strikes. "How many times have you said things weren't fair but then just swallowed it and lived with it because that's what a 'manly man' would do?!"

"It's what I had to do! What choice did I have?!" he shot back.

"You got a choice now," the redhead replied. "Why're you still putting up with it? Why are you still letting Mom wave that contract over our heads? Why are you letting someone else tell us who to marry, who to love?"

"Because honor demands it!" Ranma snarled. He leapt forward, throwing a flurry of blows at her with his amaguriken speed. She parried and dodged, but he felt a few strike home, and it was her turn to skid back, holding a bruised shoulder.

"Since when has 'honor' mattered to our parents? Since when has anything they taught us about honor made sense?" she panted. "You don't even know what it means! It's just what Pops or Mom tell you it is!"

"I know what it means! It means doin' what's right! It means when you give your word, you keep it. It means…"

"When has Pops ever done any of that?!" she demanded. "When has Mom?!"

"We've got a good Mother!" Ranma howled and leapt for her but this time she was ready. She sidestepped with surprising speed and kneed him in the gut, then, when he was doubled over, she flipped up to pin his neck between her legs and toss him on the backflip, sending him crashing to the ground a few meters away with the wind knocked out of him.

"Since when? What part of 'honor' does she follow except the bit where she gets to cut our heads off if we don't keep her happy?" the redhead shouted.

"She sacrificed for us! So we could be strong!"
"She sacrificed us!" The redhead thumped her chest. He could see tears running down her cheeks. "She sacrificed me, because I wasn't allowed to exist within her 'perfect son' - not even a little bit! And it's still not good enough! She still wants more! And you keep making excuses for her, keep apologizing for her! And you keep pushing more and more onto me, thinking you can just hide it all under the curse! You make us run away from the people who actually care about us!"

"You were gonna sleep with Ryouga!" Ranma snarled. He found the will to summon another ki blast and flung it at her, blasting her aside. She coughed, sprawled on the ground as he stormed up to her. She looked up at him, wiping some of the blood from her lip.

"Yeah. I was," she said. "Or go back to Ucchan's to be with Akane and Ukyou. Or go find Nabiki and Shampoo. Or even just go home to the dojo and give Kasumi a hug. Because I needed someone."

"Ranma Saotome doesn't need anybody," Ranma growled. He lifted his hands over his head, gathering energy for one final strike. The light illuminated her with sickly reds and yellows like the glow from Ryouga's Shi shi hokodan. She glared up at him, unafraid. "Yeah. Because a man amongst men doesn't need anyone but his Mom, right? Even his feelings for the girls he says he loves. Because I'm where you put all of that, too. And if you keep doing it, soon there's not going to be anything left of you." She looked away. "You win for now. But I'm not gonna stay quiet forever. I want my life back!"

The explosion obliterated her, throwing him back with the force of it.

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He started awake in the bath, reaching out and gripping the side of the tub as he splashed. He gasped for breath until he woke up enough to realize he was in very little danger of drowning - that he was in the furo at the Tendo dojo and he was safe.

Ugh, what was THAT? He rubbed his temples feeling the sickly ache of a migraine settle behind his eyes.

He slowly pulled himself out of the bath and grabbed a towel to dry himself. As he did he heard a polite knock at the door. He quickly wrapped the towel around his waist, mindful of how often he was usually barged in upon and not wanting to squander the benefit of the warning.

"Ranma?" Kasumi's voice came through the door. "Are you okay? You've been in there a long time."

He breathed a sigh of relief. Kasumi he could deal with right now. "Yeah, I'm fine. I just dozed off in the bath."

"I was a bit worried when you didn't come home last night. Is everything okay?" Kasumi added hesitantly.

Ranma sighed, feeling a pang of guilt. "I'm sorry I didn't call to let you know, Kasumi."

"That's all right, Ranma. I just worry. I know sometimes you can't always call. Just promise me you'll keep safe and take care of yourself?" Kasumi's tone was almost apologetic and it sent another stab of guilt through his heart.
This is dumb. I'm feelin' guilty because I didn't come home last night because I didn't wanna feel guilty! "I will, I promise," Ranma replied. After a moment, he added. "Hey, Kasumi?"

"Yes, Ranma?"

"Are… Are Nabiki and Akane home yet?"

"Not yet. They said they were going to meet the other girls at the Tea Shop to talk about the Omiai Sunday. Nabiki told me you knew where it was, but I didn't want to disturb you. You've seemed like you have a lot on your mind lately."

"Oh." Ranma wasn't sure if he was happy about that or not.

"Dinner will be a little later for their sake but I made a snack for you to tide you over." She paused again. "I can bring it up to your room if you're not feeling up to socializing with Father and me?"

Ranma considered a moment. He didn't want to seem weak or needy and he was honestly a little tired of imposing on Kasumi so much. But at the same time Soun was one of the last people he wanted to deal with right now and being downstairs ran the risk of running into the girls as they came home. Still… not like his room was really all that comforting. But there was one place that was. "Actually… could you bring it out to the dojo?"

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Kasumi's 'snack' was pretty much a full meal, with rice, grilled fish and pickled vegetables. Ranma wasn't inclined to complain and barely paused for air as he wolfed down the food like someone who hadn't eaten all day. Which he hadn't.

Kasumi simply knelt and watched him eat without saying a word, refilling his rice bowl and teacup as needed.

Ranma finally had his fill, sat back and put the tray aside. "Thanks, Kasumi! That was great!"

She smiled. "I'm glad you enjoyed it. I'm afraid dinner itself will be rather light. Akane already ate while working at Ucchan's and Nabiki informs me that Elder Cologne has requested she stay at the Nekohanten to facilitate her training." She sighed. "The house has been… a little too quiet."

"Yeah, well… everyone's got stuff goin' on," Ranma said, a bit more gruffly than he intended.

"Well, you can feel free to invite your friends from school over. I did enjoy having them over earlier this week," Kasumi smiled. "You were talking about using the dojo to train with them…?"

"Maybe. I dunno. My days have kinda all become girl side stuff. I sorta want to have some guy time too, you know?" He picked up his tea and drained the cup. "I can help 'em out while we're still at school. For right now I've kinda been lax on my own training and maybe while everyone else is busy with other stuff it'd a good chance for me to get back into it."

"You shouldn't work too hard, Ranma." Kasumi put the dishes on the tray and closed the rice steamer as she gathered everything to take back to the house. "I suspect the girls would really appreciate it if you visited them while they were working."

Ranma's expression darkened. "If it's all the same, Kasumi… I'd rather keep my focus on my training for right now."

She gave him a surprised look. "Ranma…?"
Ranma stood and stretched. "I've been stressin' about all the relationship stuff like crazy and it's not
doin' me any good. There's no point in gettin' too comfortable or attached as long as the omiai is still
up in the air so I should just focus on my trainin' and let Mom and Pops take care of it like they said
they would."

"Are… you certain you're all right with that, Ranma?" Kasumi asked, a little shocked. "You've
always been very outspoken about not having a say in such matters. Plus, you and Nabiki…"

"Mebbe I've been rethinkin' that," Ranma said. There was a coldness in his expression. "Mebbe it
doesn't matter so much. Mebbe I've been wasting my time and energy fightin' for what I want when I
don't even know what that is. Better if I just focus on what I do know." He turned and walked
further into the dojo where several training dummies were set up. "Thanks for the meal, Kasumi."

"Ranma…?" Kasumi said, but he didn't respond and instead started a kata at the far end of the dojo.
The conversation was over. She sighed sadly, collected the tray and rice steamer and gave him a final
regretful look before she slid the dojo doors closed behind her.

"So, Himura didn't even show up to the game?" Nabiki asked as she hobbled along. The middle
Tendo was noticeably battered and dishevelled, despite her uniform being in good condition.

Hiroshi and Daisuke respectfully matched her somewhat reduced pace. "It was mostly second
stringers playing Friday night. Not that it mattered," Hiroshi handed over a thumb drive. "Here are
the pics, but honestly? The other team was a joke."

"That bad, huh?" Ukyou commented leaning into the conversation.

"No, literally. It's a drama school that specializes in comedy," Daisuke answered. "The whole
game was them doing a bunch of physical comedy. I don't think they scored a single point."

"Himura didn't even need to be there," Nabiki said. She winced as an ambitious step pulled at a sore
muscle. "Ow…"

"Pintou should have stayed home like Shampoo suggested." Shampoo moved to slip under Nabiki's
arm to support her but Nabiki waved her off. "First few days of training always worst."

"I'll be fine," Nabiki muttered. "I can't take a day off yet." She looked up to see the front gates of the
dojo. "I never thought I'd be homesick for this place…"

"You say that like we live in a dump!" Akane protested as she walked out of the front gate, arms
crossed. Kasumi came out behind her then covered her mouth as she saw Nabiki's condition.

"Oh my… Nabiki, are you all right?" She hurried over and started checking her sister.

"I'm… I'm fine Kasumi," Nabiki replied. "Just stiff from being forced to bend in ways that I'm pretty
sure I wasn't meant to bend. Where's Ranma?"

Kasumi exchanged a glance with Akane that was not reassuring.

"Ranma… left early," Akane said finally. "Like, just as I was getting up."

"He said he wanted to get an early start," Kasumi added sheepishly.

"Ranma got up early. For school. On a SATURDAY," Nabiki said incredulously then shook her
head. "No, not a chance I'm buying it."

"Ranma seemed normal when he was working with the volleyball team," Ukyou added. "Ryouga seemed to think he's... scared of things being 'too good'."

"What the hell does that mean?!" Nabiki demanded.

"Ranma said last night that he wants to... 'refocus'," Kasumi added quietly. "He talked about... not wanting to get too involved until after the omiai is decided."

"He wants to let his mother decide!?" Nabiki yelped. She squeezed her eyes shut and shouted curses in her own head at Cologne, Nodoka and herself in that order. She grabbed the bento box Kasumi offered her and started stomping off toward the school, amazingly rejuvenated.

"Uh oh... Fearless Leader has blown a gasket..." Ukyou quipped to Shampoo as they followed along behind.

"I think this is serious..." Akane said, coming up even with them. "When I came home last night I couldn't even get Ranma to talk to me. He stayed up late in the dojo, too."

"Something's happened," Ukyou muttered. "And I think Ryouga knows more than he's letting on."

"Something's happened," Ukyou muttered. "And I think Ryouga knows more than he's letting on."

She glanced up to see Nabiki stalking off towards the school. "Betcha Ranma skipped picking him up this morning too. Akane, you wanna come with me to get him? Shampoo can keep Nabiki out of trouble."

"Umm... what about us?" Hiroshi raised his hand.

"Nabiki complaining about lack of caffeine," Shampoo said. She reached into her pocket and dug out a few coins. "Get coffee? No, wait, Nabiki like tea at shop... Earl Grey!" She handed them to Hiroshi.

"Make sure it's hot, too. As hot as they'll give it to you. She always complains about how the stuff from most shops is lukewarm," Akane added.


"Warn us if she starts having you research how to hire a hitman or something," Ukyou said. "And if you see them, maybe ask Sayuri and the team if they know anything?"

"Sure thing."

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Nabiki had nearly made it to the school gates before Hiroshi and Daisuke caught up with her again.

"Hey boss!" Hiroshi said sheepishly. "Uhh... we got you something..." He held up the cup.

"I don't have time for schmoozing right now, Hiroshi," Nabiki growled. "Get out of my way or I'll..." she winced a bit as a sore muscle protested. "... I'll have Shampoo hurt you."

Shampoo shrugged apologetically to the boy and cracked her knuckles.

"Ack! No!" Hiroshi gave Shampoo a look of horrified betrayal. "You said to bring her caffeine! I..."

Before he could react, the cup was snatched out of his hand. He looked at Nabiki and opened his mouth to warn her that it was hot, but she had a finger up to silence him and was already gulping the
contents greedily.

Hiroshi, Daisuke and Shampoo simply watched in awe as Nabiki chugged the boiling hot beverage.

Having drained her cup, Nabiki finally sighed in relief, a little puff of steam actually visible in her breath. She closed her eyes and simply took a moment to allow the restorative properties of the almighty caffeine to percolate through her body. She straightened, opened her eyes (which now seemed much less bleary) and handed her empty cup to Hiroshi.

"Better," she said finally. "Make it hotter next time, though. Those western style coffee joints always wimp out on the temperature. Now, where was I?"

"About to hunt down Ranma?" Daisuke supplied helpfully and earning an elbow to the ribs from Hiroshi.

"Right…" Nabiki sighed. With her mind a bit clearer she was far less inclined to simply rush in and try and hunt him down to yell at him.

This is my fault. The thought occurred to her as she continued through the gates. This all started after I promised to see Ranma that evening then blew her off for Shampoo. She glanced back over her shoulder at the Amazon. Shampoo was proudly wearing her collar with the silvery tags glinting in the sun. I still haven't had a chance to talk to her about that.

She pulled out her phone to check the two missed calls from that night. Both came from the same payphone. Ryouga asked if Ranma had called me and spoken to me. I guess she did.

Guilt was still not an emotion Nabiki was terribly good at dealing with. It made her want to fix the problem immediately, regardless of what the smart move would be.

If I confront Ranma right now we'll get cut off by the bell. If I wait until lunch she'll just avoid me like she did yesterday. She considered. So… create a block of time then, after homeroom.

"Hiroshi? Daisuke?" She beckoned the boys over. "I need a distraction…"

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"Ryouga, spill," Ukyou growled at the Lost Boy's back as they walked towards Furinkan.

"C'mon, Ukyou, I don't know what else you want me to tell you." Ryouga jammed his hands in his pockets and hunched his shoulders.

Akane, who was walking ahead of him, turned around and folded her arms, stopping him dead. "Ryouga… Ranma's acting weird. You know why. Tell us." Her expression softened. "Please."

Ryouga winced. Akane may have lost most of her glamour in his eyes but it would be a heartless creature indeed that was immune to one of Akane's pleading looks. "You aren't going to like the answer."

Akane's brow furrowed. "What did you do, Hibiki?"

Ryouga sighed and rolled his eyes. "You know, I'm started to see what Ranma used to go on about with you jumping to conclusions!" He leaned in close and glared at her. "We went to the Ucchan's that night."

"When? I didn't see you, and I was there all night!" Akane shot back.
"No, you didn't. But we saw you," Ryouga continued. He counted to three, waiting for the realization to dawn.

It took two. Akane's eyes widened and she stepped back a bit. "You… Ranma saw…?"

"Yeah. Ranma saw," Ryouga said. "And it rattled her."

"She was jealous…?" Akane asked, eyes widening with fear.

Ryouga sighed and dropped his gaze as the brief surge of anger left him. "No. She was… alone. I tried to get her to call Nabiki, but…" He shook his head. "Nabiki was busy too."

"We all paired up and Ranchan ended up the fifth wheel," Ukyou said softly.

"B-but…" Akane flushed and fidgeted. "But Ranma knew stuff like this was happening… right?"

"Knowing it and seeing it are two different things," Ryouga replied. "Besides, it wasn't jealousy it was… She kept asking if you had each other then why did you need her?"

"That's ridiculous!" Akane protested. "I… I don't know what I'd do without her! We did all of this for her!"

Ryouga held up his hands placatingly. "Hey, that's what I told her!"

"I think this is the sort of stuff Nabiki was worried about when we talked about this whole harem plan," Ukyou said glumly. "We started supporting each other to get our own wobbles under control but we ended up leaving Ranma to wobble on her own."

Ryouga shrugged. "Hard to balance a cart on five wheels."

"So why didn't you do something?!" Akane demanded, whirling on Ryouga. "If you care so much about Ranma like you claim, why'd you leave her out in the cold?!"

"What should I have done, cold-cocked her and dragged her inside my house?!" Ryouga shot back. "I offered!"

Akane reared back in surprise. "You propositioned her!?!"

"What?! NO!" Ryouga scrubbed his hands through his hair in frustration. "My Mom was home! I offered to have her come in and hang out and have dinner with us!"

"Oh yeah, hey, bring her home to Mom. That's a whole lot better!" Akane growled.

"Akane, stop," Ukyou said finally, getting between them. "You're both being jackasses about this!" She fixed Akane with a hard glare. "You know Ryouga would never take advantage of Ranma, even assuming he wanted to!"

"I've seen him opening her shirt in his tent!"

Ryouga clapped a hand over his face. "Not the koi rod thing again…"

"Yes the koi rod thing again!" Akane growled. "Ranma was under a spell and what did you do? You dragged her off to your tent to get a free look! And when that wasn't enough you headed off into the woods with her!"

"The spell was making her insane, okay?!" Ryouga growled back. "I opened her shirt to see the koi
mark the rod left on her chest and I dragged her off into the woods so she didn't end up attacking you! I was actually pondering putting her out of her misery and mine!"

*CLANG*

*CLONG*

Ukyou returned her battle spatula to the rack on her back and dusted off her hands. Akane and Ryouga were both sitting on the ground now, dazed and rubbing their bruised skulls.

"Got that out of your systems? Good," Ukyou said in a saccharine tone. "Now, much as I love you both… and before either of you freak out, that's sisterly love in Ryouga's case… I will quite happily murder you both and serve you as okonomiyaki toppings to my customers if you can't let go of each other's throats and focus on the problem at hand, namely how to help Ranma with her 'wobble' before she does something stupid."

"How do we do that?" Akane asked, getting up and brushing her skirt off. She shot a glance at Ryouga then reluctantly offered him a hand up, which he accepted with caution.

"This is exactly why we agreed that we needed a 'D'artagnan', right? Nabiki is good at this stuff," Ukyou said. "So, we find her, tell her what we know and… hope that by this point she's properly caffeinated."

"I guess we'll need another Fiancée's Tea, too. If Nabiki has to stay at the Nekohanten for training that makes it harder for her to keep tabs on stuff." Akane said thoughtfully.

Ukyou grinned. "We'll just need to convince Ranma to sleep over at my place more often, maybe."

Akane blushed. "Oh."

"Perverts," Ryouga muttered, though he wore a playful grin which only widened as Akane gave him an outraged look.

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Getting to class early wasn't exactly Ranma's thing but being in her seat in the classroom generally precluded too much deeply personal conversation.

Or any conversation at all, really. Hiroshi and Daisuke were probably headed to school with the group and they were usually too busy being Nabiki's henchmen of late to chat much. Sayuri and the volleyball team were there… but Ranma was starting to think she needed to cut back on the girly interactions.

_Not that the current situation is helping._ She glanced down at herself and sighed. _Dressing up to fool an opponent or trick Kuno is one thing, but…_ her hand reached up to her hair. Despite having tied it back into a ponytail she could still feel the layering and shaping that had been done by Kodachi's stylist.

_I've just been sitting back and letting it happen. Havin' to be a girl for a challenge is one thing, but all this side stuff has got to stop! I'm a GUY. I gotta remember that. Always gotta keep fightin' for that._ She took a deep breath. _Even if Mom doesn't understand about the challenge, I gotta do what would make her proud… right?_

She still felt a twinge of doubt. She shook her head and thumped herself on the temple with the heel of her hand to clear it away.
I need a good fight but most of the usual candidates are out. Even Kuno would have been good but he's still in the hospital. Ryoga is… it's better if I avoid Ryoga altogether. She winced as she remembered the after-school appointment with Dr. Hirano. Well… as much as possible anyway… gotta keep my word even if it's… not easy.

He sighed. Mousse? Ugh… much as I hate to say it, I'm not in the mood. He's usually just frustrating to fight - a lot of dirty tricks and then when I DO finally connect he goes down like a sack of rice… and that's assuming he's got his glasses on and isn't trying to fight a park bench.

She folded her hands behind her head and looked out the window. Maybe it's for the best. I should focus on the Challenge and getting it over with as soon as possible. I'll grab Sayuri and the team at lunch. That'll keep me too busy to worry about other stuff.

She saw Ukyou and Akane and enter the classroom out of the corner of her eye but she didn't look up. It didn't feel real great giving them the silent treatment but… maybe it was better if they were mad at her. She could patch things up if the omiai went well and if it didn't… well… it would make things easier.

Thankfully the class started almost as soon as they entered. Ranma turned her attention to the teacher. School might be dull but it made for a serviceable distraction from some of her more problematic thoughts.

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Class was over surprisingly quickly. It had been dull as anything, but it had kept Ranma's mind busy.

Cool! Just one more period, then it's lunch and club activities! I should be able to stay outta trouble until then. It's Remedial Chemistry, none of the others even have that with me!

She got up, grabbed her bookbag and scuttled out of the room almost as soon as they were dismissed, skirting past Akane and Ukyou before they could even get out of their seats. She darted out into the hall and headed for her next class.

I might even get some brownie points with the teachers for this! Not that I'm planning to keep this up… She rounded the corner towards her next class and stopped dead.

Nabiki was waiting for her in the hallway, leaning against the wall outside of her chemistry classroom, arms folded and eyes closed. Ranma knew that she had noticed her, however, because she saw the slight quirk of the corner of her mouth as a smirk began.

"You keep skipping out on me and I might think you were trying to avoid me, Saotome," she said. The tone was almost nostalgic; pure Ice Queen. It was the tone Nabiki used when it was time for Ranma to pay up whatever ungodly debts she had pinned her with.

Ranma was in trouble.

"Aheh… hey Nabiki…" Ranma said nervously, starting to try and edge around her. If she could just slip into her class…

There was a *BANG* and the door flew open in a cloud of black smoke. The chemistry teacher and several students tumbled out of the classroom, coughing. The stench from inside the room made Ranma recoil instinctively.

"Oh, hey, look at that, I guess class is cancelled until they air out the room," Nabiki said in an off-hand manner. "We should use this opportunity to go have a chat. Let's go up to the roof, shall we?"
Ranma glanced about, looking desperately for an out. "Actually… uhh… Nabiki… You see, there's this thing and…" She felt the finger and thumb grasp her earlobe a half second too late to react. Blinding, paralyzing pain shot up and down her spine as pressure was applied. "Nnnnngh!"

"Now now, come along like a good girl," Nabiki said as she casually dragged the weakly struggling redhead by the earlobe towards the roof access stairs. "We really do need to chat."

"Ow ow ow ow ow! What's the big idea, Nabiki!" Ranma yelped as she was finally released once they had reached the roof.

Nabiki closed the door behind her then leaned back against it and crossed her arms, making it very clear that Ranma was not getting back through it except through her.

"You've been avoiding me… all of us… since Thursday," Nabiki said sternly. "I'm pretty sure I know why."

"Then we don't need to talk, do we?" Ranma huffed, putting her hands on her hips.

"Ranma…" Nabiki glared at her a moment, then sighed, lowering her gaze. Her expression softened. "... Please."

_Damnit…_ Ranma paused. She took a tentative step forward. "Nabiki… don't…"

"I… know I screwed up," Nabiki said finally. "That is… that's _really_ hard for me to say. Wow." She chuckled softly, still not looking at Ranma. "I know I broke a promise to you and you got left out in the cold because of me…"

"Nabiki, _stop_."

Nabiki blinked and looked up. Ranma was standing with her arms folded, giving her a cocky grin.

"Ain't nuthin' to apologize for, so why're you wasting the breath?" Ranma said. "You said it yourself… people our age do stupid things. They date, they break each other's hearts, they recover, and they eventually figure out what they're looking for. Maybe that's all that's goin' on with us. With the thing on the beach and the fiancee brigade and… and whatever else. And it ain't worth gettin' upset about because in ten years none of this will really matter all that much. So… it's 'ain't nuthin' to apologize for because you're doing exactly what you're supposed to be doin' - figuring it all out. Same with Shampoo an' Ucchan an' Akane." She shrugged. "I got caught up in it too, but… I guess this is why Mom wanted to handle the _omiai_, so I could focus on the Art and handling Challenges. An' right now I've got an important challenge to win so… Maybe that's best." She shook her head. "I know that's not how you wanted it… but…"

Nabiki was staring at her. Ranma had expected surprise or anger or maybe for Nabiki to retreat behind her Ice Queen mask again. The last would have been easiest - for Nabiki to brush it off as if it were nothing - like it was a scam that had been foiled. That's what Ranma had _hoped_ for anyway.

What she saw instead was _hurt_. Nabiki's big brown eyes were clear and focused on her and behind them was no artifice or glamor, just pain.

"You proposed to me. I said _yes_."

Jumping off the roof headfirst suddenly seemed like a _wonderful_ idea to Ranma.
"I didn't say yes..." Nabiki started, her eyes starting to cloud as the tears came. "... I didn't say yes because I was still looking, Ranma!" She stepped forward. "I didn't say yes because none of this will matter in ten years!" She reached out towards her. "Why are you doing this?"

Ranma felt the simple, easy clarity that she had felt since having that dream in the furo start to crumble.

"B-because... because you don't really need me anymore..." Ranma said shakily, backing away a little. "Because... everyone gets to be happy if I just get out of the way... Because... because it's easier..."

Nabiki shook her head. "I didn't fall in love with you because I wanted easy, Ranma Saotome!"

"I..." Ranma shook her head and backed away. "S-so what if the omiai doesn't go your way, huh? What if Mom picks Akane, or Ukyou, or Kodachi even? What am I supposed to do then, huh? J-just tell her to go to hell?!" Her eyes narrowed. "I know the whole family honor thing doesn't make any sense to you, but it was how I was raised! I gotta always do my best to be the man Mom wants me to be... the man Pops has been tryin' to raise me to be... and I can't do that if I'm goin' around behind their backs workin' against 'em! Mom wants what's best for me an' Pops has always been there to help me train for a challenge! I've been fightin' 'em on this for so long and... and it's just made everyone miserable. Maybe it's time to stop, huh? Maybe what I want isn't the most important thing here. Maybe I gotta start trusting 'em like they keep telling me I need to."

"Why are you willing to trust them, after all they've done to you, but not me!?!" Nabiki demanded, taking another step. "Why not Akane? Or Shampoo, or Ukyou?"

"Because! Because..." Ranma felt her confidence bleeding away as that sense of resolve started to unravel. There were good answers to Nabiki's demands, she knew there were! But she just didn't have them. "Look... just lemme talk to Mom and Pops at the omiai... But... until all of that is sorted out we should stop... I should stop. Stop makin' plans or gettin' involved when I don't know where I'm goin'."

"You mean until your mother tells you where you're going," Nabiki said coldly.

"I just gotta fulfil the contract, okay?!" Ranma shot back. "I gotta put honor and my family first! At least for now. Just for a little while. I can do that because I know you and the other girls are okay now... you'll be okay, no matter what happens, 'cuz you've got each other." She swallowed. "You just... you just gotta... gotta give me a little more time."

"How much time?" Nabiki asked softly.

That was an easy question. An obvious question. And one Ranma didn't have a good answer for.

"Ask... ask me after the omiai on Sunday," Ranma said finally.

Before Nabiki could answer, Ranma turned and leapt for the fence surrounding the rooftop then bounded away.

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"You are quite brazen to come here yourself, child," the old woman said in Mandarin. Her name was Lo Shan, youngest of the Council of Elders, and she was the only one who had been willing to meet with Himura. She was a middle-aged woman, sitting on a cushion and flanked by two much younger female guards. Her greying black hair was pulled back in a tight ponytail that fell down her back in a cascade of silver and black. She wore green robes trimmed in gold and emblazoned with the crest of
the village. Her eyes were cold and dark and what had undoubtedly once been a lovely face was marred with scars and lines. She took a puff from a long pipe and regarded Himura with detached interest. "Especially with only a copy of the scroll."

"On the contrary, I felt it was necessary insurance, Honored Elder," Himura replied in crisp, measured words.

Lo Shan frowned. "Your Chinese is stilted." She leaned forward. "Unlike some other Joketsuzoku, I have little use for Outsiders and even less for their contrivances like that one you flew here in. Your wealth and power in the outside world means little here. It is not the knowledge of the scroll we seek, but to prevent that knowledge from falling into the hands of those who would misuse it. Now… you will produce the original scroll and any remaining copies. Such things have no place in your world."

The woman exuded threat almost casually. She had the presence of someone to whom power came easily and who was utterly confident in her abilities. Hers was an enormous ego and it was likely entirely justified.

Himura was kneeling on the hard floor. She had been made to wait in that position for some time and her legs ached. She shivered a bit. Part of her envied such easy, visceral power - not having to rely on underlings or schemes but to simply have the means to take what you wanted with your own hands. She took a breath and steadied herself.

The downside of such power was that it limited one's horizons. When your best tool is a hammer all problems become nails. And why have a Hammer when you could have a Carpenter?

She smiled broadly. "I have no objection to returning the scroll to the custody of the Joketsuzoku. However, before I do so, I wanted to create an opportunity to discuss the matter of someone who is of importance to your village - someone who has been wronged by just such a misuse of the scroll… and who may be served by proper use of it once more."

Lo Shan laughed. "Proper?! There is no proper use for such a thing! It is the arrogance of your countrymen that produced such a thing!"

"That point I do not dispute, Honored Elder," Himura bowed her head. "But… the knowledge of the scroll may be used to reverse that which was done."

"You presume we have any interest in doing so," The elder sniffed.

"No, I merely state it as my intended goal. Or at least… the most contentious of them," Himura smiled again. "I prefer to get the 'bad news' over with, as it were. Of your interests, we have not yet spoken, but… if I might be so bold as to presume?" She snapped her fingers, and her attendant scuttled forward on her knees. The woman bowed and presented a large binder, handing it to one of the elder's guards. The guard opened it, leafed through it then passed it to the elder.

"What is this?" The elder asked. Her tone carried a sneer but there was the undercurrent of curiosity there that Himura had been hoping for.

"Detailed information on every known martial artist of eighth Dan or higher in Japan. I also have similar dossiers available for Korea, Vietnam and China itself," she smiled. "A benefit of my own position."

"Hnh. And of what relevance is this to me?" Lo Shan closed the binder and tossed it to the ground in front of Himura.
"How big is your village, elder?" Himura asked. "Less than a thousand, yes? That's quite a small gene pool. Viable, but a little shallow."

The elder sighed as if bored. "I will take your word for it. This is of interest to me how…?"

"Xian Pu is widely recognized as the most skilled warrior of her generation, correct?" Himura asked. "Even in Japan we know this. But… that's something of a disappointment compared to prior generations, is it not?"

The elder's eyes narrowed. "This is not a matter we discuss with Outsiders," she said harshly.

"An edict from her Great-Grandmother, Khu Long, I imagine?" Himura replied. "Your village has existed for thousands of years on a very simple system: You respect and incorporate strength. Your oldest and most cherished laws revolve around inviting such strength into your village. I imagine in days past of wandering Monks and Adventurers, such a policy brought much needed new blood to your tribe. But… there are not so many wandering Martial Artists these days, are there?"

"My patience wears thin, girl. Get to the point!" Lo Shan growled warningly.

Himura shrugged. "The martial artists do not wander so much, but they do still exist. And I know where to find them. I can provide all the information you need to decide which ones are worthy. And I can provide the means for you to collect them. Or, should you prefer, to deliver them to you."

"Are you suggesting we roam about Asia kidnapping men to be our husbands?" The elder's face cracked into a scornful smile. "You are far more naive than I originally believed!"

"Am I?" Himura asked. "Your enemies the Musk marry Outsiders now, rather than abusing the pools of Jusenkyo, and their power remains at its ancient height. The residents of Togenkyo Island combine abuses of similar magical waters with Outsider blood to the same effect. The Chinese government itself becomes more authoritarian and mindlessly expansionist with each passing year. I would think it painfully obvious that your village cannot presume to be self-sufficient in the face of such pressures, much less sneer at the offer of a hand of friendship and alliance."

"You speak of the Triad," Lo Shan said, drawing herself up fully. "Others have made such overtures on their behalf. We have no interest in the friendship of liars and peddlers of poison."

"I am associated with the Triad, yes. Or rather my Grandfather is, and I will be in his stead when I succeed him. But I am not here representing the Triad or their interests. I am here representing my own, in which the Triad may be a factor." She smiled and leaned forward. "Your village's hatred of enslavement is legendary but you have no compunctions about enslaving others. Perhaps an association with such liars and peddlers of poison would be more palatable to you if you were the ones ruling them?"

The elder chuckled. "Now you presuming I am naive."

"Perhaps," Himura said. "But as you look down on me for my ignorance and presumption about your people, remember that the Triad are mine. They are part of a 'village' much larger than yours, into which I have been born and raised." She casually examined her nails. "Of course, you are quite right to suppose any proposition of overthrowing the Triad to be madness or idiocy or both." She looked back at the Elder and smirked. "But the Triad, like most of the 'village' I am from, is a meritocracy. Revolution is not required - merely the proper sponsorship, inside knowledge and patience." She leaned back again. "An Alliance that promises nothing but quick gains is a farce. An Alliance that promises no quick gains at all is doubly so. I propose neither. What I offer is… an ongoing and mutually beneficial arrangement. For now, I can provide information and access to
things that benefit you in the short term in exchange for support in securing a position that will afford me much greater ability to provide. Which I would be inclined to continue to do for the continued support of your skills and for the benefit of positioning those who share a similar mindset in situations that are advantageous to us both. In the parlance of my people… this is a ground-floor buy in."

The elder regarded her coolly for a moment. She puffed on her pipe then closed her eyes. She snapped her fingers and a pair of girls scurried off to return shortly with a pillow for Himura to kneel on and a fresh cup of tea.

"I would hear… specifics," The elder said in Japanese.

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"Ranma!"

Ranma barely heard the warning before the volleyball struck her full force in the face, catapulting her backwards to land flat on her back. The ball careened off and Ranma was left staring up at the sky, spread eagled on the ground.

Sayuri's head came into view, upside down. "Ranma, are you okay?!" She knelt down next to Ranma's head.

"No fair having Rin spike it at me…” Ranma murmured, trying to get her eyes to focus properly again.

"Uhh… actually…” Riko's head appeared a bit behind Sayuri's. "I was the one who spiked that. Aheh…”

"Senpai, are you okay?!" Rin also popped into view.

Ranma groaned and sat up, rubbing her forehead. "I'm fine. Just… just slipped on some sand. Lemme go again."

Sayuri sighed. "Ranma, this is the sixth fumble you've made today. I don't think your head is in the game."

Ranma clenched her fist. "No, c'mon, give me another shot!"

Sayuri shook her head. "Actually, you might be able to take blows to the head all day, but we're getting tired. I'm calling a break for now." She looked up. "Riko, that was a good spike, by the way."

Riko blushed and grinned at the compliment.

Ranma, however, slumped and looked at her hands. Why isn't anything going right today?

"Oh, hey Ryouga," Sayuri said.

Ranma looked up and cursed inwardly. Of course. Of COURSE as soon as I think that Ryouga shows up!

"Ranma! Where the hell have you been?!” Ryouga growled. "I've been looking all over for you!"

"The same place I've been for half the day?" Ranma got to her feet, sighed and dusted herself off. Part of her was surprised that Ryouga had actually managed to make it to the volleyball courts from
inside the school in such a short time.

"We've got an appointment to meet Dr. Hirano, remember?" Ryouga folded his arms.

Ranma clapped a hand over her face. "Right, right… more girl side stuff. How could I forget?" She gave Sayuri an apologetic look. "I gotta go take P-chan here to the vet. Sorry I gotta duck out early."

"Hey!"

Sayuri shrugged. "That's okay. I don't think we were doing you too much good anyway." She cocked her head. "Ranma… I know you've got a lot going on right now. Just let us know if there's anything we can do to help, okay?"

"Uhh… yeah… sure…" Ranma rubbed the back of her head sheepishly then retreated quickly before things could get too much more awkward. She grabbed Ryouga's arm and started leading him toward the gates. "C'mon, pork butt."

"H-hey, aren't you gonna change outta the gym gear?" Ryouga asked as she dragged him along.

Ranma glanced down at herself and sighed in frustration. He had a point, but all she had with her was her girl's school uniform, which she did not want to wear any longer than she had to. Not that the girl's gym uniform was any better. She blinked as she remembered an alternative. "I left a set of clothes at Doc Tofu's. I can change when we go pick him up."

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"Tofu Ono, a pleasure to meet you."

Tofu had his hand extended in greeting and a smile on his face. Ranma had changed into her standard red chinese shirt and training pants and Ryouga had elected to stick with his school uniform. All of them had been greeted by Dr. Hirano at the reception desk.

The Neurologist paused, looking Tofu over in his simple brown gi, his relative youth and his short ponytail. He cleared his throat, took off his glasses and made a show of cleaning them. "Ah, yes… you would be the 'Doctor' Ranma and Ryouga told me about that has knowledge of the… unique medical situation we are investigating." He put his glasses back on. "Doctor Masamune Hirano, Neurologist. Might I ask what your field of specialization is?"

Tofu blinked and lowered his hand. "I'm a licensed chiropractor in Nerima. My focus of specialization is chiropracty, but with extensive study of moxibustion and acupuncture…"

"Of course. Chiropracty," Hirano sighed. "I fear Ranma and Ryouga have misunderstood the requirements of the situation. While I have no doubt you are entirely competent in your… field of expertise… I would not feel comfortable involving someone who is not thoroughly versed in modern medical…"

"... As well as my Medicinae Doctorem et Chirurgiae Magistrum from McGill university with a minor in physiotherapy, as well as my MD from the Japanese Government," Tofu finished, still smiling. "My sensei felt it was important to have a broad perspective on medicine that included both modern and alternative forms. While I specialize in chiropracty, acupuncture and moxibustion, I am a fully licensed General Practitioner."

Hirano blinked. "O-oh… My apologies doctor."

Tofu folded his hands behind his back. "None needed. Many of my fields of specialization have a
poor reputation due to misinformation and, if I'm being perfectly frank… Tofu leaned in with a conspiratorial wink, "... there are a lot of quacks out there claiming to be chiropractors."

"Hhn," Doctor Hirano said noncommittally. "W-well, be that as it may… are you familiar with Magnetic Resonance Imaging?"

"Of course. I've had several of my patients make use of it, rather than CT scans. It's superior for imaging soft tissue though the process is somewhat more involved and uncomfortable than a CT scan," Tofu said enthusiastically. "I've always wanted to see how it might be used to better formalize and explore my own fields but naturally such expensive equipment is rarely available for use by alternative disciplines, much less to satisfy curiosity."

Hirano raised an eyebrow. "Normally I would be quite adamant that your proposed use of the technology would be frivolous and irresponsible. But… in light of recent developments…"

"Ranma tells me she showed you an example of manifested ki," Tofu interrupted him. "I do hope she didn't blow a hole in any walls with it?"

Hirano cleared his throat. "No… I wasn't aware that was a possible application of…" He sighed, defeated. "If you would follow me, perhaps it's best if we get started."

Ranma and Ryouga sat slumped in their chairs. Ranma was nodding off and Ryouga had the look of someone for whom boredom had entered a meditative state.

"So these are the scans you've taken of Ryouga's brain," Tofu said. "Both before this 'link' with Ranma manifested and then after?" He considered the images on the computer screen, using the mouse to flip through the images.

"Yes. We're still trying to interpret what we're seeing, especially this activity here in the entorhinal cortex." Hirano leaned over his shoulder. "Ah… not knowing your specific breadth of study for your degree…"

"The part of the brain that is believed to regulate sense of direction," Tofu interrupted. "Enhanced activity in that region of the brain, especially such chaotic activity, would explain Ryouga's inability to find his way."

"Quite so," Hirano replied. "But it does not explain how Ranma is able to suppress said activity and normalize the region." He reached over and took the mouse, bringing up a similar image of Ryouga's brain after linking with Ranma.

Tofu rubbed his chin. "This reminds me of something…" He picked up the small satchel bag he had brought and opened it to retrieve a number of old scrolls.

"O-oh… yes…" Hirano made a face upon seeing the old parchment. "I am not sure if traditional folk medicine would have much constructive knowledge to contribute to…" he trailed off as Tofu opened the scroll to reveal a diagram of a human head with an maze of lines and notes and a considerable focus on the particular part of the skull that corresponded to the image on the computer screen. "Wait… what is this?"

"It's an old diagram made by a priestess from the Sengoku jidai period," Tofu said. "It's a scroll I came across while looking for possible insight into Ryouga's condition. Now… admittedly some of this you'll need to take with a grain of salt. But the priestess, Kaede, was treating a man who had apparently fallen afoul of some form of yokai that cursed him with an inability to find his way."
Hirano closed his eyes. "If this is leading to drilling holes in Mr. Hibiki's head to release foul spirits…"

"That was more of a European practise, actually," Tofu replied, unperturbed. "But Kaede's notes here speak of finding a definite disruption in the man's Ki, centered around this region of his head, which she believed was a kind of 'spiritual poisoning'. However, because of the nature of a person's aura she was unable to alleviate the man's symptoms."

"The… 'nature of a person's aura'?” Hirano repeated uncertainly.

Tofu turned in his chair. "Yes! All living things have an aura…” He held up a hand. "... and before you roll your eyes, I am aware the term has been misused but I think Ranma's demonstration is enough to prove such things exist. At any rate, all living things possess an aura which is made up of Ki, which is the vital force. 'Life energy' you could perhaps call it. Some have tried to relate it to the bioelectric fields of living things to find a way to measure these forces by more scientific means but, typically, the only real way to detect and probe the ki of a living thing is for someone who is suitably trained to do so with their own ki. In the past this was often a priestess or a monk, and in the modern era it is practitioners of alternative medicine. However, without that scientific rigor that tools like this provide…” he motioned towards the computer, "... well… there is a lot of chicanery."

"Presuming that we accept all of this at face value…” Hirano replied skeptically. "What is this 'nature of a person's aura'?

"Well, the largest hurdle for someone using Ki in healing practise, aside from simply learning to use it competently, is the fact that Ki is a mutually repulsive force; one living creature's Ki will naturally resist the Ki of another, almost like a magnetic field. For one using Ki to attempt to probe or heal injuries, this resistance has to be overcome, which naturally limits what can be accomplished. Surface healing can be accelerated, muscle and joint problems or fatigue, but more serious injuries, deep tissue damage, cancers and organ problems… these are often beyond our reach. We can attempt to use ki-infused herbal concoctions to try and slip past the body's natural defenses which allows us to help a little with issues of digestion, say… but most of the rest is admittedly a placebo effect." He shrugged. "Most of what we do… what competent ki healers do at any rate… is try to correct disruptions in the natural flow of ki through the body to promote healing through one's own ki. But again, we can only influence the surface and deeper problems such as this are generally beyond us. Regardless of what some charlatans might claim."

Hirano removed his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "This is… quite a bit to process. It all sounds rational enough but I have had one too many conversations with patients who refuse proper treatment due to their beliefs that hanging prayer strips at the local temple will cure them of an entirely operable tumor or remove the need to properly treat heart problems." He took a breath. "Still… in light of Ms. Saotome's demonstration…” He reached over, grabbed the mouse again and brought up the two scans of Ryouga's brain, both before and after the link. "If we assume your paradigm is correct, then how do you explain this? Ms. Saotome is quite insistent this was accomplished via some form of 'Ki sharing' between them, yet your dissertation on the 'Nature of Auras' would label this as an impossibility."

Tofu turned and regarded the images. "I was wondering that as well. If we're to assume that Ryouga's problem is in fact some form of 'ki poisoning', then an infusion of Ranma's ki would temporarily suppress it, like a blood transfusion for a patient suffering anemia. Now, as they describe it to me, Ryouga's family, as an aspect of this 'curse' are able to form a 'link' with another individual. An 'anchor' that they can navigate by, despite the ailment."

"Yes that part seemed all rather mystical and indeterminate," Hirano replied.
"It's possible the link isn't part of the curse, but in fact a distinct Hibiki family trait..." Tofu said. "From what they tell me, it's a function of strong emotional connection... more like pair bonding. Among strong Ki users there are often distinct qualities... Some are more inclined for healing, others for more physical manifestations such as Ranma and Ryouga... If we presume Priestess Kaede's 'demonic curse' and Ryouga's ailment are the same, or at least related, it's possible that this unique factor of his ki... this family trait... allowed them to survive whereas the poor soul under Kaede's care did not."

"Could such a poisoning effect be hereditary?" Hirano asked.

"A child's ki is initially formed from that of his parents at the moment of conception. As I understand it, Ryouga's mother also suffers from this, and gestation would have reinforced it. Without knowing more about Ryouga's family line it's tough to speculate what might cause it to manifest in a case of it being from the paternal side, but..." Tofu shrugged. "It may be through some vector like Bovine spongiform encephalopathy. This is all medicine that has normally been beyond our reach." He looked again at the MRI images. "I suspect the only reason your equipment is able to pick all of this up is because Ryouga is an exceptionally strong Ki user. But... here, see these faint lines here, and here? These are known ki paths."

Hirano leaned in and squinted. "I was under the impression those were artifacting in the imaging process."

Tofu shook his head. "Maybe... if the placement wasn't dead on. I have examined Ryouga, and I can attest that these match up with his own ki flows. But these..." He pointed to others within the skull. "... These have been forever beyond our reach."

"Are you saying that we have inadvertently produced possible evidence of these 'energy fields' that are the basis of your... uh... discipline?" Hirano asked.

"Quite possibly!" Tofu said. He grinned. "Isn't this exciting? This is like the invention of the first microscope! Peering into things we could once only blindly paw at with clumsy digits and limited senses." He looked at the image again. "See here, how the lines get twisted and snarled right as you reach the area of heightened activity in the entorhinal cortex. And here... the activity is suppressed but the snarled ki lines remain after Ranma's transfusion of Ki."

"That suggests that the matter is treatable, but not curable that way," Hirano said thoughtfully, his skepticism slowly giving way to curiosity.

"Maybe not!" Tofu switched to another image, this time from the second series that had been taken of Ryouga's brain with the activity. "This is before the link with Ranma - and this is after, once the activity had reasserted itself. See how these lines have changed and the activity in this region is less pronounced?"

"I see... so you're proposing extended exposure to, for the lack of a better term, 'healthy' ki would not only suppress this disruptive influence but allow the pathways themselves to normalize."

"Yes! Essentially using Ranma's ki as a pattern to reconstruct the damage. Almost like a scaffolding to promote regrowth of tissue."

"Now... hold on a moment... you are saying these ki pathways..." Hirano pointed to several near the surface, "... are known, correct?"

"Yes, quite well known," Tofu replied, happy to see the neurologist taking an active role.
"These... these are major nerve pathways..." Hirano said, his eyes widening.

Tofu frowned and looked again. "No, they're not."

"No, you're right, not exactly. More like... They're parallel." He traced a finger along one. "Like afterimages. Or... rather... what if what are traditionally called ki 'pathways' are nothing of the sort, but in fact an effect, like a magnetic field generated by moving electrons through metal. Only in this case, it's electrons moving through human nervous tissue. This would explain the bright points near, but not at, major nerve clusters."

"But wouldn't a field project around the nerve, like a magnetic field?"

Hirano chuckled. "If all of this is as real as you say, there's no assurance we are even dealing with anything that falls under our usual understanding of physics, my friend." He peered at it. "If we could... decipher this... use what's detected here to reverse-map the nervous system of a living patient in real-time..."

"Wouldn't that imply that what we are seeing going on with Ryouga's brain is in fact a form of brain damage?" Tofu asked. "And the effect of Ranma's ki..."

"Reversal of brain damage." Hirano's eyes went wide. "You are suggesting the possibility of reversing neurological damage... potentially anywhere in the nervous system." He clapped his hands and his eyes lit up. "Theoretically, you could regenerate any part of the nervous system! Even a spinal cord! All you would need is a 'donor' with a healthy spinal cord to provide the appropriate pattern for the patient's ki to work from!"

"And a link to bypass the natural resistance to invasive ki," Tofu added.

"If it's possible, it's reproducible," Hirano asserted. "It might take... years or even decades, but... if this is what I think it is..."

"... it would completely change modern medicine," Tofu finished, eyes widening.

"Forget the microscope, my friend! This is penicillin!" Hirano crowed. He clapped Tofu on the back. Ranma started awake at the clap. She blinked blearily and glanced at Ryouga, who was glassy-eyed and unmoving. She stretched and yawned. "Uh... hey, doc? Are we gonna do some scans or somethin' today?"

"Hmmm? Oh, you're still here. My apologies, Ms. Saotome!" Hirano said, obviously distracted. His eyes were still on the computer screen, occasionally flicking to Kaede's scroll. "I don't think we'll need you or Mr. Hibiki today. I'll give you both a call when we need you back here."

Ranma frowned. Hirano and Tofu had returned to their animated conversation which involved a lot of unfamiliar terms that made it sound like they were speaking a different language. "Uhh... I guess we'll... be seeing you then?"

"Take care, Ranma!" Tofu waved distractedly.

Ranma gave the two older men a skeptical look but they had gone back to ignoring her. She shrugged, grabbed Ryouga by the arm and hauled him to his feet then dragged him out of the hospital before he was fully aware they were leaving.

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"So… Do you think that'll actually go anywhere?" Ryouga asked, still shaking off some of the fogginess from having been zoned out for so long.

"I dunno, man. I was asleep for most of it," Ranma replied. She walked along on top of the nearby fence, hands folded behind her head. She shot him a grin. "I did hear 'brain damage' pop up a few times, though."

"Yeah… thanks. That makes me feel loads better," Ryouga muttered, jamming his hands in his pockets.

Ranma smirk faded. She had been hoping for a more lively response to her jab but Ryouga really wasn't rising to the bait anymore. He simply seemed far less inclined to get angry at Ranma - which made it tough to pick a fight. And that was frustrating, because Ryouga would be more than happy to trade barbs with Akane, as well as blows.

*Why's he so happy to give Akane a good fight but not me, huh? Ranma groused. What's she got that I don't got? I'm a WAY better fighter than…* She stopped and squeezed her eyes shut. *Not havin' weird thoughts about Ryouga anymore. She sighed and glanced at him. At least I got away from this without any more handholding. That stupid link is probably most of the reason why I've been feeling weird lately.*

Her hand twitched and she grabbed it and rubbed her palm with her thumb to make it go away.

"So how did your talk with Akari go?" Ranma asked, wanting to shift the focus of her thoughts elsewhere.

"What talk?" Ryouga asked, giving her a confused look.

"You know, the talk? That you were gonna have when you promised me you were gonna call her?" Ranma scowled at him.

Ryouga noticed her dirty look. He shrugged. "About as well as your talk with Nabiki when you promised *me* you were gonna call *her*.""That's different you jerk!" Ranma shot back, clenching her fist.

"Is it?" Ryouga asked thoughtfully, not really in response. His eyes were on the pavement, not Ranma. "I didn't skip it on purpose, it just slipped my mind. I'll call her tonight."

"Wait… really?" Ranma blinked. "Just like that, huh?" She shrugged and folded her hands behind her head again. "Well… good for you, I gue-wait…" Her brow furrowed. "Why would something like that 'slip your mind'?" She gave him another smirk. "Didja chicken out again?"

"No," Ryouga said with the nonchalance that came from an easy truth. "I was just worried about someone else." He raised his head, giving her a meaningful look.

Ranma's eyes widened, and she nearly toppled off the fence. "Wh-wh… NO!" She waved her arms frantically. "L-look, we gotta stop this crap, okay? I'm a guy."

"So?" Ryouga raised an eyebrow. "You're also my friend. And you kinda saved my life. And you're maybe possibly helping me to cure my biggest problem outside of the Jusenkyo curse. Gender doesn't have anything to do with that. Why're you being weird about it?"

"I…" Ranma felt the heat rise in her cheeks. She looked away and crossed her arms. "... Shut up."
Ryouga smirked, smelling blood. "You're cute when you pout, you know that?"

Ranma's eyes widened and she whirled on him. "You take that back!"

He kept walking, turning around and walking backwards, smirk widening. "Make me, little girl."

With a roar, Ranma leapt off the fence at him, throwing a flying punch at his head. Ryouga weaved out of the way and circled around behind her. She lashed out with her leg in an attempt to sweep his legs out from under him but he skipped back out of reach.

"You're awful slow, Ranna. You're usually faster than this, even as a guy!"

"I AM A GUY, DAMNIT!" Ranma launched herself from her crouch and drove her fist into his gut.

Ryouga grabbed her wrist, seemingly unaffected by the punch. "What was that? You're fighting like when I first got to Nerima. I thought you were…"

Ranma grabbed Ryouga's wrist in turn. Her other arm suddenly blurred as she threw a flurry of punches at his midsection. Pushing her amaguriken speed as hard as she could, she repeatedly struck the same exact spot - several hundred times in the space of a second or two.

"...fast..." Ryouga wheezed and stumbled, but Ranma still had a hold of his wrist and used that to hold him as she hopped into the air and slammed both her heels into his chest, driving him back.

"How's that?" Ranma settled into a ready stance, waiting for him to charge her like he always did. "Or should I go get some hot water and make this a real fight?"

Ryouga coughed, holding his gut. He wiped a little blood from the corner of his mouth and smirked. "That'll be interesting... considering I can tell you're wearing a bra."

Ranma looked down, then covered her chest, blushing. She glared at him then howled and charged once more, intent on wiping that smug look off his face.

Half an hour later Ryouga finally called a stop to the running battle.

"Enough, enough..." he held up his hand. "You win, Ranma."

Ranma bounced to a stop, confused. She was panting and dishevelled and was aching from a half dozen bruises and scrapes but she felt great. Better than she had in weeks. "What?! Why?! I'm just getting warmed up!"

"Yeah, well, I've gotta get home and help Mom with chores before dinner," Ryouga straightened. "It's getting late as it is."

"So you're just gonna run out on a man-to-man fight?!" Ranma demanded. She knew she was setting herself up for an easy retort. She was waiting for him to react so things would spark off again.

"I'm postponing it," Ryouga corrected. "We aren't finishing this any time soon and you know it."

Ranma felt a little crestfallen as, once more, Ryouga refused to take the bait. She straightened and jammed her hands in her pockets, sulking. "Fine... ya big baby... C'mon, I'd better get you home before you turn into a pig-shaped pumpkin or whatever it is that happens that's got you all anxious to sweep the floor at home."
Ryouga walked up beside her and fell into step with her easily. She noticed he was adjusting his gait to match her shorter strides, got annoyed by it and sped up her pace.

"You got some good hits in," Ryouga rolled his shoulder, wincing.

"Yeah… well… So did you," Ranma replied, though she honestly didn't feel as sore as she normally did after a fight like that. It wasn't so much that Ryouga was pulling his punches but more he wasn't fighting as dirty as usual.

They continued walking until Ryouga's house came into view. Ranma could see Ryouga's mother out front working in the flower planters and hesitated.

Ryouga noticed her stop, shrugged, and continued walking. "Thanks for the workout, Saotome. See you Monday." He waved casually as he walked to the gate by himself.

"Uh… sure," Ranma waved back, a bit confused. She watched him greet his mother and head inside. What's up with him? Ryouga usually fights until one or both of us can't move, unless something else comes up, but he just… STOPPED today. And he never raged out like normal. It's like he just… wasn't into it like usual?

She shrugged. Figuring Ryouga out wasn't something she wanted to waste any more time on today. At least this time it had been something straightforward and manly and familiar.

She turned to walk away, then paused, turning back to look at Ryouga's house again. Her expression became thoughtful as realization slowly dawned on her.

*He did that for my benefit. Because I needed a good fight.*

She looked down, feeling an odd wash of emotions and conflicting impulses. Most of all there was an odd, warm feeling.

She jammed her hands in her pockets, hunched her shoulders and walked away quickly.

*Trust Ryouga to make even FIGHTING confusing…*

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Sunday morning started with getting flung out of a window.

Ranma had gotten used to being able to sleep in on Sundays. Even on school days, generally the only things waking him up would be the alarm clock or Kasumi gently chiding him that he should really get up or he'd be late. The only real surprises had been the occasional time he had wakened to find a fiancee (or two!) had snuck in to snuggle with him sometime during the night.

You don't realize how precious peaceful sleep is until it's taken away from you.

Ranma's eyes snapped open as he flew through the air. He tucked into a ball, rolled to change his trajectory and managed to land on his feet on one of the large stones surrounding the koi pond rather than in it. He whirled to face his attacker, though he already knew who it was.

"You're getting soft, boy! Sleeping in to this late hour!" Genma chided him, arms crossed. "Were you planning on sleeping all day? On the day of your omiai no less!"

"I was considering it!" Ranma shouted back. "Some of us gotta get up early the other six days of the week. We can't just cuddle up with an old tire and take a nap anytime we want like some people!"
Genma's eyes narrowed. "You disrespectful, slovenly disgrace! Is this how you repay all my hard work training you? In front of your mother, no less!"

"Hi dear!" Nodoka poked her head out of the family room doors, waved cheerfully then ducked back inside.

"Yeah, Mom seems real broken up," Ranma replied, folding his arms and smirking. "I think you're slowin' down, old man. You didn't even get me into the pond this time!"

"Oh I'll get you into the pond…" Genma growled. "See if I don't…"

Genma was interrupted by a howling battlecry. He dodged to the side just as a yellow blur landed right where he had been standing and kicked up dirt as her foot impacted the ground. Akane didn't hesitate but switched into a backwards roundhouse kick that caught Genma in the back and sent him flying towards the pond. Ranma ducked and rolled clear as there was a massive splash behind him.

The rotund form of a panda emerged from the pond, looking confused and holding up a sign that read: Hold on, I'm supposed to train with the boy this morning!

Akane exchanged a glance with Ranma and gave him a wink, then turned focus back on Genma-panda. "You can fight with Ranma after you're done with me, old man!" She darted forward past Ranma and into the pond, kicking up a spray as she threw a savage series of punches and kicks at the panda, who backed up slowly, frantically parrying with his sign.

The panda produced sign in his other paw that read: Help me out, boy! She's gone berserk!

"I'll show you berserk!" Akane ripped the second sign out of his paw and smashed it over his head.

Ranma whistled low. "Wow… Akane's going hard this morning."

"She was hoping to wake you up this morning herself."

Ranma turned to see Kasumi walking up to him, holding a towel. "It seems you don't need this this time."

Ranma smirked. "Thanks anyway, Kasumi. You should probably hold onto that for Akane." He winced as there was a loud crash behind him, followed by another one of Akane's battlecries and a whimper of pain from the panda. "... and maybe have the first aid kit ready."

Kasumi smiled. "Oh, I'm sure there's no need. Akane seems fine." She winced visibly at another crash and howl of pain from the Panda. "Well, maybe the ice pack in case she bruises her knuckles."

"Err… yeah…" Ranma wondered what Genma had done to earn the ire of the eldest Tendo this time or if perhaps he had just hit a kind of critical mass with her. He resolved to never find himself in the same situation.

"Nabiki and the other girls are on their way. They should be here soon," Kasumi said. "I'll have breakfast ready for when they get here. I thought it might be nice to all sit down together to have a meal."

Ranma smiled and nodded. "Sounds good." He glanced towards the family room. "Uhh… is Mr. Tendo in there with Mom?"

"Not right now. I believe he's taking a bath to ease his nerves. He's quite stressed over the omiai."

Kasumi cocked her head. "Why?"
"Uhh, no reason." Ranma rubbed the back of his head. "I just wanted to ask Mom something and wanted to make sure this was a good time."

"Oh! All right Ranma." Kasumi smiled. "I'll try and get you some privacy with her for a few minutes." She winced as there was another crash behind them. She turned and sighed. "Oh dear, is that another hole in the fence wall?"

Ranma turned and took the chance, trotting up to the sliding doors of the family room. He took a deep breath and adjusted his silk shirt to make sure he was presentable.

_Dunno why I'm nervous. Just going to talk to my Mom. Not like that's a big deal… right?_

He slid open the door and walked inside. His mother had the _rirekisho_ of each of the girls arrayed in front of her on the table. She looked up as he entered and smiled.

"Hello, son!" She said, beaming. "I was just reviewing your prospective brides again. You truly are as manly as I hoped to have attracted such wonderful girls to you."

"Uh… thanks…" Ranma sat down across from her. "Umm… is it okay if we talk?"

"Nervous about the _omiai_?" She asked with a smile. "Don't be. I will select the best bride for you in all of Japan!"

"Yeah, I… uh… I know," Ranma said sheepishly. "It was more… I wanted to talk to you about what happens _after_. You know… once you uh… pick one?"

"Oh, don't worry at all, my son. It's all been planned for." Nodoka beamed at him then went back to flipping through the papers.

Ranma blinked, waited a moment, then scooted forward a bit. "Uh…"

"Is there something else, Ranma?" Nodoka asked, smiling.

"Can I know what's been planned?" He asked nervously. ""Cuz it's kinda been eatin' at me…"

Nodoka sighed and closed the file she was reading. "It _was_ meant to be a surprise for you, but if you _must_ know…" She leaned forward conspiratorially. "Your father and I have been saving up for a getaway for you and your bride. We'll have the wedding at home, right after the _omiai_ announcement is made, and then you'll be off to Ikaho Onsen for three days and nights! It's the best place for young couples who are trying to conceive, I hear."

"Wait… _conceive_!?!" Ranma gaped. "Shouldn't we… y'know, wait until I'm out of high school?"

"Nonsense, we're already behind schedule," Nodoka replied, unperturbed. "Presuming their reputation isn't just marketing propaganda and you succeed, your wife will stay with me during the pregnancy and you and your father will be able to go off on a nice long training journey together! Though we have prepared in case it takes a little longer. It did take your father and I a few tries after all."

"Hold on… what if I'm not _ready_ to be a father yet?!" Ranma protested. "And… shouldn't I at least be _there_ during the pregnancy?"

Nodoka paused and gave him a searching look, seeming genuinely confused. "Ranma, has your father not explained any of this to you?"
Ranma shook his head slowly.

Nodoka sighed. "Silly man! You should have figured all of this out yourself by now, though." She folded her hands on her lap. "Ranma, you are rapidly approaching the Prime of a martial artist's life - the time when your physical ability reaches its apex. Those few short years are the years you can and must accomplish the most. This was something your father was aware of, which is why he took you so early for training; so that those years wouldn't be wasted learning the basics, as they were with him. To waste this golden time of your life on courtship and child rearing would be tragic, so your father and I have planned for it. Naturally, such a time of your life will be dangerous so the needs of the Art had to be balanced with the need to ensure the Saotome line continues. Your father was to provide a betrothal for you... something he botched terribly, but it isn't beyond repair with so many wonderful candidates! When the arrangements are made, you will naturally need to have a child as soon as possible. Once that child is born, your wife will join you on your journey to take your father's place as your support. He is getting on in years and it's unfair to expect him to keep up with you forever, much as you might wish differently."

"She'll be coming with me and bringing a newborn?!"

"Of course not, dear!" Nodoka beamed. "Your father and I both understood right away that having a child so young would be a burden upon your young wife and naturally you would not have time to help raise it during your pursuit of the Art. So the baby will stay with us... your father and I... and we will raise it in your absence. Likewise if you should have any more during your journeys - and I hope you do! - Your wife will return to us to have the child before rejoining you. I do understand that the firstborn should ideally be male, but I wouldn't object to a girl or two. Your father will grumble, but I know he will come to love a daughter and much as a son with a little proper prodding from me."

"Hold on... don't you mean granddaughter?" Ranma said, eyes widening. "I'm... just supposed to dump my kids off with you while I go train!?"

"It is a burden your father and I are willing to accept, Ranma," she said solemnly. "And naturally there will be more than just training! There will be tournaments and challenges and travel... oh, it will be so exciting! I envy you!" She reached over and patted his arm. "Once the eldest is twelve or so, you and your wife may come and collect him to take him with you to train. Your father will ensure they are all suitably schooled in the fundamentals and I'm sure you will have refined your father's training techniques by then."

"So... that's it?" Ranma asked. "Training journeys and making babies? Aren't I supposed to... settle down?"

"Oh, eventually!" Nodoka replied. "I imagine it will be up to your wife to ensure you have a dojo prepared for you once you have finished training all of your children. Your father can run the dojo while you are away, of course, and we would be more than happy to manage your earnings for you. When it's time for you to retire, you will have a place to return to to teach and care for us in our twilight years."

"What... what if I want to do something different? Like... what if I wanted to get into martial arts films? Or... or start a dojo now? Or..."

Nodoka sighed. "Ranma, Ranma, Ranma... Your father and I have planned this out since before you were born! Anything less would be a tragic waste of your talents and a threat to the destiny of the Saotome legacy. We have done all of this... made all of these sacrifices and plans... because we know what is best for you. We know what it is that will bring you fulfillment. We have taken care of all of the worry... you merely need to walk the path."
"What if I want to walk a different path?" Ranma asked quietly.

He shrank back a bit at the look of rage that crossed her face. For a moment he thought she might strike him. She quickly schooled her expression, the mask of formal calm slipping over her features once more.

"Then… so dies the Saotome line," she said softly. "Very well. I will call your father and we will arrange for the seppuku ceremony at our home."

"What?! NO!" Ranma bolted to his feet.

"A man amongst men would not say such things!" Nodoka glared at him coldly. "You speak of what you want! You speak of your hardships! What about me?! What about what I want, and have instead sacrificed for you? You ungrateful child! This is why the contract exists! You have proven time and time again that you cannot be responsible with your own life! That you cannot be trusted! That, if allowed to steer your own fate, you would immediately turn towards disaster!" She took a deep breath, calming herself and brushing a stray lock of hair out of her face. "I will hear no more of this. You are young, so a certain amount of… disrespect is allowable, but you have reached too far, my son. Do not reach any further or there will be consequences." She smoothed out her yukata. "Now… go occupy yourself with something productive. Perhaps go find your father and assist him? You've done precious little of that as of late. I will let you know when the omiai is decided."

"I can't even be here for my own engagement?" Ranma asked softly.

"No, you may not, and rest assured your father and I will be having a long discussion about further curtailing your activities outside of your training!" She gave him a cold stare. "Make no mistake, life has been easy for you until this point. It will only get harder from here, and you will learn how lucky you have been and how foolishly you have spent your carefree days. Now go, and be at home… our home… by seven or there will be no dinner. And do not come begging to Kasumi! You have imposed on the Tendo's hospitality far too much already."

"I… " Ranma gaped at her, but she was ignoring him now. Her happy smile had returned as if she had never been angry while she flipped through the pages of Kodachi's tome. He considered saying something but he already knew it was pointless. Quietly he stood and, without another word, he headed upstairs to pack.

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Kasumi stared sightlessly into space, her hands over her mouth. She heard Ranma's footsteps as he slowly made his way up the stairs. She closed her eyes slowly and a pained expression crossed her face.

She had heard every word. The walls were thin and Nodoka had made no attempt to lower her voice. Why would she? She obviously felt she was fully within her rights and no one would dare challenge her. Certainly not Kasumi's father!

*How can a mother use her own child so ruthlessly?* Her eyes opened and she shuddered, taking a few breaths to steady herself. Nodoka had already told Kasumi much of this of course, but what had seemed to be simply unreasonable expectations on Nodoka's part had quickly transformed into a commandment enforced on pain of death the moment Ranma had dared question it.

Kasumi was intimidated by the older woman. At first it was because she seemed to be so much better as a homemaker than she was, but now? There was something alien about Nodoka, something that didn't make sense to her and she shied away from it. She had the potential to
She took another breath and started rehearsing what she would have to say. Nabiki's indignation and bravado would be satisfying but ultimately self-defeating. She needed an appeal that would work for Nodoka.

*Not Ranma's well-being. If she truly believes THIS is what is best for him it would never work, and if she doesn't… well, then it would be equally meaningless. But what DOES she value if not her own son's happiness?*

She considered. Unconsciously she walked over to the cutting board where the vegetables for that morning's breakfast were laid out. She picked up a red pepper and a knife to start chopping… then paused, her eyes drawn by the reflectivity of the knife blade. She turned it slightly until she could see her own face in the polished metal, reminding her of the katana Nodoka perpetually carried to hold over her husband and son's heads.

*Honor*. Kasumi found the answer. *Or… being PERCEIVED as honorable, at least.* That was the important distinction.

She resumed chopping as a plan formed. She felt a slightly guilty bit of pleasure in that she imagined what she was plotting was manipulative enough to make Nabiki proud. But it would require her to be ruthless and calculating and cold, some of the many things that she was *not*.

*This is for family,* she decided, her resolve firming.

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Nabiki sighed, rubbing her lower back as she walked through the gates of the Tendo Dojo. She felt like an old woman - a mass of aches and pains.

"Not as bad this time, yes?" Shampoo asked hopefully, walking next to her. "Pintou doing better in training!"

"She's started throwing bowls of ramen at my head. *Full* bowls. Full of *boiling* liquid," Nabiki muttered. "If I'm doing better, it's just because it's the only way to survive!" She sighed.

"Can give backrub later?" Shampoo asked. She sidled a little closer.

Nabiki smiled a bit in spite of herself. "I think I'd feel better if we talked to Ranma about this first, Kitten," she said softly. "Especially after I botched things on the roof."

Shampoo's face fell and she nodded. "Ranma… Ranma still want us, yes?" She asked timidly, wrapping her arms around herself.

"Ranma isn't really great about being in touch with what he wants," Nabiki replied. "He keeps treating happiness like a limited resource - like he has to be miserable to leave more for us or something."

"Why Ranma think him being miserable make people who love him happy?" Shampoo asked with a heavy sigh.

"Have you met his parents?" Nabiki replied dryly.

They entered through the front door. "I'm home!" Nabiki said, kicking off her shoes.
Akane poked her head into the hallway. She looked cheerful, if a bit sweaty, with a towel around her neck and still wearing her yellow gi. "Welcome home, Nabiki!" she said. "You're just in time for breakfast."

"Is Ranma home?" Nabiki asked, leading Shampoo as she headed for the family room.

"He was last time I checked. I think he's upstairs changing?" Akane replied. "His Mom and Dad are here. We were all going to have breakfast together."

Nabiki blew out a breath. "We'll have to try and get him alone after breakfast, before the whole *omiai* nonsense starts. What about Ucchan? Or Kodachi for that matter?"

"Ucchan is getting the morning prep done to make things easier for Konatsu, so should be here after breakfast. I imagine Kodachi will be here right when the *omiai* is scheduled on the invitation like a good and perfect wife," Akane snorted.

Nabiki paused then looked up towards the ceiling tiles. "Is that right, Sasuke?"

"It is Mistress Nabiki, she will be... Oh drat! I wasn't supposed to talk!" A voice came from above the drop ceiling. A tile shifted out of place a little, and Sasuke's whiskered face came into view as he rubbed the back of his head sheepishly. "I guess you caught me."

"I should have known Kodachi would have you spying on us!" Akane growled, causing the diminutive ninja to cower.

"Just behave yourself and don't leave a mess," Nabiki replied and continued walking.

"What, you're just gonna let him stay?" Akane asked skeptically as Nabiki passed her.

"Sasuke is a known quantity. Besides..." her eyes went to the family room... "... if Kodachi really, truly cares for Ranma, maybe she should know more about the Saotome family."

"You not invite Kodachi to Fiancee's Tea, is you?" Shampoo asked, looking a little aghast, and expression mirrored by Akane.

"I wasn't planning on it. 'Crazy' plus 'rich' plus 'used to getting her way' plus 'accustomed to being in charge' does not mix well in a situation needing a lot of understanding, compromise and empathy," Nabiki replied. "Besides, we have to all at least like each other."

"Good," Akane sighed in relief.

They all filtered into the family room. Nodoka was already sitting at the table, attending her rather battered and bruised husband, who was wincing and whimpering as she treated his many cuts, bruises and contusions. He looked like he had been through a wheat thresher.

"What happened to you, Mr. Saotome?" Nabiki asked, though she was fairly sure she already knew the answer. *Way to go, sis!*

"It seems Akane has reached a new level in her training!" Soun said proudly. "Isn't that right, Saotome?"

Genma held up a wooden sign: *She hits SO hard...*

"Now now, dear. It's rude to use the signs when you're not a panda," Nodoka chided him.

"Ha ha! Well said, Saotome!" Soun chuckled. "I am very proud of you, Akane. And I understand
you are now in training with Cologne at the Nekohanten, Nabiki?"

"Uh… yeah…" Nabiki said, a bit off balance. "She seems to think I have potential."

"It makes a father proud to see his daughters following in his footsteps," Soun said cheerfully. "The Art will do you good, Nabiki, you'll see. I bet you selling the dojo doesn't seem nearly as attractive now, does it?"

"Oh no, I'm still planning to sell it," Nabiki said, a wicked grin crossing her face. "The property values in this part of town are through the roof. With the money I'll make, Ranma and I can open a dojo twice this size and have plenty of seed money left over besides."

"O-oh…" Soun replied, his good cheer fading a bit.

"Don't worry, Daddy. We'll have plenty to find a nice retirement home for you," Nabiki winked.

"Y-you shouldn't joke about such things, Nabiki!" Soun huffed. Seemingly eager to change the topic, he leaned towards the kitchen. "Kasumi! How is breakfast coming?"

"Just a moment, Father."

After a few minutes, Kasumi came into the family room. She did not have any tray as expected but instead walked to one side of the table and sat down alone.

"Is… something the matter, Kasumi?" Soun asked.

Nabiki sensed something was up and kept her mouth shut.

Kasumi folded her hands in her lap, her eyes closed and head bowed a moment. When she opened her eyes again, there was a cold determination in them as her gaze settled squarely on Nodoka.

"Before breakfast, I wanted to discuss something. Auntie Nodoka, I understand you've already sent Ranma home?"

"What!?!" Akane blinked, but Nabiki put a hand on her arm and gave her a warning look.

"Well, it wasn't necessary for him to leave right away, but I suppose Ranma misunderstood," Nodoka chuckled softly. "It has been many years since I've had my boys home and I felt it was time they started living in the home that we've worked so hard to rebuild for them, rather than imposing…"

"The agreement between our families was that Ranma would remain here until he finished high school," Kasumi cut her off coldly. "You speak of imposition, yet you have chosen to override an agreement between our families that has been in place since before I was born. And despite our attempts to accommodate your wishes - and even make this hall available for your uses despite the chance it may work out against our interests - you are seeking to annul yet another agreement and weaken this dojo further?" She glared coldly at the older woman.

Nodoka swallowed. She glanced at the faces of the others all collected around her. "Perhaps… this is not the best time or place for this discussion, Kasumi dear…"

"This is the time and place we are going to have this discussion," Kasumi asserted flatly.

"Kasumi, be reasonable…" Soun said sheepishly, glancing nervously back and forth between them. "There is no need to be so confrontational about this! I'm sure that…"
"This dojo has faced no less than seven challengers in the past year which Ranma has been instrumental in defending against," Kasumi said, gaze still fixed on Nodoka. "While I am not a martial artist, the well-being of this household is my primary concern and Ranma is critical to that. The expectation was always that the engagement would be fulfilled and Ranma would be taking over these duties. That may not happen now, so we require time to ensure my sisters are prepared to shoulder that burden - time that Ranma staying would give us. Considering the long-standing obligation between our families I consider this a matter of honor."

Nodoka blinked, staring at Kasumi in shock - a look Kasumi returned with cool resolve. 

"I… appreciate your position, Kasumi…" Nodoka said finally. "But while I do sympathize, my son's needs…"

"I believe Kasumi is correct in this matter," Soun said, startling everyone.

"D-Dad?!" Akane blurted, shocked that her father was taking a stand against Nodoka.

Soun had his arms folded and his eyes closed. "While I appreciate your position, Nodoka, Ranma's needs are not the only concern here, and as head of this household I must put the needs of my household first. Kasumi is correct. This dojo has faced many challenges over the past year, which Ranma has been vital to resolving. Furthermore I believe Ranma's time here has been greatly beneficial to his training and I don't believe our needs are mutually exclusive. I have tried to be… flexible in the matter of the engagement out of respect for your fierce devotion to what you believe is best for your son, but there is a limit, and on this matter at least, I must insist."

"I…” Nodoka's eyes widened as Soun held his position against her.

"Defense of allies important, yes?" Shampoo chipped in. "Otherwise not remain allies very long."

Nodoka looked around the table again, seeing a number of gazes fixed on her. She looked tremendously uncomfortable.

"I-I had no idea this was a matter you felt so strongly about. I merely wanted to have my son home for dinner a few nights a week," Nodoka said finally. "I have heard quite a bit of grumbling about how my son and husband are 'freeloading' and I only wished to remove an unwanted strain on the friendship between our families, not add to it…"

"By all means, I'm sure Mr. Saotome would be much happier at home. I'm sure Ranma can take care of the dojo by himself," Nabiki said with a smirk.

Nodoka shot her a dirty look and cleared her throat. "As I was saying..." she sighed. "If this is a matter you feel so strongly about, you only needed to ask. I would be happy to have Ranma stay here to help you out in getting your own house in order. It is the least the Saotome clan can do as allies of the Tendos, after all." She smoothed her yukata, regaining her composure. "Now, if breakfast is yet to be served, I think I will busy myself ensuring the dojo is ready. Come along, dear." She stood smoothly and, with as much dignity as she could muster, walked out of the room, towards the dojo.

"But… I'm sure breakfast will be ready soon…" Genma protested.

"Come along, dear."

"Yes, dear…" Genma slumped, getting slowly and painfully to his feet and limping off after his wife.

"Way to go Dad!" Akane said once they were out of earshot.
"Nice to see Daddy still has a little backbone in him," Nabiki added.

"Yes, well… as much as the Saotomes are precious friends, there is a limit to how much I can sacrifice of my own household for their sakes," Soun said gruffly. "If this is a matter my daughters are of one mind about, then it's my duty as a father and a martial artist to back them up."

"Also, if Ranma leaves, Akane won't have anyone left to spar with but you," Nabiki pointed out.

Akane casually cracked her knuckles.

Soun's stoic expression cracked a little. "Heh… yes… well thankfully it doesn't seem to have come to that." His expression grew serious again. "I am somewhat concerned that this may hurt your chances in the omiai."

"On the contrary, I think Kasumi reminding Nodoka we haven't forgotten the debt of honor owed to us could work in our favor," Nabiki replied. "Besides, I've got a killer sales pitch lined up. Nodoka Saotome would be crazy to turn it down."

Kasumi closed her eyes and seemed to almost shrink now that the confrontation was over. "I… I hope you're right, Nabiki."

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Ranma wasn't really paying much attention as he hopped from roof to roof.

He wasn't heading home. Right now that would just make him even more uncomfortable than he already was. For the moment he was just moving for the sake of keeping in motion - to keep ahead of that awful feeling of doom.

*What did I do wrong!?* he wondered, over and over as he skipped off of rooftops and light posts. The image of that brief moment of rage twisting his mother's features kept replaying in his mind, spurring him to push harder, for more speed, in the hope that the burning in his muscles would push the image away.

He finally reached his limit, stumbling a bit on a gravel roof as he staggered to a stop and barely caught himself before tumbling over the edge. He pulled himself back, the sharp stones digging into his palms and knees as he panted on all fours and tried to catch his breath. The stitches in his sides felt like knives stabbing into him, his legs felt too weak to hold his weight, and still the image refused to go away.

*What did I do?! WHAT DID I DO WRONG!?* His fingers dug into the gravel and tar as he trembled.

Being in trouble wasn't anything new to Ranma. He'd spent most of his life fighting with his father, and then resisting his father's stupid schemes, and getting chewed out for it. He'd been blamed constantly for his father's misfortune and called 'ungrateful' or 'foolish'... it wasn't that hard to brush off, given how often karma had proved Genma Saotome for the idiot he was.

But his mother…?

She was sweet. She was kind. She was patient with Akane. She smiled for everyone and even on the topic of the Seppuku contract she had seemed more sadly resolute than truly anxious to carry it out. He had been looking forward to getting to know her again, to make up for the time they had lost. He had been happy to think of her as the 'good' parent - the one who would finally be what he had been missing. So he had tried his best to be a good son for her, to trust her… even when things seemed to be pulling further and further out of his control.
Was he so repugnant to her now that even asking a question would enrage her? Was he such a terrible son that she was eager to send him back out into the cold to wander homeless for the rest of his life? Was he so awful that she honestly felt it would be better if he killed himself rather than want something more?

He pushed himself into a kneeling position as his breathing slowed as his heart rate gradually dropped. *Is this really what I deserve?* He looked at his hands, scraped from the sharp stones and sticky with tar.

He was having trouble saying 'no'. All of the mistakes he had made in his life came back to him, mocking him, reminding him of how much of his bluster and bravado was just that.

Then there was his girl side. His mother had seemed so accepting at first, so understanding. The girl side wasn't his fault; an inescapable problem and sometimes a necessary evil. As long as he continued to be a Man amongst Men, it was okay.

And then the definition of what *that* was kept changing. And each time his girl side was less and less 'okay', even if a challenge required it. It had started with sighs and exasperated looks, slid into lectures on 'not getting lazy' about his girl side and finally fallen into flat outright prohibition - even to the point of raising the spectre of the contract.

Ranma eased his pack off his shoulders, set it on the roof and sat down with his back against it, folding his arms. He looked out over the sea of buildings towards the hills and trees leading up the slopes of Mt. Fuji.

*I could just go*, he thought. *I've got everything here. I could just... go on a training journey and simply never come back.*

He felt sick at that idea - sick and lonely - but he was having trouble thinking of anything better. *It's what Mom wants anyway, right?* He didn't feel much reassurance in that. Somehow he got the feeling that wouldn't be enough for her either and that he would just end up running from the contract for the rest of his life.

"Why are you willing to trust them, after all they've done to you, but not me!?!"

He remembered Nabiki's words, and wondered why himself.

*Because they're my parents, obviously,* he thought - but that rang hollow. He had, after all, learned a long time ago not to trust the old man.

*Because I wanted things to be different with Mom.* The answer came after a few minutes. *I wanted to make her proud o' me.*

It wasn't working out that way, though. No matter what he did, somehow it was always wrong - always disappointing. The harder he tried, the more disappointed she seemed to be in the results. The only things she had ever been proud of him for were the things he didn't really have any control over.

He folded his hands behind his head and closed his eyes. He felt exhausted and it wasn't from the running. His stomach rumbled but he ignored it. He let his breathing slow and tried to clear his mind. Gradually, the lines of worry on his face smoothed as he relaxed and drifted off into a light sleep.

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"Why crazy girl go first?" Shampoo groused as the fiancees huddled around the koi pond.
"Yeah, and they've been chatting in there for nearly an hour," Ukyou added, crossing her arms and huffing as she picked at the sleeves of her formal kimono. "I can barely move in this stupid thing. How much longer is she going to make us wait?"

"I think maybe I was wrong - she is miffed about Kasumi standing up to her," Nabiki replied. She rubbed her chin. "Which means we'll probably go last, and it means that she might not be so happy to hear our idea from me."

"Let Shampoo present, then," Shampoo said. "Is Joketsuzoku laws that make possible, after all."

"Nabiki?"

They all turned to see Kasumi standing there, looking much more hesitant than she had been before breakfast.

"What's up, sis?" Nabiki asked. She smiled reassuringly. "You did good this morning, by the way. I'm proud of you!"

Kasumi smiled weakly. "Thank you, but… you need to know why I did it; about what I overheard Nodoka tell Ranma."

The four fiancees turned and gave the eldest Tendo their full attention.

Kasumi took a deep breath and started to recount the conversation between Nodoka and Ranma in as much detail as she could muster. She noticed the girls' faces darkening almost immediately, but she pushed on even as their expressions moved through incredulity and into rage.

"Chūmén bié wàngle dài bìléizhēn a!" Shampoo muttered, glaring towards the dojo and moving to take a step towards it before Nabiki stopped her with a hand on her arm.

"She told him that?" Akane asked, aghast.

"She's not raising any of my kids!" Ukyou growled.

Nabiki rubbed her forehead. "And as soon as Ranma suggested any change in plans she went straight to the nuclear option?" She sighed. "I didn't realize it was that bad."

"What do we do, Nabiki?" Akane asked, worry creasing her brow.

"Can fix," Shampoo said softly, gazing towards the dojo.

"Don't you dare, Shampoo!" Ukyou said, catching her arm. "I know that look. That's the 'obstacles are for killing' look."


"But Ranma would never forgive you!" Ukyou argued.

Shampoo gave her a hard look. "Would do anyway. Worth it so Airen be free!"

"Keep that option in your back pocket, kitten," Nabiki said softly, putting a hand on her shoulder.

"Nabiki, be serious!" Ukyou chided her, giving her an outraged look.

Nabiki scowled, staring at the dojo. "I am. I was hoping we could manage Nodoka but as long as she has that contract and is hard-set on her specific plans for Ranma's future our only choices are to
convince Ranma to go ronin or somehow neutralize the contract as a factor, and I don't know any other way to do that."

"Why would she want that?" Ukyou said. "I can understand wanting grandchildren…"

"She doesn't want grandchildren. She wants children," Kasumi interjected. "She wants replacements for the child she gave up."

"Fourteen years to regret her decision… fourteen years of loneliness and resentment that she's suppressed under the facade of 'the good wife'…" Nabiki said thoughtfully. "Fourteen years to fantasize about her second chance to be a mother… and suddenly Ranma isn't the child she's been so desperate to get back but the means to get that child she wants."

"And a reminder of her regret," Kasumi added.

"So send him away," Ukyou finished, looking sad. "But always working to provide her the things she's done without. Like some invisible genie."

"But… why?" Akane asked. "Why does she have to have it that way? She could have all of that and more if she didn't send Ranma away!"

"She'd just be 'grandma' then," Ukyou said. "I guess having Ranma actually there in his own life doesn't fit with her fantasy."

Nabiki shook her head. "There's something else. Something that makes it urgent. I don't buy the whole 'Prime of his life' routine. There's some reason Ranma needs to give her a kid and get out as soon as possible."

"You figure there's something else coming due?" Ukyou asked. "Like another contract or engagement or something?"

"Something she doesn't expect Ranma to be around after," Akane said, a note of fear entering her voice. "At least… not in any way able to have kids."

"Or something that's in danger of being found out if Ranma stays in one place too long," Nabiki replied.

"We figure out later," Shampoo stated firmly. "Get Airen away from lǎo yāo pó NOW."

Nabiki took a deep breath. Stick with the original plan. Stall stall STALL. "Okay… this is gonna suck, but we're going to have to play along, at least until we get that contract out of play. So… we go with the original plan and lay in heavy on the baby rabies aspect. Shampoo… I agree, you should be the one to pitch it to her."

"Ta made niáo," Shampoo growled.

"I know, kitten. Just… pretend she's an obnoxious customer at the Nekohanten," Nabiki said "Play up Chinese fertility herbs and how eager we all are to get pregnant."

"Do you think she'll still go for it?" Ukyou asked.

Nabiki shook her head. "I don't know. Her plan would need Ranma's wife to play along and be willing to give up their child - and that's a lot harder with four of us. On the other hand, we've got a much higher chance of giving her a grandchild fast. It'll come down to how important the money side of things is to her. But it'll hopefully make the decision enough harder for her to buy us some time."
Nodoka felt much relieved as she chuckled politely over some droll comment Kodachi had made.

The girl was very nearly perfect - lovely, strong, refined, from a noble house and wealthy enough to ensure the needs of her whole family were met, as well as having enough travel points already marked out to sustain Ranma's training journey for decades. Nodoka had broached the topic of child rearing and Kodachi’s comments about hiring nannies and tutors reassured her that the girl would not be overly attached to any children and would likely not object to Nodoka raising them in her stead.

Nodoka had major concerns about Nabiki or Akane, given how… quarrelsome the Tendos had been as a whole. She was well aware they had the strongest claim and how the whole matter would look should they not be chosen. Kasumi’s baffling confrontation was just salt in the wound. The Tendos expected far too much, wanting Ranma to stay put and service their needs. That simply wouldn't do.

Ukyou or Shampoo had promise, but she worried that they, too, might expect far too much. The girls had their own ambitions, their own futures. Maybe not incompatible, but not ideal.

She supposed she should meet with the others, though, at least as a formality. "I apologize, Ko-chan, but I'm afraid I'll have to cut this short," she said, smiling gently.

"But that's such a shame, Mother Saotome!" Kodachi said, pouting. "We were having such a nice chat!"

Nodoka nodded. "We were, but I must speak with the other girls. For the sake of appearances at least. You understand, don't you?" She gave the girl a conspiratorial wink.

Kodachi caught the gesture and smiled. She covered her mouth with the fan she had brought with her but the grin reached her eyes. "Of course, Mother Saotome. One must observe propriety and fairness, after all." She stood gracefully and bowed. "I'll see you again soon I trust. I imagine we will have much more to talk about then."

Nodoka nodded. "I imagine we will." She watched the girl leave and sighed, pondering what the children would look like. She glanced over at her husband, who was leaning against the wall, snoring. "Genma, dear?"

He didn't respond but continued to snore softly.

Nodoka sighed. She picked up the blanket-wrapped bundle next to her, untied the string and slowly slid the katana from its sheath a few inches.

Genma started awake, pale and sputtering. He glanced in her direction and whimpered.

"Awake? Good." She slid the katana back into the scabbard with a sharp *click*. "Please show the next girl in? Shampoo or Ukyou, if you would. I think we'll leave the Tendos for last."

Genma got up a bit stiffly and headed towards the door.

Nodoka settled into pleasant future planning. She would have preferred to have Ranma home, of course, but once the omiai was decided the matter would be moot. She would simply pull him out of high school, which would annul Kasumi's 'agreement'. Putting Ranma and the girl in close proximity for an extended period would undoubtedly result in an heir quickly, if her read of the girl was at all correct, and then she could send Ranma on his way. Kodachi would be pleasant company for the nine months and more than eager to rejoin her husband afterwards. Everything was settling into place.
The door slid open. Nodoka looked up but was surprised to see all four girls entering. Shampoo knelt on the cushion in front of her while the other three took up positions arrayed behind.

"I'm sorry girls, there seems to be a misunderstanding," Nodoka said. "I wished to speak with Shampoo alone. You will all get your turns, don't fret!"

"Actually, Shampoo… I speak for us all," Shampoo said quietly. "We wish to discuss alternative option allowed by Joketsuzoku law."

"Alternative option?" Nodoka asked, confused.

Shampoo took a breath and seemed to gather herself. "Ranma great warrior to Joketsuzoku. Greatest in many generations. Draw many accolades and many privileges. One, not offered for centuries, is right of multiple wives."

Nodoka's eyes widened.

"All betrothed of Ranma, save Kodachi, already been judged worthy in eyes of Joketsuzoku," Shampoo continued. "Great-grandmother has given blessing and if Matriarch Saotome do same, Ranma may marry all four."

"Four wives…?" Nodoka repeated. She glanced at the other girls, who were all sitting quietly, seemingly unsurprised by the proclamation.

"We all discuss amongst selves, agree is best option," Shampoo said. "Wish to produce strong children, many children. This best way."

Nodoka sat back a bit, shocked. "Oh my…" she said softly. "And… you have all agreed to this?"

Each girl nodded in turn, saying nothing else.

Nodoka regarded the Chinese girl. This was certainly an unexpected development! And, apparently, this time it did not come from Nabiki Tendo. She idly wondered if Soun was aware of this little arrangement his daughters had made.

Still… It would be the MANLIEST option by far… she considered. All of the advantages of each of the four girls plus four times the chance of child… possibly multiple children all at once!

She closed her eyes and steadied herself. _Perhaps this is an option worth considering? It certainly wouldn't hurt to hear her out._

She folded her hands in her lap and locked eyes with Shampoo. "Very well. Tell me more."

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Ranma awoke with a start on the roof, spasming as awareness flooded back in one surge. A moment of panic gripped him when he realised he didn't know where he was, but after a moment the flight-or-fight burst subsided as his memory trickled back to him. He groaned and pushed himself up carefully as he tried to work the krik out of his back. His mouth was dry and his tongue was plastered to the roof of it by some sort of awfulness. Sharp little stones that had been digging into him as he napped reminded him of their presence with stinging soreness and he brushed them off in irritation. Digging into his pack, he fished out a canteen which was, thankfully, still half full. The water was lukewarm and stale but it was better than nothing.

He coughed a few times. Sleeping outside on a roof in a bad position wasn't exactly the best way to
wake up feeling refreshed.

_Not even sure where I am…_ he thought, shielding his eyes as he checked the position of the sun. It was mid afternoon, maybe? Still lots of time to kill before he had to be home. He closed up his pack and slung it over his shoulders and walked to the edge of the roof. Vaulting down to the fire escape, he hopped down bouncing between balconies and window ledges until he reached the ground and landed in an alleyway looking out onto the street.

He paused for a moment, feeling a bit lost. Stepping out onto the sidewalk he looked up and down the street but he still had no real idea where to go.

"Senpai…?"

He turned slightly. It took him a second to recognize the girl who was staring at him from a few feet away. _What are the chances…?_

Rin was wearing normal street clothes; blouse, jeans and a light jacket. It dawned on him that he had never seen her in anything but her school uniform, gym clothes or the volleyball team uniform before. She was giving him a quizzical look.

"Yo…" He held up a hand in greeting, feeling a little awkward.

"You look a little rough, senpai. Have you been sleeping outside?" Rin cocked her head. "You're all dirty and…" She walked over to him, hopped up and plucked something from his hair. "... You have leaves in your hair." She showed him an old dried leaf that had been caught in his pigtail.

"Heh… I might have gotten a bit messy… kinda wasn't paying much attention," Ranma said sheepishly. "I've just been running around a lot. Took a nap on a roof… you know, lazy Sunday stuff?" He stretched nonchalantly to illustrate his point, but winced as his stiff muscles cramped in protest.

Rin blinked at him a few times, then shrugged, accepting his explanation as one of those 'Martial Artist Things'. "Okay… _Oh!_" She tapped her fist into her palm. "That's right! This is good! It's good I ran into you!" She beamed as she grabbed his arm and started trying to drag him. "Come on! We should get going!"

Ranma didn't budge. It wasn't that he was resisting all that hard - it was just Rin simply couldn't pull hard enough to move him. He stared at her, confused. "Uhh… go where?"

"Captain Sayuri… wanted to have a practise session… At a gym she found… that has a volleyball court… since we can't use the dojo today…" Rin said, undeterred and grunting with the effort as she continued to try and pull him along. She simply didn't have enough mass to give her the needed traction. She stopped to catch her breath. "She wanted to find you, but Kasumi said you weren't there when we called. I'm so lucky I ran into you!" She beamed as she grabbed his arm and started trying to drag him. "Come on! We should get going!"

Ranma watched her efforts for a few moments, bemused, before he started walking. She nearly toppled over in surprise. "Alright, alright, I ain't got nuthin' better to do anyway. Lead on."

She nodded happily, resumed her grip on his arm and continued to pull ahead in the manner of an exuberant child at a fairground. "_Yay!_ Captain Sayuri will be so proud of me!"

Ranma snickered. "Uh… look, no offense, but I'm not gonna go girl for this, even if we are practicin'."
She glanced back at him and cocked her head curiously. "Why would senpai change? Senpai is a boy."

Ranma was taken aback a bit by that. "Wait, wait, wait… Aren't you the one who's always insisting I'm a girl?"

Rin slowed down a bit, looking thoughtful. "Yeah…" She looked up at him and grinned again. "Because when I say that, senpai is a girl."

"Yeah, that's the curse Rin," Ranma said, sighing heavily. "At least she doesn't think I'm two separate people, like the Kunos."

Rin shook her head. "No, that's not what I mean. Sometimes senpai is a boy even when he's a girl, and sometimes senpai is a girl even when he's a boy."

Ranma gave her a blank look.

Rin puffed her cheeks out in frustration. "Nnmnnnnnn! I can never explain this right!" She thought a moment then tried again. "You know Ukyou, right?"

"I'm… kinda engaged to her, so yes," Ranma replied, chuckling a bit.

Undeterred, Rin continued. "Well, you know how Ukyou-senpai is sometimes a boy?"

Ranma rolled his eyes. "Rin, Ukyou doesn't have a curse. She just dressed up as a boy. She's 100% girl."

Rin shook her head, scowling with frustration. "No, the curse just confuses things!" she stopped walking and stomped her foot with a huff.

Ranma stopped as well, curious about what she was getting at.

Rin closed her eyes and took a deep breath to calm herself. "When I was learning to play volleyball, Dad taught me to watch how people move. But not just in volleyball - he said you could learn all kinds of things about people that way. At first it was just to learn… you know, when the players on the other team were up to something or which way someone might jump or if they were off balance. But I started to get good at it so I'd do it even when I wasn't playing. You know… for practise? You can learn so much just from watching how people move while they're doing everyday stuff - the way they walk, the way their weight sits, what they do with their hands…"

"Yeah. It's called 'body language',' Ranma replied. "It's part of how you read an opponent in martial arts, too."

Rin opened her eyes and looked at him. "'Body Language'… I like that! That's a good name for it!" she said brightly. "Dad always called it kin… kines… some word that's been hard for me to pronounce. Now where was… oh yeah…! Anyway, you can tell stuff about people from their 'body language'. Ukyou-senpai is a girl but sometimes, especially when she's dressing like a boy, the way she moves and how she stands or walks or uses her hands… it's all 'boy' language."

"Well, yeah. She pretended to be a boy most of her life," Ranma replied.

Rin shook her head. "No, that's acting. I can always tell the difference." She made a face. "Sometimes it's annoying because there'll be a really intense scene in a movie or something, but I can tell the actor is just bored or irritated."
"I think that's just bad acting, Rin," Ranma said skeptically.

Rin's shoulders sagged, dejection written across her face. "You don't believe me. Fine. Nobody ever really does." She turned and resumed walking.

"H-hey!" Ranma jogged a bit to catch up to her. "Look, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to… just tell me what you were gonna say, okay?"

Rin glanced at him cautiously then stopped again and took a deep breath. "Okay. So… I don't think Ukyou-senpai is acting. Or at least, she's doing the kind of acting where you make yourself think you are what you're pretending to be."

"Method acting," Ranma supplied helpfully, remembering the term from the disastrous play of Romeo and Juliet he and Akane had once been in.

"There's a name for that, too!?" Rin bounced on the balls of her feet, suddenly happy. Then she clapped her hands to her cheeks and shook her head, screwed up her face and tried and look serious again. "Nnn! I get distracted too easily, sorry Senpai… Anyway, Ukyou-senpai moves like she's thinking like a boy, not just… like a girl trying to do what a boy would do. She doesn't hesitate or have any pauses in her reactions like you would if you were translating in your head."

Ranma crossed his arms and looked thoughtful. "Huh… Maybe that's why I never noticed…?"

Rin ducked her head. "A-actually… Senpai isn't very good at reading it. Most boys aren't," she held up an apologetic hand. "B-but Senpai is busy reading other stuff! Like… martial arts stuff… aheh…" She blushed a bit. "B-besides… Ukyou-senpai is hardly ever a boy around you. Usually only when she's mad… o-or…" She fidgeted. "… that kiss in the hallway that one time…"

"So… you're saying that when I turn into a girl, I've got a girl's body language?" Ranma asked.

Rin tapped her chin. "W-ell… not always? Sometimes senpai is a boy acting like a boy, like yesterday during volleyball practise… e-even though Senpai was in a girl's body at the time. Sometimes senpai is a boy trying to act like a girl, l-like when Senpai tries to fool Kuno-senpai. A-and sometimes Senpai is a girl trying to act like a boy," she considered. "E-especially when Mr. Boyfriend-san… umm, I mean Ryouga is around."

Ranma chuckled nervously, not really wanting to acknowledge how close to the mark Rin had come with that. "I think you're seein' stuff, Rin. I'm 100% guy, no matter what my body is." He flexed his arm a bit.

Rin shook her head. "N-no, senpai, you're not."

Ranma's cocky grin slowly started settling into an annoyed glare.

Rin quickly waved her hands placatingly. "I-I mean, no one is! A-at least everybody I've ever met or seen has boy and girl. Usually it's always a lot more of one than the other but it's always a mix."

Ranma's dark expression faded a bit into more skeptical curiosity. "Oh yeah? Even Ryouga?"

Rin nodded. "Uh huh! I mean, he doesn't have a lot of girl but he's got more than the other boys at school…" She started walking again then added in a conspiratorial whisper, "… and more than some of the girls…"

Ranma smirked. "Now that I can't wait to tell him about."
"It's more that our school has a lot of tomboys. Ryouga doesn't shift around like Senpai does, though," Rin added sheepishly. "But senpai is definitely on the 'boy' side today, so senpai is a boy."

She gave him a hopeful look. "D-does... does that make sense now?"

Ranma considered. "I guess maybe it does... I mean, as much as anything else," he shrugged.

She cheered, punched her fist into the air and skipped ahead, doing a little dance. "Yess! Senpai understands!"

Ranma laughed and waved his hands. "Easy, easy!"

Rin beamed again. "You don't know how hard it is to explain this to someone! And even when I do, they just look at me like I'm crazy and start avoiding me," she sighed. "I used to get in trouble a lot when I was younger because I'd tell people they were a boy or a girl when I met them a-and... I guess it made them mad because what I said didn't always agree with what they were physically. I didn't mean to make people feel bad, so I just stopped... until I met senpai."

Ranma shrugged nonchalantly. "I've heard of weirder stuff. It actually reminds me a lot of the whole concepts of 'Yin' and 'Yang'."

Rin cocked her head. "Yin and Yang? Isn't that that swirly black and white Chinese symbol thingie?"

"Yeah. It's meant to represent a philosophy that's core to a lot of martial arts," Ranma said. "Things that seem to be opposin' forces... light and dark, hot an' cold, male an' female... they're actually connected and dependent on each other. Even something that's a lot of one side always has a little of the other because they need each other to exist. Like how you know light is light only because it gets rid of the darkness and darkness is just the lack of light so, if there wasn't a little of one in the other, you wouldn't be able to see anythin' either way. Same with hot an' cold... and I guess male an' female too."

"Oh!" Rin said. "So maybe Instead I should say 'Senpai has a lot of Yin today' or something?"

"'Yang' is the male side, actually," Ranma replied.

"Oh, okay!"

They walked for a bit before an idea occurred to Ranma. "Hey, uh... you ever met Ukyou's waitress? Konatsu?"

"Yes! She's nice!" Rin said. "She's usually definitely a girl, but... she gets a little confused when Ukyou-senpai is talking to her or she's looking at Ukyou-senpai. It's weird though... sometimes she seems like she's a girl trying to pretend she's a girl... if that makes any sense?"

"You'd be surprised," Ranma said. "Okay... ever met Tsubasa Kurenai?"

Rin made a face. "I... uh..." she ducked her head. "She's weird."

"So she's a girl too?" Ranma replied, starting to wonder about Rin's accuracy. He knew full well that Tusba was very insistent about his gender despite his proclivities.

"Is it a he?" Rin asked, fidgeting. "It's hard to tell! Mailboxes don't usually have a gender!"

"... What?"
"He's a mailbox pretending to be a girl!" Rin blurted. "I know that doesn't make any sense and you think I'm crazy now but that's what I see! It's weird and I don't like him and ever since he showed up at the school this one time I have to kick the mailbox before I mail a letter just to be sure it really is a mailbox and not him!"

Ranma started laughing and before long the giggles spread to Rin as well, though she wasn't really sure why she was laughing. It took several minutes for Ranma to recover, holding his sides and leaning against a streetlamp.

"Th-thanks, Rin…" Ranma said, catching his breath as he wiped the tears from his eyes. "I needed that."

"I-I didn't know what I said was funny…” Rin said sheepishly, but she was smiling, pleased that she had made her senpai happy.

Ranma straightened, brushed himself off and nodded. This is what I need. A little guy time, a good distraction and some physical activity to work the kinks out - then I'll be good as new.

He gave Rin a thumbs up. "C'mon, let's go play some volleyball."

Maybe today won't be such a bad day after all.

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"Shampoo still feel dirty," Shampoo complained, hugging herself and shuddering.

She and Nodoka had spoken for over an hour, giving Nodoka the details of the four-way arrangement and discussing various advantages. Nodoka had mostly been interested in Amazonian fertility techniques, methods of ensuring the gender of the child and so on. It had ended up resembling a chat between cattle breeders more than anything else.

Now that Nodoka was gone, Shampoo had claimed the furo and demanded a good long scrub to purge the greasy feelin it had left with her. Apparently, though, it had not helped.

Nabiki felt unsettled too, but for a different reason. With the omiai over, at least for another day, and no pressing crisis or crazy Amazon elders trying to kill her with soup bowls, her mind had time to settle back onto the problems of her own creation.

"Because you don't need me anymore…"

She sighed, leaned against the wall and closed her eyes. You don't really believe that, do you, Ranma? That you're just… INTERCHANGEABLE like that?

She shot a guilty glance over at Shampoo. She had admitted her attraction to the Amazon to Ranma, who didn't seem worried by it at the time… but admitting a 'thing' for Shampoo and spending the night in her bed were two very different things. Especially when the latter was something she hadn't talked to him about beforehand.

You KNEW this was going to cause problems like this, Nabiki! she chided herself. You knew and you did it ANYWAY.

"You've got the face of someone who's beating herself up, sugar."

She cracked open an eye as Ukyou settled down to sit against the wall next to her. "I'm surprised you're not doing it for me," Nabiki replied.
"Why would I do that?" Ukyou asked. "I'm just as guilty as you are. Probably more… Ranma caught me."

"You didn't make a promise to him," Nabiki said softly. "I knew stuff like this was going to happen. I knew I needed to keep my head clear. I was the one everyone was counting on to get us through these things. But when Ranma needed me, I had my phone turned off." She growled the last two words bitterly and let her head thunk back against the wall.

"Yeah, well, Shampoo has a way of… clouding your judgement without meaning to," Ukyou said carefully, her eyes on the Amazon as she talked with Akane over a cup of tea.

Nabiki considered a moment. There were even more dimensions to this and she realized she needed to be careful. "How do you feel about things?" She asked, watching the chef out of the corner of her eye.

"In general, or about Shampoo in particular?"

"Both."

Ukyou sighed. "Shampoo and I have always had a… 'connection', I guess is the word. Not really a romantic connection, but… I trust her. She's important to me and I think I reached a point somewhere along the way that I just couldn't really imagine us not being part of each other's lives, no matter what shape those lives took." She glanced at Nabiki. "And… yeah, that got physical a few times, but that's not really what defines things. It isn't that relationship-defining thing for her that it would be for us… it's just how she is with someone she likes and trusts. To her it's just another way to have fun and feel good and make someone you care about feel good, without being really any more significant than a backrub. And… I think I like that, honestly. I don't think I could be that casual about it with anyone else, but with her… We both needed the outlet."

"A 'backrub' is a really stupid reason to turn off my phone," Nabiki muttered.

"You do realize it's more than that between you and her, right?" Ukyou asked, looking concerned. "Don't think I don't understand what that collar means."

"I don't know if that makes it better or worse," Nabiki admitted. "Am I betraying Ranma? Are we?"

"I'm surprised you're not angrier at me," Ukyou admitted. "I mean… me and your little sister…"

Nabiki rolled her eyes. "Have you seen her? Akane has been happier lately than she's been since… since…" She trailed off. "Well, since Mom was here for her."

"We've been so busy trying to sort out our feelings for each other now that Ranma isn't in between us all that we kinda forgot to figure out things with him, too," Ukyou said sadly. "Letting life drag us apart and pair us up. No wonder he decided he was a fifth wheel." She gave Nabiki a sidelong look. "You know… What's the story with you and him? How did you fall for him?"

"I got so busy being clever I forgot I had feelings," Nabiki said softly. She looked at her hands, her mind going back to that weekend. "I had this whole weekend planned, but Daddy screwed it up by saddling me with Ranma for it. He probably figured I'd use it as motivation to get Ranma and Akane back together. I decided to try and make the best of it, to make a 'business deal' with Ranma and try to keep him happy so I could go hang out with the college kids and pretend I was more worldly and sophisticated than I really am. I was expecting him to… well, do everything Akane used to accuse him of."

"But he didn't," Ukyou said, smirking slightly.
"There was one time a balcony collapsed with me, Ranma and Akane on it. When it happened, Ranma saved me instead of Akane. His reasons made sense - Akane was a martial artist and could handle the fall where I couldn't. But… just for a second… just for a second... I felt special."

"I remember that. Akane switched the engagement to you over it."

Nabiki chuckled softly. "I punished him pretty harshly for making me feel like that. He even started to fight back, which was… adorable, frankly. But circumstance thrust him back into Akane's arms. Literally." She sighed. "But this time… there was no Akane and no convenient fiancées or rivals to use to deflect it when he… he would look at me… focus on me. The way he just seemed fascinated with the simplest thing I said. How, with all of the girls at the beach to look at, he was looking at me. How he lit up when I joked with him or let him be on my side for one of my schemes. How I didn't need to remind him to pay attention to me because he just did."

"Sounds like he got you good, sugar," Ukyou said wryly.

"I think I always knew he'd do it too, if I let him get close," Nabiki said softly. "That's why I pushed him off on Akane when he and his Dad first showed up." She made a face. "That, and I felt weird because I was attracted to his girl side before I realized it was a girl and I didn't want to deal with that bit of confusion every time he got wet." She snorted. "Fat lot of good that did me."

"I think things worked out fine," Ukyou replied, nudging Nabiki with her elbow. "Ranma needs us. All of us. And we definitely need him. And between us we do a pretty good job of filling in the gaps. So… How do we get over this bump? Other than beat ourselves up over how we never should have hit it in the first place?"

"I need to talk to him," Nabiki said thoughtfully. "We all do. One-on-one time. We need to involve him in our lives rather than just trying to make time to involve ourselves in his." She took a breath and gave Ukyou an apologetic look. "I know I don't really deserve it this time, but I need you guys to give me the benefit of the doubt and let me go first."

Ukyou smiled and nodded. "That's why you're D'artagnan, sugar."

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After being struck with the volleyball for the third or fourth time, Ranma had begun to think that maybe he had been a tad over-optimistic about the day.

"Aww geez, again?" Yuka groaned as she folded her arms and huffed in exasperation.

There weren't many patrons using the gymnasium of the fitness center today. Most of their classes were typically held after working hours on weekdays. They had split into pairs, two versus two, with the odd person out rotating in, to give them a chance to work on ball handling and covering other positions. Ranma had figured it would mostly be for Yuka and Riko's benefit, and maybe a chance to see what Rin could dish out directly, but once more he found himself tripping over his own feet.

"Everything okay, Ranma?" Sayuri trotted over and scooped up the ball to bring it back to them.

Ranma sighed and looked at his hands. What was wrong?! This shouldn't be so difficult but… everything seemed 'off'. It's like I'm reacting to everything a half second too late. He felt like he was fighting his own reflexes or using the wrong muscle memory.

"I dunno…" Ranma said finally. "I've been feelin' a bit odd for the last couple of days…"

Sayuri gave him a sympathetic look. "Well… don't push yourself too hard, okay? I don't want you
"getting hurt before the game."

"Maybe Ranma should try changing into a girl?" Riko suggested from the other side of the net.

"I-I don't think that will help…" Rin said timidly.

"Why not?" Yuka asked.

"Because…" Rin trailed off, looked down, then back up to lock eyes with Ranma for a moment. "U-um… b-because senpai is… moving like… like someone pretending to be a volleyball player."

"Isn't that what Ranma does?" Yuka quipped, crossing her arms and smirking.

"Yuka, be nice," Sayuri chided her. "But she does have a point. Ranma, you usually do better than this even when you have no idea what you're doing."

Ranma sighed heavily. "It feels like I'm fighting myself," he shook his head. "I'll figure it out. Set me up again."

Sayuri shrugged. "Okay, if you're sure." She tossed the ball to Rin.

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By the time Ranma dragged himself home he had made very little progress which was, in and of itself, baffling and frustrating. Even things he had never done before he could pick it up faster. This was just hitting a ball over a net!

*I ALREADY know this,* he thought miserably. *It's like… I'm FLINCHING.*

He reached the front door of his house and paused. He took a second to look over the place in the light of the setting sun.

*I wish I remembered this place better before it got wrecked and rebuilt,* he thought. He reached out and touched the freshly painted wood of the doorframe. *I guess… Pops and I left here before I really had a chance to make a lot of memories.*

He slid the door open. "I'm home!" he announced. He kicked off his shoes, but he didn't hear any response. *I wonder if they're still at the Tendo's?*

He walked through the foyer into the main room of the house and found that, in fact, they were not at the Tendo's. Genma was seated at the table helping himself to what remained of dinner. Nodoka stood in the small attached kitchenette, her arms crossed as she glared in his direction. She managed to convey the impression that she had been standing there holding that position until he had been unlucky enough to cross into her field of view.

"Well, I am glad you could see fit to finally come home, Ranma," Nodoka said coldly.

"Umm… hey Mom?" Ranma said weakly, wondering what he had done this time. "Is… something wrong?"

"Just that you seem to have missed dinner." She motioned towards the table. "I believe I told you we were having dinner by seven? I didn't realize you might assume that it would be permissible for you to simply wander in whenever you pleased and expect dinner to be kept for you."

"It's… It's still five to seven…" Ranma said, confused. "You said to be home by seven…"
That same expression of rage flickered across her face but it stayed longer this time. She picked up the knife she had been cleaning and stabbed it into the cutting board. "And now you lie to me about what I said to you?!” Her eyes narrowed. "I expected you to be home well before seven and ready to help with preparation! Your father and I have worked hard all day to secure your future and now we are expected to wait on you as well? Oh my son, this is beyond the pale!” She stalked around the counter and up to him, the ice in her eyes boring into him.

"I… I'm sorry!” Ranma said, confused and hurt. Unfairness and accusations from his father he was accustomed to and could easily brush off. But from his mother…?

"Mealtimes are not held at your convenience in this household, Ranma! You are expected to be present and ready to help when mealtimes occur or you can do without!” She sighed heavily. "I expect to find a man amongst men and more and more I am confronted by a slovenly boy! Things may have been different for you at the Tendo Dojo but you will find that the real world does not work that way and you are very much headed for a disaster if you do not learn and change your ways.” She closed her eyes, the rage giving way to a pained expression. She turned away from him and covered her mouth. "I have had… a very trying day today! I did not need this disrespect, this… this cruelty heaped upon me! I did not deserve it heaped upon me!” she sobbed.

Genma hopped quickly to his feet and scuttled over to comfort his wife, putting his hands on her shoulders. He glared at Ranma. "Now look what you've done! You've made your mother cry! Get to your room, boy! I'll think of a suitable punishment for you later!"

They turned away from him and Ranma was left ignored. He reached out briefly towards his mother then drew back his hand, turned away and slowly made his way up the stairs.

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"It won't work, you know."

Ranma looked around to find he was back in that black, featureless void once more. This dream again!?

The voice was familiar. He turned to find the source. Visible nearby was the faint glint of metal. Iron bars. He started to walk towards it and realized it was a cage - small - just large enough for a single person. Inside huddled a small figure, curled up into a ball with her back to him. She had red hair, a pigtail half unbound and wore a blue shirt that was tattered and frayed.

Ranma stared at her. I killed her, though… He glanced down at his hands, remembering the rage - the intent he had put into that last ki blast. "I thought… I… That blast..."

"That won't work either," she said softly without bothering to look at him.

"How do you know?!” he demanded.

"You've tried it before," she said. She sounded very tired. "You don't remember, but you have. A bunch of times, actually." She reached up and tapped one of the bars with a knuckle and the metal rang slightly. "I just end up in here for a while. Until you let me out because you need me, or you forget that I'm here and I sneak out.” She rubbed her arm where dried blood was visible through the torn shirt. "Still hurts, though."

Ranma felt a pang of guilt then stopped himself short. This isn't a real person. This is just my girl side. "Yeah? Well… what's not gonna work?” Ranma asked defiantly walking up to the cage.

"Makin' Mom proud,” the girl said with a sigh. "Makin' her see you're a man amongst men and you
"Mom's different," Ranma said, but it sounded hollow, even to his ears. He could still feel the ache in his belly from a stomach filled only with the cold dread of that look she had given him. It was like a screen showing a pleasant picture had dropped from behind her eyes and something that hated him shone through.

"'Mom's different,'" she scoffed. "She is not and you know it. She's tolerating us, Ranma. We're not what she wants. We didn't come back right and she's sick of making do so she wants to try again with our kid. She's just putting up with us until we hand 'em over then we're supposed to get the hell out of her life. There'll always be something more we need to do. There'll always be some reason or another why we're still weak - why we still need her. She's got our whole life planned out for us." She shook her head and folded her arms on top of her knees to rest her chin on them. "We'll never fulfill that contract because she doesn't want it fulfilled."

That's not fair! he protested. We waited so long to see her! We worked so hard to find her again! We worked so hard to make her PROUD of us! "I can't… I can't just write her off! Not after everything we went through to get her back!"

The girl uncurled and turned to glare at him, her ice blue eyes flashing. "She wants to take away our KIDS, Ranma!"

He realized he could hear a note of fear in her voice, as if she didn't fully believe she could stop it from happening.

"We're supposed to give her a mess of cute babies to raise then go out into the world and make the Saotome name mean somethin' so Pops can make good in the dojo we build for him!" She was trembling with anger, her expression that of someone who had been betrayed far too many times. "We're their meal ticket! We've always been Pop's meal ticket - the only difference is now Mom is in on it too!"

"It's more'n that!" Ranma protested. "It's… it's gotta be more'n that! Why would a parent have a kid they didn't want?! Why would they… why would they go this far if they didn't care about us?! If we didn't mean anythin' to 'em?!

"We mean about as much to 'em as a pair of chopsticks," she said bitterly. "We're there to bring the food to their mouths an' that's it." She turned away from him and slumped back down in the cage. "An' you know what you do if chopsticks don't get the job done? Or if they're cheap or got splinters or they aren't the color you want? You snap 'em in half and get new ones."

"No!" He slammed his fist into the bar of the cage. "They… they want what's best for us! They said…!"

"They said we don't know what that is, and they do," she said quietly. "So I guess all this…" she gestured around them, "… this misery we're drownin' in… this is just us not understandin', huh? We're not happy because we're too dumb to be 'happy', right?"

"We're not kids anymore," Ranma said through gritted teeth. "What's best for us ain't always gonna make us happy…"

"You think any part of this is what's best for us?" she asked harshly, turning to glare at him again. "When was the last time what was 'best for us' actually did make us happy?! When in the fourteen
"Years o' bein' homeless? The fourteen years with no friends - no one but Pops? The Contract?! The Pit!?"

"No…" Ranma swallowed, his throat dry. "Okay… okay so… so maybe they're not good at it… maybe… maybe they're even bad at being parents, but… but that doesn't mean they don't care!"

"Whatever," she said cynically, looking away. "If you're here, it means you need me again for something."

"W-what would I need you for?!" he demanded hotly. "You're just the curse!"

She rolled her eyes at him. "I'm you, so I know you're not actually that stupid," she huffed. "Yin and Yang? Everybody has a little of both? Ringing any bells?"

"So… you're my Yin?"

"Yeah. Except I guess Pops doesn't subscribe to much in the way of Chinese philosophy," she replied. "He's been trying to beat me out of you since… since…" She trailed off. "... I don't think there was a time that he wasn't, actually."

Ranma watched her quietly for a moment then sat down with his back to her and leaned back against the cage. "I guess… I guess I can see why you hate him."

"That's the worst part…" she said, her voice cracking. "I don't… I don't." She huddled up a little tighter. "I don't hate him. I just wish more than anything he didn't hate me."

"Are… you crying?" Ranma turned and moved to reach through the bars to comfort her but he hesitated, not knowing if he should touch her or if comforting his own girl side even made sense.

She hiccupped, like she didn't know if she should laugh or sob and got stuck halfway. "Yes, I'm crying, jackass. I'm the part of you that does that, remember? All the stuff Pops said was girly - like enjoying ice cream parfaits or playing volleyball or not being a jerk to our fiancees," she elbowed him through the bars, hard.

"Ow! Why'd you do…?" Ranma started to ask but trailed off. He knew exactly why she had done that. "... So you're the reason I can't play volleyball?"

"You make it sound like it's my fault!" she growled at him. "I'm not the one who blasted me into this cage! You're suppressing me hardcore right now so that means all the stuff you think is girly gets suppressed too, including volleyball."

Ranma sighed, closed his eyes and let his head fall back against the iron bars. "So that's why I felt like I was fighting myself." He was silent a moment. "Am I going crazy?"

"I dunno?" she replied. "I don't know anything more than you do." She considered a moment. "No? I mean… This is just me, bein' stressed and talkin' stuff out in my dreams. It's not like we're actually separate people…"

"So… then how do I open the cage?" Ranma asked, glancing over his shoulder at her.

She was gone.

He turned fully but the cage was empty. He started to look around, wondering what could have happened to her.
A small hand waved in front of his face. He spun around again to find she was right in front of him, giving him a cocky grin.

"Yo."

"What the hell!?" he growled. "You made me go through all that and you could have gotten out whenever you wanted!!"

"You made you go through that. Same person, remember? This is all you, just arguing with yourself," she reminded him. "You've never really 'locked' the cage. But... after what we talked about with Rin, we kinda needed to figure out how to accept this."

"It's not that simple though, is it?" Ranma asked. "We're not Yang with a bit of Yin. That's what you're talking about accepting. We're... we're both."

She nodded slowly. "You already knew that. And you know Mom & Dad will never, ever accept us because of it. That's why you did this. That's why you always try and do this. But it doesn't work anymore."

"Why, though? Why are we like this?!!" He looked at his hands. "Did the curse do this or were we always... split like this?"

"I don't know," she admitted. "I don't remember. We're not usually real introspective, you know? We've always just... tried to be what Pops said was manly."

"So... what do we do now?"

"I dunno," she said. "Call a truce? Until we figure some o' this stuff out, I guess??" She held out her hand to him.

He sighed and reluctantly took it. "Truce."

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Thanks for sticking with me. As people have been annoyed by my use of Mandarin without translations, I've decided to add a few. Also... I'm just looking up bits and pieces online, I don't actually have anyone helping me with it, so I apologize if I end up with 'All your base are belong to us' levels of bad phrasing.

Chūmén bié wàngle dài biléizhēn a - Literally: don't forget to bring your own lightning rod when you travel! As in, the heavens might strike you down any time. This is based on an old belief that the heavens will send down thunder and lightning to punish someone especially evil/vile, can't even wait until after they're dead.

lǎo yāo pó - evil old witch

ta made niao - Damn it.

The word Rin's father used for 'Body Language is 'Kinesics'

Some of you may point out that Nodoka DID, in fact tell Ranma to be HOME by seven, despite her later assertion. That's intentional. Look up the term 'gaslighting'.

This was a big chapter, but there was a lot of stuff that needed to happen to set up for the next week.
The next morning Ranma felt a bit like he was walking on eggshells. He got up and got dressed as quietly as he could. He could hear his mother downstairs in the kitchen and his father still snoring in bed.

So... how is this gonna go? Ranma wondered, unsure what was going to greet him. He was starving, but... he wasn't sure if he was welcome at the moment. He made sure his backpack was set with everything he might need and looked around his room.

It had supposedly been made for him when the house was rebuilt but he hadn't had any input on it. It was mostly empty, furnished only with a western-style bed, a dresser and a throw rug on the floor. He had only stayed in it a handful of times. The dresser held nothing, save a few clothes. It felt barren and sterile.

He slid his window open and hopped quietly out and onto the roof to leave his pack there. He felt like it would be smart to get it out of the house but he expected his mother would stop him if she saw him carry it with him. Once it was safely stowed he ducked back into his room and closed the window again.

He grabbed his schoolbag, took a deep breath and walked down the stairs. He could hear his mother humming downstairs. She sounded happy.

"Good morning?" he said tentatively as he reached the bottom of the stairs and peeked into the family room.

"Oh, good morning Ranma!" Nodoka said brightly. She was in the kitchenette, making breakfast. "Did you sleep well?"

No? Why is she askin' that after last night!? "Umm... okay I guess?" he answered, not wanting to say anything confrontational.

"Good! You're a growing boy and need your sleep. I was actually considering letting you sleep in and just calling in to the school," she said as she continued to chop at the cutting board and slid the ingredients into the soup pot.

"Uhh... no... I mean... A man amongst men lives up to his obligations and attendin' school is one of 'em, right?" he replied, amending quickly with reasoning he figured she would accept.

Her hands slowed, her preparations became more methodical and she was pensive for a moment. "Ranma... You understand all of this is for your sake, don't you?"

Ranma blinked. "I..."

"You must think me the worst person in the world..." she said softly, putting the knife down. "You must hate me - must think I am just doing all this out of cruelty and that I am just a horrible mother who enjoys seeing her son suffer!"

"What? No, Mom, I..." He stepped forward into the room.

A few tears fell onto the chopping board. "Don't try and deny it. I've seen it in your eyes!" She shuddered. "I keep clinging to the knowledge that one day - when you are older - you will understand all this. Perhaps when you go through this with your own son and he hates you for it
"I don't hate you!" Ranma protested, taking a few steps closer.

She shook her head. "You never say 'thank you'. You never appreciate any of the things I've done. You'd rather listen to those Tendo girls and all of the things they say to curry favor with you." She shuddered again, her voice filling with venom. "They're just jealous, you know. Jealous of our family - of how you and your father are so much greater in the Art than they could ever be. That was all that the engagement ever was to them, Ranma. It was the Tendo girls attempting to attach themselves to your greatness. Even Kasumi!"

She huffed angrily though it was somehow almost a relief that it wasn't directed at him this time. "Such a manipulative, angry, deceitful girl she grew up to be! Her mother would be ashamed of what she has become. And at the pitiful state in which she keeps their home!" She looked up at him. "You must promise me that you won't be taken in by their lies, Ranma. It's all just a pretty mask, you know. I know you think they care about you but they're only after their own interests. Your father and I are the only ones who truly have your best interests at heart. We're the only ones who truly love you. You understand that, don't you?"

"Everyone in this world wants something from you, Ranma... You're special. They want to take that specialness for themselves. Dilute it. They fool you to make you care about them just so they can take more from you. You can't let them."

Genma had said something very similar to Ranma. It was a running theme - the justification for why they had to perpetually move on - why no matter how much he liked a place or how well he was doing, they couldn't stay. It was why any friendships he made were doomed to end in disaster. It had never seemed right - never seemed to really fit - until right now.

"She wants to take away our KIDS, Ranma!"

He sucked in a breath, feeling almost like a veil had been lifted and he was seeing his mother for the very first time. He felt ill.

"I'm sorry, you must think me silly," she said. "What would you like for breakfast, dear?"

"Uhh... I'm... not super hungry, Mom," Ranma lied. He suddenly found that he didn't want to be in the house any longer than he needed to be. "I'll just grab something from a stall on the way. I don't wanna be late for school." He turned to go.

"Freeze, Ranma," Nodoka said sternly. Ranma froze.

Nodoka sighed heavily. "Ranma... I wanted to try and spare you more pain but if you are headed to school then it is likely to come up." She rubbed her forehead. "The Tendos are very old and very dear friends of ours, despite how I feel about the actions of Soun's daughters. Evidently he feels quite strongly about our family's obligations to his and he has gone so far as to make them a point of honor." She held up her hands. "I did try and reason with him but he was quite insistent that he expected you to fulfill these obligations, even if you were not to marry into his family. I understand this is an unfair burden on you but for the time being... He is expecting you to help out around the dojo."

Ranma turned slowly, keeping his eyes down to hide the hopeful look he had in them.

She folded her arms sternly. "Now, this is not like your previous stays there. You are not there as a guest - you are there to work. Soun was very upset with how you and your father have freeloaded in
the past and this has incurred a problematic debt that interferes with your future prospects. I expect you to work hard for him and to wipe this debt away quickly. You will also need to ensure that Akane is sufficiently trained to protect the Dojo from challengers. You can no longer rely on your father to take up that burden, either. This is the agreement I had to accept in order to secure the freedom to select the best wife for you, so I expect you to work so hard for Soun that he will have no complaints even if I should choose someone other than one of his daughters. I will be dropping by to see if you are working." She looked away. "He has also demanded that you stay in residence during this period. I am not happy about this and, rest assured, I will be discussing this with Soun at length to get this requirement lifted."

"I understand, Mom," Ranma said, trying to muster the solemn tone of one being punished.

"I will drop by from time to time to see how you are doing." She walked up to him and gave him what he expected was supposed to be a reassuring smile. "Don't pack too much. I expect Soun will drop this charade in a few days when he gets tired of it. And don't trust those girls of his! Nabiki and Kasumi especially! They're all out only for their own interests - remember that."

"I will," he repeated, feeling a stab of pain in his heart as the horrible, sick realization about his parents spread.

She came up to him and hugged him. It was an awkward, mechanical thing. He didn't want to hug her right now but he did it. As soon as she released him, he made his way up the stairs, fighting the urge to bound, fighting the urge to show any enthusiasm until he was well out of view. As soon as he was, he sprinted for his room, threw open the window and flipped up onto the roof. He retrieved his pack, leaned over the edge to close his window again, then launched from the rooftop, practically flinging himself away from the house as far as that first leap could carry him.

He hit the ground running - sprinting, really. Part of him knew he was just running from a problem that he was going to have to deal with eventually but, for now, he needed to get away.

Mom says the same things Pops says, he thought as he ran. Different words, but the same things. She calls me things when I don't do what she wants. Different names, but same kinds of things. They're the same... Everything they say is the same, they just use different words! The ideas kept rattling as connections started to form. Too fast and too intense - he almost stumbled a couple of times. Things that had never made sense to him about his father and his parents in general started to slip into place as, at last, he surrendered that final, precious assumption.

What they do... what they do to ME... what they want from me and FOR me... is for themselves. It's something THEY want. When they say they are doing 'what's best for me', it's because it's what's best for THEM.

It comes back to them... Pops and Mom both say bad things about people, even friends... but it describes THEM. Pops calls me lazy, ungrateful, clumsy, stupid... but that's HIM - that's what HE'S always been like. Mom calls the Tendos greedy, scheming, manipulative, false... and... and that's HER.

Everything they say... EVERYTHING... is about them. The idea echoed in his head, rattled around in his brain like dice in a cup. Everything they say about others really describes THEM. Over and over it repeated in his mind, a shout in an echo chamber. Everything they say they want for me, they want for themselves.

He expected he should feel angry - betrayed - hurt. But right now he was just numb, like he couldn't quite yet process the concept. He felt like he had just stepped off a cliff - trapped in that moment between when you first start to fall and the realization that you can't see the bottom nor any way to
stop yourself falling - just before the panic sets in.

It pushed him to run faster - harder. He needed to get home.

Despite the intensity of his need he still slowed as the Tendo dojo walls came into view. He wanted to keep running - to vault over the walls and burrow inside and hide - but something held him back. A new fear.

What if they don't want me anymore?

His feet slowed and he finally came to a stop to find himself pinned between two awful feelings - one that was trying to push him forward and the other that was holding him back, crushing him between them.

Nabiki tried to talk to me and I threw it back in her face! I promised to trust her… then I DIDN'T! I…

"So, Saotome, I think you have an answer that you promised me."

He whirled. Nabiki was standing in the adjacent alleyway. He had been so wrapped up in his own thoughts that he hadn't noticed her. Her voice was measured and calm - almost cold. Pure Ice Queen. Her arms were folded and she was looking at him with that same expression of cool expectation that she normally used when she was collecting on one of his debts.

He swallowed, feeling that intolerable ache in his chest get worse. "I… I… M-mom said Mr. Tendo made a deal with her…" he stammered. It wasn't what she wanted, he knew, but he couldn't force his mind to dredge up anything else.

Unexpectedly, her mask cracked. Her brow twitched and her eyes dropped. She closed her eyes tightly, her hands dropped to her sides and clenched into fists. "Just here for chores, huh?" she asked softly. Her voice was wavering a little.

Ranma opened his mouth but nothing was coming out.

"Ranma… I… I usually know what to say. I've tried to convince myself that consequences didn't matter - If I made someone mad, I had a million different ways to smooth it over. But right now I don't. I know what I need to say but it's hard because I'm terrified of saying it badly and that you'll jump away somewhere I can't follow." She swallowed hard. "I… keep demanding your trust… but I didn't earn it… and when you really needed me, I wasn't there."

"Nabiki…" Ranma managed.

Nabiki closed her eyes tightly and shook her head. "No! Let me finish!" she shouted. She took a shuddering breath. "You're afraid that we don't need you… that I don't need you… but the truth is I'm… I'm terrified you don't need me… and… and that I'm really just the selfish, cynical Ice Queen everyone sees me as… and that whatever it is you see in me that's more than that… whatever it is you made me believe was there… that you'll stop seeing it." She slumped. "B-but… that's just selfish too, isn't it? I know I'm supposed to say I just want you to be happy, but that's not enough! I want to be the one to make you happy! I want to be the one who shares it with you! And that's just like everyone else who gets so obsessed with you, and I know that I'm not any better… and… and…"

Tears started to squeeze out from her tightly closed eyes, running down her cheeks. "... And I don't have the words I need to make you come back!"

She was just opening her mouth to continue when he closed the gap between them and pulled her into his arms, hugging her with everything he had.
"I'm sorry," he whispered to her. "I'm sorry... I'm sorry... I'm sorry..." Over and over.

He felt her arms snap around him as she hugged him back just as tightly, so hard her nails dug into his back. That was okay. It felt good, actually. He wanted her to hold him tight.

"Shhh..." she soothed him and he realized he had been repeating the words 'I'm sorry' like a mantra. He felt the tears starting to run down his own cheeks and he didn't care. It didn't matter if it was unmanly or if someone might see or judge him.

"I'm the selfish one," he said. "I did this... I didn't know how to handle what I felt... I didn't know how to handle feeling..."

"Shhh..." she soothed him again. "You can be selfish, Ranma. You're allowed."

"I should have trusted you," he said. "I do trust you. I need you. I..." His voice hitched. "I don't know how to win this kinda fight. She... she wants our kids, Nabiki..."

"I know," Nabiki replied softly.

They were quiet for a few minutes. He held her like he was afraid she was going to be taken away... because he was. Gradually the tension and the adrenaline started to fade. He heard the sounds of sniffling and quiet sobs and realized they were his. He relaxed his grip just a little so he could run his fingers through her hair.

"Say it again, please..." she mumbled against his neck.

"... What?"

"... kids..." she mumbled insistently.

"Our kids?" he repeated softly, momentarily confused. Then he realized what he had said. "... Oh."

"S'your fault," she mumbled again. "Kids're bad for the career. Not 'sposed to want 'em. Not s'posed to like the idea." She was quiet another minute or two then added more softly, "... Again."

"Our kids."

She squeezed him gently and leaned back a little to look up at him. He reached up to brush away some of the dampness from her cheek.

"Now... you've got three more girls to say that to," she said, a ghost of her old grin returning. "And we've got a lot of making up to you we wanna do."

Ranma's stomach made a loud, protesting rumble.

"Would... that happen to include breakfast?" Ranma asked sheepishly.

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Thankfully, Kasumi had anticipated Ranma's hunger.

It had been nearly two days since he'd eaten anything substantial. He could actually feel the first few mouthfuls hitting the bottom of his empty stomach.

"Slow down a little Ranma," Kasumi cautioned him. "There's plenty and it's not going anywhere. You should be careful about eating too fast after fasting for a period."
Ranma dutifully slowed down, forcing himself to pace. Kasumi was right and it wasn't the first time he had gone without food for a while. Eating too fast would just bring it all back up again.

Kasumi smiled at him. "Good. Though maybe you can pace yourself by letting your wives feed you?"

Soun, who was sitting at the head of the table trying to look stoic, *harumphed*. "Kasumi, I wish you wouldn't be so casual about the whole situation!"

"They're not *my*..." Ranma started then trailed off, looking to his left as Shampoo sidled up to him with a pair of chopsticks, then to his right as Akane took that side. Then he felt a pair of arms slip around his neck, soft brown hair momentarily obscuring his vision. A soft pair of lips brushed his ear, as an even *softer* pair of something *else* pressed against his back.

"Wode airen, Ranchan," Ukyou murmured in his ear, her breath tickling the tiny hairs on his neck. Suddenly, food didn't seem *quite* as urgent anymore.

Shampoo and Akane grinned at each other and started picking out morsels to feed him.

"Good wives know how to pacify stubborn husband," Shampoo said, popping a bit of rice in his mouth.

"We'll just have to make sure to keep this up until we're sure you're eating properly," Akane purred, following up the rice with a morsel of pickled vegetable.

"I... *munch*... can... *chew*... feed myself, y'know..." Ranma protested weakly.

"Let us have our fun, Ranchan," Ukyou murmured in his ear. Something about her tone and the way she was pressed up against him caused him to lock up again, allowing Shampoo and Akane to continue feeding him.

"U-ucchan... you're... you're not wearing your bindings today, are you?" Ranma managed to whisper hoarsely.

"You're welcome to check, Ranchan," she replied and lightly kissed his cheek.

"Hrrk..."

Nabiki was watching the entire thing from the opposite side of the table, cheek resting on her hand and wearing an expression of fond amusement. "You three are going to end up killing him. You know that, right?"

Soun was trying very hard to pretend that nothing existed in his house past the newspaper he was holding up in front of him.

Ranma glanced around a moment. That awful, hollow, sickly feeling in his stomach was gone and it wasn't because of the food. He closed his eyes and relaxed a bit. He could feel the warmth of the three girls around him. Suddenly the awkwardness and tension felt a little silly. He sighed, snaking an arm each around Shampoo and Akane. Both of them made soft noises of surprise at the unprompted gesture of affection.

"Thank you," he said softly and sincerely. "I'm... I'm gonna earn this somehow. I promise."

Akane gave him one of those painfully adorable smiles and leaned against him. "You already have,
"baka," she replied fondly.

"Airen not need try so hard. Just need be here," Shampoo added.

He felt Ukyou's arms tighten around him as she pressed closer to his back. Which… caused some very interesting sensations and reminded him that maybe not all of the tension was gone - or necessarily bad.

He felt something poke his thigh and realized Nabiki had stretched out her leg to touch him with her foot, just to have that little bit of physical contact.

He suddenly didn't really want to go to school.

"Did you want to change before you head off to school, Ranma?" Kasumi asked. "Your uniform is washed and pressed for you and hanging up in your room."

"Can't we stay home? Just for today?" Akane asked, voicing Ranma's own thoughts.

"Now now, Akane, while I appreciate you wanting to spend time with your fiance…" Soun started to say.

"Fiancées," Akane corrected him with a very Nabiki-esque smirk. She shifted her arm to curl around Ukyou's waist.

Soun twitched hard enough for it to be mistaken for a seizure. "... I would rather you not compromise your education..." he continued in a very strained, squeaky voice. He cleared his throat. "There will be ample time for such things…"

"... When you're not present and therefore don't have to be confronted with the fact that your daughters are participating in a hedonistic and morally questionable relationship that you're afraid you might be partially responsible for?" Nabiki asked sweetly.

"... Yes," Soun finished with a cough.

"Awww, Papa Tendo, don't you love us?" Ukyou asked in the sweetest, most innocent tone she could muster.

Soun twitched again hard. "I think… I will finish my breakfast in my room. I'm… not feeling well," he said, getting shakily to his feet. As he walked away, soft sobs could be heard.

"Oh father, father, father," Kasumi said, shaking her head. She set another tray down and knelt at his place at the table. "Don't mind him. I know he's quite fond of all of you and supports you in this. He's just… having some trouble adjusting."

"He does have a point, though," Nabiki noted. "Ranma has to keep in the good books at school or the Principal could still pull him from the volleyball team."

"Also… we'd probably better go back to me changin' at Tofu's or the Nekohanten rather than here," Ranma added. "Mom said she'd drop in from time to time to make sure I'm not slackin' off."

Kasumi's eyes narrowed, a flicker of uncharacteristic annoyance crossing her usually serene face. "... Is she now?"

"Kasumi, you've got my mobile number," Nabiki said. "If Auntie Saotome drops by while we're at school or are otherwise out, just give me a ring." She glanced at Ranma. "We should probably get
"Do I gotta?" Ranma asked pensively. "Aren't those things s'posed to give you brain cancer or something?"

"You are such a Luddite, Ranma," Nabiki sighed and gave him a tired look. "Who told you that?"

"Pops di… Ah, good point," Ranma admitted sheepishly. "Still… how'n I gonna pay for it?"

"I'll divert some of the betting fund." Nabiki said. "It'll just be a cheap prepaid one. It'll only have so many minutes on it so you should only use it in emergencies."

"Right," Ranma replied, pretending he understood any of that beyond the 'only use it in emergencies' part.

"Also… for the time being, until we iron out all our relationship bumps, I think we need to make sure nobody gets left out on their own," Nabiki added. "Means three and two at all times."

"I'm… look, you don't need t'do that for me, Nabs," Ranma protested.

"It's not just for you, Ranma," Nabiki replied, holding up a finger as she settled into lecture-mode. "We need to… well… be around each other until we're sick of each other. To live in each other's bathrooms, closets and underwear drawers. We each need to figure out what we do that annoys the others and figure out what each other's boundaries are early on so we can hash out how this is going to work long-term."

"I'd think we have a pretty good head start on that," Ukyou replied. "We kind of figured out all of that first, before we got past it enough to… y'know…" She blushed a little.

Nabiki shrugged. "For you, Shampoo, and Akane? Maybe. Ranma, Akane and me too, for sure, but not all of us together." She sighed. "Cologne's requirement that I stay at the Nekohanten complicates things…"

"We'll shuffle around," Ukyou said. "And maybe we can convince Cologne to give you weekends off or something."

"You're welcome to spend the weekends here," Kasumi said brightly, punctuated by a loud sob from the direction of Soun's room.

"Maybe should also get time with Airen?" Shampoo asked cautiously.

Nabiki nodded. "In fact, Ranma should take each of us on a date this week. One-on-one, while the remaining three occupy themselves with something fun or productive together."

"Really!?" Ukyou and Shampoo lit up.

"Uhhh…" Ranma hunched over a bit. "I'm… not really good with the whole 'dating' thing…"

"You've been on dates with pretty much all of us before," Nabiki replied. "Just relax and be yourself. It's not like you need to impress us or play it like you're with a girl you don't know that well. It's just like hanging out with your friends except more making out in movie theaters." She glanced at Shampoo and Ukyou in turn. "In fairness to the fact that me and Akane have had pretty much unrestricted access to Ranma for so long, you two get the first two dates. Shampoo gets to pick since she dealt with the omiai stuff yesterday."
Ukyou and Shampoo shared a glance.

"Any chance you could take tonight?" Ukyou asked sheepishly. "I need time to get Konatsu set up if he's gonna run the shop solo for a night."

Shampoo grinned. "Shampoo hoping you say something like that."

"Hold on, we have a problem," Akane interrupted. "If Nabiki has to be at the Nekohanten for the dinner rush and Ukyou has to be at Ucchan's, someone is going to be on their own."

Nabiki sighed. "No battle plan survives the first engagement…"

"Perhaps any 'rules' you have will need to be 'As much as possible', rather than absolutes?" Kasumi suggested gently. "I get the feeling this arrangement of yours will require a great deal of flexibility."

"I can handle the dinner rush. Not like I'm not used to doing it with just me and Konatsu," Ukyou said. "Akane can help Nabiki at the Nekohanten and maybe see if we can get Cologne to agree to loan me Nabiki in return one night. I can meet up with you two after the dinner rush." She grinned. "Maybe we'll even get to learn a neat Amazon technique or two."

"Don't hold your breath," Nabiki groused. "But that's a good idea. And a good point, Kasumi. Thank you, sis."

"Don't mention it," Kasumi said. Then she leaned forward and whispered conspiratorially. "I mean that literally. I think Father is distraught enough about this without knowing I'm helping you."

"Gentle Girl's help appreciated," Shampoo said, smiling.

"How do you feel about all of this, sis?" Akane asked, a little timidly. She unconsciously pulled in closer against Ranma's side as if she were worried about the answer.

Kasumi smiled and closed her eyes with a sigh as she pondered the question. "I… have a weakness for good love stories," she said at last. She opened her eyes and looked at each of them in turn. "There is something very compelling about defying the 'conventional wisdom' of those who insist you can't possibly succeed, even if I don't have the courage to do such a thing myself." She looked a little sad for a moment. "Everyone dreams of a love worth fighting for, no matter how much is arrayed against it. If you are to succeed or fail, I want it to be on your own merits - not because of some selfish person who neither understands nor cares to."

They shared a quiet a moment as they all considered that. Akane's attention was focused mostly on her sister, though.

"Then we should get going. Sayuri and the rest will be here soon," Nabiki said, getting up. "Thanks for breakfast, Kasumi!"

As most of them filed out to gather their things for school, Akane hung back, looking at her sister. Kasumi noticed but didn't say anything.

"You sounded almost envious, Kasumi," Akane said finally.

"Not of your situation, no," Kasumi admitted as she took a sip of her tea. "But… part of me has always dreamed of someone who would come along and sweep me off my feet - a knight in shining armor - but one who needed me to save him in turn - someone to whom I wasn't just a plain housewife-to-be." She looked away sadly. "Everything in my life has been practical. Everything I have striven for has been to find joy in the simple things… because those are all I have. I've learned
to accept that I will never be strong or fast or clever and that I'm the one in the background of people that are - like you and your sister and most of those around you. And that's not a bad thing. Someone must be in the background and I do it well, I think. But... some silly part of my heart has never been able to let go of that dream entirely - that somewhere out there is that knight who needs me."

"Not many of those left today, sis," Akane said soberly. Her tone grew tentative. "Is that... is that why you and Doctor Tofu...?"

"Doctor Tofu is a sweet man. He's kind and funny and brilliant," Kasumi said, smiling wistfully. "And I would have to be blind not to see how he feels about me. He would be a good husband; a good provider; a loving father; a sensible choice. And... he doesn't need me - not in the way I wish he might." She sighed. "Maybe... I'll outgrow this last silly dream someday soon."

Akane looked down. She felt irrationally guilty. For all of the compromises and strife and struggle, she had found the thing Kasumi had evidently most wanted. Worse, she hadn't even valued it properly until recently. She reached out and gently touched her sister's hand. "Don't give up just yet, sis."

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The day passed in relatively uneventful fashion by Nerima standards.

Doctor Tofu had barely taken notice of them when they dropped by to allow Ranma to change. He seemed unusually distracted, but not in the way he was when Kasumi was around. Piles of old books and scrolls covered his desk and was scribbling feverishly on his notes.

Once they'd gotten to school, Shampoo had trouble focusing in class - in part because the teacher was boring perpetually getting the material wrong (and got snarky when she tried to offer helpful corrections) but mostly because she was busy trying to decide where to go with her Airen for their date.

She caught the nub of chalk when was thrown at her head by reflex. She blinked, examined it in surprise, then looked up to see the teacher who stood, frozen, still poised as if in mid throw and staring at her.

"Teacher lose grip on chalk again?" Shampoo asked innocently.

The teacher composed himself quickly and cleared his throat. *Ahem* yes, well... Perhaps I'd keep a better grip if I wasn't so flustered from noticing certain students weren't paying attention." He crossed his arms and held himself up to his full five-foot-nil height, glaring at her.

"noticed chalk. Means paying attention, yes?" Shampoo asked sweetly, tossing it back to him.

He fumbled to catch it and stumbled a bit before dropping it on the floor. He bent over to pick it up, a little red in the face once he was done recovering it. "Yes... perhaps you should look like it more often, please Ms. Shampoo! I don't know how they teach in China..."

"In China, teacher throw blades," Shampoo replied with a bit of a smirk.

He blanched at that then coughed again to cover the sudden flutter. "I see... well... *ahem* where were we?" He turned back to the board to resume his butchery of Ancient History.

Shampoo felt a nudge against her foot. She glanced over her shoulder to see Nabiki giving her a bemused look.
She smiled back and went back to her textbook with a sigh as she tried to at least act like she was paying attention to the teacher's mangling of the already terrible textbook material. It always seemed to amuse her pintou how she put the teachers off balance. She supposed it was difficult for them to assert their authority over someone they knew could casually smash through walls.

*Males here aren't so different from the village,* she thought. *Most are still weak. They just waste all of their effort on trying to pretend they're NOT, rather than doing something productive. Such as LEARNING THE MATERIAL THEY'RE TRYING TO TEACH!* She glared at the back of the teacher's head and he shivered reflexively.

The rest of the class passed relatively quickly, at least. The teacher engaged in his usual passive-aggressive power play by holding the class for a minute or so after the bell had rung in order to assert his dominance or some such childishness before sending them on their way. Shampoo had learned to temper her exuberance at being freed from the monotony lest she draw even more petty ire from the man.

She spotted Nabiki as soon as she got out of the classroom and fell in step beside her.

"You're going to give Mr. Fujikawa a nervous breakdown one of these days, kitten," Nabiki said, smirking at her.

"Man who not keep Assyrian and Syrian straight deserve breakage of some kind," Shampoo snorted.

"Well, to be fair, he was right this time. You weren't paying attention," Nabiki noted. "You that excited about your date with Ranma?"

Shampoo ducked her head, suddenly feeling a bit sheepish. Her hand went instinctively to the collar around her neck. "Pintou not jealous?"

"I was the one who suggested it, kitten," Nabiki replied, arching an eyebrow.

"Arranging date rational planning. Feelings not rational. And Pintou not very good at keeping track of own feelings," Shampoo poked her shoulder.

Nabiki seemed to consider a moment. She glanced around a bit then grabbed Shampoo's wrist and pulled her into the nearby girl's washroom. Shampoo squeaked in surprise but didn't resist.

As soon as the door closed behind them Nabiki pulled her into a hug, leaning back against the door to make sure no one came in after them. "Trust me kitten, if it was anyone else other than Ranma, I'd be twitchy as anything." Nabiki looked into her eyes, their faces inches apart.

Shampoo could see the glint in Nabiki's eye and smirked herself. "Pintou okay with it being Ranma because she have naughty plans," she surmised as she slid her arms around the other girl's neck. She sighed as she relaxed against Nabiki.

"Well, you are going to bring him home to the Nekohanten, right?" Nabiki asked and leaned in just a little closer, her voice low.

"Not sure. Could go back to Dojo…" Shampoo replied playfully.

"Shampoo…"

"Anything for pintou…" Shampoo amended with a wink. "Why drag into bathroom, though?"

"The faculty get uptight about public displays of affection," Nabiki replied.
"Even hugging?" Shampoo asked.

"Afraid so," Nabiki nodded.

"Seems shame to go to all this trouble for privacy just for hug…" Shampoo's voice dipped into a sultry purr.

"Oh my god, I am trying to POOP! Could you take it to a janitor's closet or something!?" an unfamiliar but extremely annoyed female voice called from one of the stalls.

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Ranma was pacing outside, chewing nervously on her finger and muttering to herself.

"You're going to wear a trough into the asphalt," Ry��ga said dryly. He, Hiroshi and Daisuke were all leaning against the wall outside of the school. Their class had let out early after their math teacher had managed to annoy Ms. Hinako in the hall and gotten himself drained.

"Shut up, this is important!" Ranma growled at him. "I gotta think this through so it goes perfect!"

"Ranma, this isn't the first date you've ever been on," Hiroshi said.

"This isn't even your first date with Shampoo," Daisuke added.

"Yeah, but those were all to try and get instant nannichuan or spy on Ry��ga makin' moves on Akane or something... Sorry, Ry��ga," she added sheepishly as she noticed his glare. "I've never gone on a date just to go on a date before! I always had an end goal planned! What end goal could you possibly have for just going on a date?!"

All three boys stared at her flatly.

Her eyes widened and she blushed, getting flustered. "B-besides that! Perverts…"

"Ranma, that's pretty much the point of dating," Hiroshi said.

"I mean, you're doing it backwards, of course," Daisuke added. "You date someone to start a romantic relationship."

"Oh, I dunno, my parents go on dates now and then," Hiroshi countered.

"And then?"

"They spend the night at the motel… Yeah, point made."

"Ranma, you've been on dates with Nabiki, haven't you?" Ry��ga asked, exasperated. "How is this different?"

"Nabiki knows I don't know what I'm doing!" Ranma ranted. "She's the one who I was counting on to teach me this stuff!"

Ry��ga sighed and clapped his hand over his eyes. "Ranma, she just wants to spend time with you! Just spend time with her."

"I've spent the last year learning how to do the exact opposite!" Ranma whirled on him.

"Whyyyy?" Daisuke asked.
"Yeah, that's always confused us," Hiroshi admitted.

Ranma pinched the bridge of her nose. "What do you figure would happen if I spent a lot of time with Shampoo?"

Hiroshi and Daisuke glanced at each other then at Ranma.

"Motel," they answered in unison.

Ranma rolled her eyes. "Ugh, you guys are perverts! I mean once the other three girls found out."

Hiroshi and Daisuke blinked, glanced at each other again then back at her.

"Morgue," they answered, again in unison.

"Exactly!" Ranma threw her hands up in the air. "All I know how to do is blow Shampoo off without making her too mad! I never actually spent a lot of time with her without someone else around or some catastrophe happening to distract us!"

"If you think you're gonna get through a whole date without some sort of catastrophe happening, you're expectations are way too high, Ranma," Ryouga said with a smirk.

"I know! But this is really important to her and I've been a jerk to her and all the girls for the past year, and I wanna make this special to make up for it but I don't know how!" She came up to him with tears in her eyes, fist held to her chest as she pleaded. "Please, Ryouga! You have to help me!"

Ryouga's eyes widened as the schadenfreude he was feeling at Ranma's romantic panic was immediately obliterated by the sight of a very cute girl crying and pleading with him. This set off a number of hardwired responses in his brain that shut down all common sense and survival instinct responses and overwrote them with a single, overriding imperative: Must Protect.

"I-I-I… Of course!" He put on a confident face and thumped his chest. "Leave it to me, Ranma!"

Naturally he hadn't the faintest clue how to go about doing that, but Cute Crying Girl Protection Mode had zero allowances for such trivialities.

Hiroshi and Daisuke exchanged a glance, recognizing the signs of bad decision making in progress. Hiroshi pulled a packet of rice crackers from his bag, opened it and offered some to Daisuke as they settled in to watch.

Thankfully, Ranma had some wonderful terrible ideas. "I know! Since you seem to know how this goes, you pretend you're me and I'll pretend I'm Shampoo. We'll act out what you think would be a good date and that should help me figure it out from there!"

Some small part of Ryouga's brain that hadn't been totally overridden was screaming into a megaphone that this was a terrible idea and was inevitably going to end badly. He could hear it quite clearly and he knew, without a doubt, that it was, as it always was, entirely correct. But he hadn't gotten to where he was in life by listening to it in the past and he wasn't about to start now!

"That sounds good. Gimme a minute to think of something," Ryouga replied, closing his eyes. Okay, now what? I don't know where Ranma should take Shampoo on a date!

There was that Waterpark…

He winced. Yeah, genius. A waterpark is EXACTLY where a couple of Jusenkyo sufferers should have a date!
A small, mean part of his brain pointed out that, given Shampoo's curse and Ranma's fear of cats, it would be hilarious.

He shook his head. NO! Ranma's sincerely counting on me this time and I'm not gonna let her down! Okay... Keep it simple. Dinner and a movie. "All right, I've got it." He opened his eyes.

A petite redhead abruptly attached herself to him with an excellent facsimile of the traditional Amazon glomp technique, arms and legs wrapping around him.

"Nihao!" Ranma chirped in a remarkably good impression of Shampoo's bubbly tone and accent. "Airen take Shampoo to date?" She smiled cutely a disturbingly convincing simulation of Shampoo's normal enthusiastically adoring expression whenever she managed to catch her Airen.

The sound of Ryoga's brain shutting down was nearly audible, the cacophony of a smoothly running machine suddenly suffering catastrophic metal fatigue failure in every major moving part at the exact same moment.

"... Guh."

"We're gonna need more crackers, dude," Daisuke said.

"Airen home?" Ranma asked, waving her hand in front of Ryoga's face. "... Ryoga? Are you okay?"

"Ranma, you're a cute girl who's wrapped herself around him like a boa constrictor and calling him 'lover' over and over," Yuka said, walking up to the group. "I'm pretty sure you've broken him."

"Ack!" Ryoga scrambled a bit trying to untangle herself, but her glomping dismounts were still imperfect and she toppled into a clumsy heap on the ground.

Yuka walked over to Hiroshi and Daisuke and snagged a rice cracker from Hiroshi's bag. "So, what's the idiocy of the day?"

"Ranma's nervous about her date with Shampoo, so she's trying to get dating tips from Ryoga," Hiroshi replied, then paused. "... Y'know, that's even stupider than it sounded in my head."

"I think I can manage without the comments from the peanut gallery!" Ranma growled, picking herself up off the ground.

Ryoga shook his head to clear it. "S-sorry, don't know what came over me."

"Puberty," Yuka said, snaffling another cracker.

"Please don't help, Yuka," Ranma implored her. "This is important!" She looked at Ryoga. "Look, maybe you should start? You be me, and... uhh.. I dunno, say the stuff you would say if you were me?"

"Right!" Ryoga said, then immediately ran into a problem; He had no idea what Ranma would say. Dialogue wasn't his strong suit, after all. He had often accused Ranma of being a casanova, but he was forced to admit that he didn't really have any examples of it.

Ranma just wings stuff, right? So... I'll just wing it! he decided. He closed his eyes, put his hand to his chest, and began. "Shampoo! I, Ranma Saotome have come to take you on a date! I, Ranma Saotome, have a night of dinner, entertainment and dancing planned for us! Come, and I, Ranma Saotome, shall sweep you into my arms and carry you off for a night full of bliss and wonder!"
He opened his eyes to see how his performance had been received. He was confronted with a quartet of blank stares.

"... What the hell was that?" Ranma asked, stunned.

Yuka, Hiroshi and Daisuke all abruptly doubled over in laughter.

"What?" Ryouska rubbed the back of his head. Granted, he might have been a bit over dramatic, but he thought he remembered Ranma saying those sorts of things the last time he had tried to win Shampoo's affection over that reversal jewel.

"I don't sound anything like that!" Ranma shouted at him, stamping her foot angrily.

This provoked a renewed fit of laughing from the peanut gallery.

"N-no… *gasp*... No it's perfect!" Yuka managed before collapsing into a fit of giggles again.

"C-can't… can't tell the difference!" Daisuke was not much better off.

"Give him a pigtail and he might as well be the real deal!" Hiroshi added.

"I hate all of you right now," Ranma groused, folding her arms tightly and pouting. "So much."

Ryouska's Cute Crying Girl Protection Mode kicked him hard in the ass again. "I-I'm sorry!" He stammered. "I wasn't trying to make fun, honest Ranma, I'm… I'm just bad at this!"

"Hence why you're the perfect choice to get dating advice from," Yuka added with a shake of her head. "I understand now!"

"Oh shut up, Yuka," Ranma growled at her. She gave Ryouska a skeptical look. "Look, let's forget about pretending to be people we aren't. Just be yourself taking a girl out and we'll go from there, okay?"

"Got any more snacks, Hiroshi?" Daisuke asked.

"I've got some Pocky," Yuka said, digging a box of it out of her bag.

"That'll do. Gimme," Daisuke made a swipe for the box but she jerked it away and glanced at Hiroshi. "Hiroshi, would you like some?"

"Yes, please."

She smirked at Daisuke as she held the box towards Hiroshi. "See? Hiroshi gets some first because he knows how to treat a lady."

"Oh yeah," Hiroshi said as he pulled a couple of the chocolate-covered sticks from the box. "If it gets me Pocky, I can fake all sorts of stuff."

"Hey!" Yuka jerked the box away while Hiroshi and Daisuke exchanged a high five behind her back.

Ranma heaved a sigh and massaged her forehead. "Aim… to not be them, okay Ryo?"

Ryouska grunted and nodded. Okay, forget the roleplay. Just figure out where RANMA might want to go on a date and that should make Shampoo happy too, right? He couldn't think of a major way for that reasoning to backfire on him. He closed his eyes again and considered. "Okay, so… keep it
simple. Dinner and a movie."

"I don't got a lot of money…" Ranma said sheepishly.

"Doesn't have to be expensive - just go for something you don't normally have," Ryouga said, pondering options. One of the few benefits of his travels was that he had gotten the chance to sample a lot of different foods.

"Italian, maybe?" Ranma suggested.

"That's a lot of pasta, kinda feel like that's gonna be old with all of the ramen… how about Greek?" Ryouga opened his eyes and thumped his palm with his fist in triumph.

"Never had Greek," Ranma said curiously.

"You'd like it, I think. I found a good gyro place downtown once… but I'm not 100% sure if it was downtown Tokyo." He rubbed the back of his head sheepishly.

"If you ever figure it out, maybe you can take me there," Ranma said, smiling. "I'm always up for a food adventure!"

"See? That's the spirit!" Ryouga nodded, getting into it now. He could almost visualize it, actually. "Movie would be good next."

"Ugh, do I gotta go watch something sappy?" Ranma sighed, with a resigned expression.

Ryouga shook his head, pondering. "Nah. You both like martial arts, right? Besides, movies are just uncomfortable if the other person isn't enjoying it." Ryouga winced a bit as he remembered some of his cluelessness around Akane. It was so painfully obvious she wasn't interested in him now, why couldn't he see it then? He closed his eyes again and tried to focus. "A lot of guys pick horror movies to try and get the girl to cling to them…" He thought back to the Cave of Lost Love and shuddered. "... but that can backfire really badly."

"Not like that's a problem with Shampoo anyway," Ranma said wryly.

Ryouga could have needled Ranma for that bit of arrogance but he let it slide for now. He folded his arms to refocus on the mental image of being on a date with a girl, but it wasn't Shampoo he was visualizing. "Something interesting but low-key I think… you don't wanna be more interested in the movie than in her, right?"

Ranma chuckled softly and closed her own eyes in an attempt to visualize the scene as well. "Yeah… that'd piss me off if someone did that to me…"

"You want a theater that's mostly empty. Pick a movie that's been running a while," Ryouga said, envisioning a cool, dark theater. He had thought about this so many times while planning to ask Akane out, to ensure that the date would be so perfect that she couldn't help but love him. "Keep the popcorn in your lap so she has to lean against you to get some."

"Sneaky," Ranma murmured, though he could hear a grin in her voice. "The armrests flip up on those seats too and the theaters are kept pretty cool. Betcha that's all on purpose."

Ryouga sighed. The mental picture was very clear now. Well-worn, something he had visualized a thousand times as he lay in his tent lost in the middle of nowhere, or slogged along on some miserable trek far from anyone who knew him or cared if he existed. It, and other little fantasies like it, had been what had kept him going. The smell of fresh popcorn, the slightly cool air of the theatre
and the feeling of contentment as he shared something enjoyable with a warm presence next to him, arm around her with a casual, easy affection that he could never muster in reality. Naturally, partway through the film, there'd be a slow part and they'd become more away of how close they were. He'd glance down at her to find a pair of blue eyes looking back into his, and a question… a challenge glinting in them. And this time… this time he'd have the courage to…

His eyes opened, but for a minute he was confused, as he was still seeing those blue eyes, just as they opened and looked at him as if she were waking up from her own dream. It took half a second for him to snap back to reality and realize that he was staring into Ranma's eyes.

He jerked back a little, startled to find that they had gotten surprisingly close to each other. At the same moment, she did the same, by reflex. He saw her eyes widen and a little color brighten her cheeks. Again there was that moment of confusion on his part, the feeling like he hadn't fully woken up from the daydream. After a second he realized why.

I was imagining being at the movie with Ranma, he thought. Not Akane or Akari… RANMA. I was… I was imagining being about to… to…

The notion caused a sickening twist of panic in his gut, but not the surge of revulsion he normally felt when one of Ranma's disguises fell away. This was more like a hole getting punched through the comfortable but fragile new layers of denial he had been carefully constructing around his feelings for the redhead.

"No, no, don't stop now," Yuka said, her mouth full of popcorn. "It was just getting good! I believe you were about to get to the part where you kiss?"

"I don't know what you're talking about…" Ryouga squeaked.

"Would you guys stop interrupting?!" Ranma said, exasperated. "I'm tryin' t'figure this out and Ryo is the only one who's actually helping me. And where did you get popcorn!?!"

Ryouga sighed in relief. Whatever madness had possessed his brain, Ranma hadn't seen it. He was clear and he could safely tuck this little slip back under the rug just so long as she didn't…

"C'mon Ryouga, let's go find somewhere with less running commentary." She reached out and grabbed his hand before he could stop her.

"Ackgh…" Ryouga made a slightly strangled noise as he felt the Link spark to life the instant her hand touched his and shone a spotlight on all of the inconvenient feelings he was in the middle of trying to stuff back into their cages.

She was already pulling on his hand, her momentum having carried her weight forward before the deluge of information through the link hit her. She froze.

He wanted to find himself a nice, deep hole to crawl into.

Slowly her head turned. He wanted to pull his hand back but, when he tugged, her grip just tightened. He had expected to see recrimination or disgust or horror in her eyes… all the things his gut told him he should be seeing. But instead there was just… questioning. He tried to block out what he was seeing from her through the link, but at this point he might as well have tried to will his eyes to stop working. He still couldn't parse a lot of what he was getting, but there was… curiosity? Something else… concern?

"Come on," she tugged his hand again. She gave Yuka, Hiroshi and Daisuke a dirty look, then started to drag Ryouga off.
"Wait, wha…?!" he yelped as he was pulled off balance and given no choice but to follow. Why is she still…?!

She dragged him around to the far side of the school, where there were some benches along the edge of the soccer field. She let go of his hand and sat down on them but she did not meet his eyes.

"Ummm… look, Ranma…"

"Sit."

He blinked. "I…"

She glared at him. "Would you stop being weird? Sit!"

He timidly sat down next to her, leaving a person's worth of space between them.

"Okay, so… keep going," she said once he was settled.

"Keep going…?" he replied, confused.

"About the date," she clarified.

He groaned, slumping over a bit. "Ranma, I'd rather not…"

"When you were imaginin' the date, you were thinking about going on a date with me, weren't you," she said - a statement rather than a question. "That's why there was that whole surge of embarrassment, right?"

"You know, I really miss the days when I had some privacy in my own head…" Ryouga muttered.

Ranma scooted a few inches closer and poked him on the shoulder. "Yes or no?"

"Yes, okay?" he growled dejectedly. "Happy? You've got me so thoroughly confused now that I'm daydreaming about you. I am fully aware that you're not a real girl, that I'm basically no better than Kuno right now, that all of this is just a side-effect of the link mixed with my own loneliness, and that it's turned into a running gag. Satisfied?"

He glared at her. He expected to see her preparing to taunt him or, even worse, pity him. Instead there was just that same curiosity.

"So… finish the story then," she said evenly.

"wHaT?!" he croaked, eyes widening as he pulled away from her.

She sighed and folded her hands on her lap, unconsciously mimicking Kasumi. "I'm tryin' something new. You're confused?" she scoffed. "You should try livin' in my head. Lately I've been… sloshin' from side to side, like water in a washtub that's gettin' rocked back and forth. But the worst part of it was always that I was scared of it. Fightin' it - because I was supposed to - because I was always s'posed to be a 'man amongst men'. Sometimes I could, though I was holdin' on by my fingernails. But sometimes… lately anyway… I lose it. But… it was always worse when I was fightin' than when I lost. It's kind of… a relief when I finally let go. I've just been a big ball o' Yin an' Yang fightin' it out and not gettin' anywhere. I've been so concerned about what I should be feelin' that half the time I don't have a clue what I actually was feelin'. So…" She swallowed and glanced at him, uncharacteristically timid. "... So right now I'm jus' lettin' myself be Yin instead o' Yang, an' tryin' to figure out what I actually feel about this, rather than decide what I should feel. Ever since this link
thing started, you've been…" she trailed off, "... you've been supporting me. And… and there's nothing in it for you. If I was gonna date a guy… really date one, not just do it as a caper or to get somethin' out of 'em… You're pretty much the only guy I could imagine doing it with. So… I wanna hear the rest of the story. I… wanna know how I feel about that."

Ryouga gaped at her silently.

"I-if that's okay," she blushed, hunching a little as the awkward silence stretched out.

Ryouga looked down thoughtfully. After another moment of thought he closed his eyes. "All right." He took a breath and tried to recapture the daydream.

"... Whadaya mean 'All right'? You gonna tell the story or not?" she asked petulantly.

"Give me a minute, would you?" he huffed. "I spent a lot of time planning this stuff out. I need to regain my train of thought."

"It's not that sort of date, is it?"

"What? No! I was imagining the date I'd take Akane on once I finally got up the nerve to ask her!"

"Point stands."

"I would never…!"

"Liar."

Ryouga grit his teeth then relaxed with a sigh. "... Not on the first date."

He felt the bench shift a bit as she scooted closer, until she was close enough that he could feel the heat of her body next to him. "So… what would you do? What comes after the movie?"

Ryouga sighed. "I'm not sure how I feel about you using this to impress Shampoo…"

"I'm gonna do something different with her. This is our date."

Ryouga seized up again for a second at that assertion. He opened his eyes and looked at her.

She had her eyes closed, her hands folded and a look of concentration on her face, as if she were trying to visualize the movie theatre he had been describing.

His expression softened a bit. He looked back down at his hands in his lap, then closed his eyes. *What the hell. If Ranma can be fearless, so can I!*

"We'd either duck out of the movie early or wait until the credits finished, depending if the movie was bad or not," he began softly. "That way we'd avoid fighting through any crowds on our way out. Then… probably start off just walking. Talk about the movie, probably."

"What if the movie was bad?"

He chuckled. "Then we'd talk about how bad it was," He was starting to get back into the daydream, imagining walking out into the night air. "It'd be dark out by then."

"Stars would be out," Ranma said softly. "We could go see them. Find a hill or a high place."

Ryouga smiled. "Yeah, that'd be nice. A grassy hill would be best."
Quietly they continued to talk. At some point she scooted closer, leaning against him lightly as they worked through the story of the date with each other.

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Himura leaned back into the padded leather as the limo pulled away from the school. "You seem exhausted, Ma'am," Ms. Sasaki said a little timidly.

Himura gave the woman a tired look. Normally she would have demanded the woman muzzle herself, or replaced her ages ago as she did with all her staff. However, after the attendant had found several minor flaws in Himura's reasoning when she had indulged her, Himura had elected to let her stay. Surrounding oneself with mutes and yes-men tended to lead to poor perspective, after all.

That did not mean she was overly fond of explaining the obvious.

"Yes, I am. A nonstop flight to China, a long helicopter ride, a tense negotiation and then the same trip in reverse without so much as an overnight stay at a hotel tends to do that," she said, rubbing her forehead. She could feel a migraine coming on.

Ms. Sasaki opened a small compartment, took out a bottle of painkillers and handed them to her. "I-I was merely voicing a concern, Ma'am. You could have taken the day off."

This was another reason for keeping the woman around. She was quite good at anticipating Himura's needs. And she was about as assertive as a wet tissue, which suited Himura perfectly. She took the bottle, tapped a few capsules into her hand and swallowed them dry. "I could, but I'd rather not take my finger off the pulse of Furinkan for that long," she sighed. "Timetables are getting rather cramped."

"There are still four more games to play before the match with Ms. Saotome's team can even be scheduled," Ms. Sasaki said meekly.

"If I've timed all of this right, the matter will never get that far," Himura sighed. "Which is for the best. Tatewaki won't stay in the hospital forever and I really don't want to have to deal with the bother of an election to take the position of Student Council President for myself officially. I haven't the time and it serves little purpose once Ranma is secured."

"Do you feel these 'Amazons' will be that useful?"

Himura chuckled. "I expect they will make themselves that useful. They've been pushed into a corner by the modern world. I'm not only offering them an 'out', but a path to be rulers. It's just a matter of showing them that I can deliver on my promises."

"Y-yes ma'am," Ms. Sasaki said uncertainly. "A-are you certain your plan will…"

Himura rolled her eyes. "Ambition is a universal human trait. There's a power struggle waiting to happen in the Council of Elders, that much is plain. I imagine having a political opponent who has been around for 300 years and shows no signs of dying or retiring any time soon can cause that. Lo Shan needs an ally among the Outsiders to counter all the friends Khu Long and her great granddaughter are making; I just happened to be someone who can offer more than just a few tricks of fancy footwork. The Elder just needs assurances that what I have to offer will be enough to counter a 'Godslayer'."

"But… is all this necessary to win your Grandfather's challenge?"
Himura laughed. She leaned over and opened up the minibar. She was slightly annoyed to find her grandfather had stripped it of anything alcoholic. She poured herself a lemonade from the decanter in the fridge. "To win? No, not at all. I've already done that, Nabiki Tendo just doesn't know it yet. All of this is just distraction to keep the players busy while I tend to a much more important game." She took a sip and sighed, leaning back again. "I had originally planned to take a more… leisurely pace with things. But this will not be the last 'test' Grandfather devises and I will not meekly be his puppet as he meddles in my affairs… not like my father was. It is time to establish my own power base. Just in case he decides to threaten my inheritance again."

"Then… you don't actually want Ranma Saotome?"

Himura rolled her eyes. "Ranma was a game. Something to make this dull senior year pass a little faster. Who'd have thought it would have led me to uncover so many fascinating secrets? But there is also a matter of pride involved." She cocked her head. "I'm sure I'll manage to find a use for her."

"Mine!"

Ranma dove for the ball, digging it out and popping it up into the air for Riko to set. She scrambled back to her feet as the other girl got under the ball, ran for the far side of the net and jumped for the spike. She drove it down over the net, the ball just ghosting by Rin's fingers as she leapt for it.

"Yes!" She pumped her fist in victory, grinning.

"Well, someone seems to be back on her game!" Sayuri walked over, grinning. "Good to see you back in form, Ranma."

Ranma winked and grinned, flexing her bicep. "You had doubts? Ranma Saotome always wins in the end!"

Sayuri smirked. "Yes, well, just as long as we win on Wednesday. I think that's enough practise for today."

Ranma wiped the sweat from her brow and grinned. So, I guess I just hadda get a few weird dreams out of my system. On some level she realized that it was more than that but… she felt balanced again.

"You're actually looking pretty good!" Ryouga said, walking up from the sidelines. Ranma felt a little heat rise to her cheeks when she realized he had been watching her play though she wasn't entirely sure why. He tossed her a towel which she caught deftly.

"I thought you were gonna head home with Ucchan so you didn't have to wait around?" Ranma said. She was trying to get her mind off the 'story' she and Ryouga had worked out over lunch. She still hadn't managed to work out how she felt about… whatever it was that was happening between them and, although she had resolved to stop being afraid of it, it wasn't something she wanted to be dwelling on during her date with Shampoo.

"I was but then I started thinking about Sayuri's trick serve. I wanted to try something, but it'll need both of us," Ryouga said. He scooped one of the spare volleyballs off the ground and walked over to her while the rest of the team watched.

"Sayuri, c'mere," Ranma said, beckoning the team captain to join them.

Ryouga handed her the ball. "Okay… I got this idea from the Link so… uhh… we'll have to use that, too," he said sheepishly. "You'll need to spin the ball on your finger, and then use your Soul of
Ice, but… combo it with the Iron Cloth to project it into the ball."

Ranma blinked. "What good would that do? Other than freeze the ball, I mean? Besides, Iron Cloth is your trick. I don't know how to do it."

"I think… I think I can show you," he said. He motioned for her to start spinning the ball and then, once she had, he reached out and cupped the hand supporting the ball with his own.

She felt the link open immediately. It was definitely getting stronger. She wasn't sure if that was something that should concern her or not but she could tell right away that he was feeling guilty and trying not to 'look'. She smiled a little. Ryo's still trying to protect my privacy. Not like he hasn't seen all of it.

"All right, now… just try and follow what I'm doing here," Ryouga said.

She could feel his ki flow through his hand - and then through hers - along her finger and up into the ball. This wouldn't normally even be possible, but the link bypassed the normal tendency of her ki and Ryouga's to repel each other.

Martial artists of their level all learned to use Ki on some level. They used it to reinforce themselves - to strengthen their blows or lighten their bodies. This felt similar, but rather than strengthening his own limbs, he was threading it up into the ball, and rather than spreading it evenly, he was lacing it like a spiderweb through the ball's structure.

"Oooooh…!" Ranma said, eyes widening. "I think I'm starting to get it! You spiderweb it like that so you can exert force on the structure… manipulate it, make it sharp, make it strong, stuff like that!"

"Yeah… and, once you get good, you can keep a thread connected to sustain the effect even when you throw it," Ryouga replied.

"Pops never taught this kinda stuff. Said weapon users were just using crutches," Ranma said as she started to consider possibilities.

Ryouga chuckled. "You'll probably come up with some crazy way to kick my ass with it in a few days. But for now, just use that to project your soul of ice into the ball - into the center of it - and hold it there. Keep it contained."

"All right… dunno what this is gonna do but make the ball cold…" Ranma said, concentrating.

Ryouga nodded and felt the chill of her ki entering the ball, using his own as a conduit. "Good… Okay, now…" He used his free hand and spun the ball faster.

Ranma's eyes widened. She could feel the heat of his ki as his hand brushed the ball. She stared at the ball, then at him, then back at the ball incredulously. "You're kidding…!"

"I think that's how it goes, right?" Ryouga asked. "This one is your technique, after all."

Ranma could immediately grasp what he was trying to do. She focused and put her free hand over his hand as it brushed the ball, using her ki to guide his more precisely. She felt the buildup of energy within the ball but held the 'Soul of Ice' in check while Ryouga did the same with his 'hot' ki - preventing them from mixing. Once there was enough, she withdrew her hand.

"Okay, give it a try," Ryouga said, nodding to her.

Ranma concentrated. If she just released all of the cold ki at once, the spiral would rip the ball apart.
She let it 'bleed', just a little, and could see the ball's spin accelerating as a result. She exchanged a glance with him, her intent clear through the link, and together they tossed the ball into the air. Both of them held that thread of ki that kept it all in control, just long enough for Ranma to strike the ball.

The ki threads snapped and the dragon was loose. They both watched as the ball suddenly deformed then accelerated explosively, firing up and away into the distance at a fantastic rate until it was out of sight.

"Wooooooooowwwww..." Rin said, her expression one of wonder. "Even I can't do that!"

Ranma took a deep breath. "That's hard!"

"Yeah, but… it makes sense, right?" Ryouga said. "She's seen all those techniques before."

"Yeah, but seeing and doing are two different things!" Ranma protested, though part of her knew that the lost boy had a point. They both turned their gaze to Sayuri.

"... What?" Sayuri said, suddenly feeling nervous.

"If I'm right, she's actively maintaining and controlling two different types of ki at once without having had any training," Ryouga said. "If she's got that kind of innate ability, then who says she couldn't pick this up just from seeing it?"

"That's a lot of assumptions," Ranma said. "That'd be an inherent level of skill likes of which I've never seen before."

"Ranma, you're talking about me like I'm not here and it's worrying me," Sayuri said, scowling and crossing her arms.

"It'd kind of have to be able to use ki like this without any training," Ryouga answered, ignoring Sayuri. "And because she hasn't been given any foundation to build on…"

"... She's been doing it unconsciously… by instinct," Ranma's eyes widened. "Maybe she's been doing this since that first time we fought here at the school but she hasn't even realized it! It's just now that she's finally reaching the point where…"

"HEY!"

Ranma and Ryouga both turned to look at Sayuri, blinking.

Sayuri put her hands on her hips and scowled at them both. "Any chance I might be let in on this really fascinating conversation about me? You know, since I'm standing here and all?"

"Aheh..." Ranma rubbed the back of her head sheepishly. "Actually, Sayuri… Until Ryo and I figure this out, it's probably best we don't confuse you with a lot of guesswork."

"Y'know how sometimes you overthink stuff and suddenly it gets way harder?" Ryouga added.

"Yeah! Like that one story where some guy asked a centipede how he coordinated all his feet and, once he thought about it, he couldn't walk anymore?" Ranma agreed.

Sayuri sighed in exasperation. "So, now that you have an idea of what I'm doing when I do these bizarre serves, you're saying it's better I don't know?!

Ryouga waved his hands in a mollifying gesture. "Just until we figure it out enough to actually know how to help train you to use it!"
"Yeah," Ranma said. She put a hand on Sayuri's shoulder. "Sayuri, this is prodigy level stuff. You got any martial artists in your family?"

"Or… dragons?" Ryouga asked, getting a dirty look from Ranma.

Sayuri shook her head. "Ranma… No, I don't, and I swear I'm sure you two are way overthinking this. It can't be that big a deal…" Her confident expression cracked a little. "... Right?"

"Well… it's more like… Remember that one kid we had in our class last year - before he got bumped up? Shi… Shun? Shinichi! That's it! Anyway, remember how crazy it was what he could do with math? The teacher put up that problem on the board and there was this big long way to solve it…"

"Quadratics, right," Sayuri said. "But he came up and solved it in like three steps."

"Yeah! And he was always doing those math puzzles and stuff. It was like he could just kinda… see stuff with math without even tryin'?" Ranma said. "And he could never really explain how he did it. There were always people who spent days trying to figure out what he did?"

"I didn't think you ever paid attention," Sayuri said archly.

"Hey!... Well… Akane useta try an' figure those out, an' it useta make her grumpy, so… I sorta had a reason to remember," Ranma said sheepishly. "But I remember when he did try an' explain it, it messed him up an' confused him until someone figured out a way to explain it for everyone else. You're kinda doin' the same thing - doin' stuff that's tough to figure out without havin' t'think about it. So I don't wanna mess you up until Ryo an' I can explain it to you. Y'know?"

Sayuri looked skeptical. "No, not really… All I want is to just figure out how to do it when I want to. But… You guys are the experts, so I'll trust your judgement," she sighed. "I'll just work on my non freaky martial arts voodoo serves until then."

"We'll figure it out. We're close. I promise," Ryouga said resolutely.

Ranma glanced up at Ryouga. "I should get you home. I still gotta change and get a shower in at least."

They bid farewell to the team, though Ranma had to intentionally overlook Yuka's meaningful smirk or Rin's obvious fangirling as she and Ryouga walked off together.

*Why do they gotta be so weird about this?* Ranma thought with a sigh. She snuck a glance at Ryouga while they walked. He was looking around, not really paying attention, but at least he seemed to be following her without getting lost.

Actually, it was more a case of them not being weird about it. Ranma was fully aware that she didn't have a single relationship that wasn't weird or strange in some way. She was on a more unsteady footing with Ryouga simply because things kept slipping into territory where she had never expected to go. She was used to pushing against judgement, scorn and ridicule to help her figure out boundaries, even if she had to go past them to accomplish her goals. Likewise, when she was pushed too hard in a certain direction, she knew to push back. Doing things that way usually seemed to balance out in the long run. She wasn't used to people simply… accepting what she was doing without trying to wrench the wheel away from her.

Still, it wasn't like she didn't know there would be push back. Her Father and Mother would be horrified… and even Akane was suspicious and jealous about it.
"Why AM I doing this?" she thought, sneaking a longer look at Ryouga. *I mean... what am I hoping to accomplish? Even if I AM... I mean... even if he... If... if WE...* She closed her eyes and sighed, her mind still shying away from the thoughts of that nature.

He hand twitched and she had the sudden impulse to take his hand in hers to get that insight through the link. She rubbed her palm with the thumb of her other hand instead.

"Hey... Ryouga?" she asked. "Does... does it bug you?"

"Does what bug me?" Ryouga asked, turning his attention to her.

"When my friends act all sly like that, like they think they've figured out we're in some secret relationship or something." She kept her eyes on the ground expecting an explosive denial.

Ryouga was quiet for a moment. "I guess I hadn't noticed."

She gave him an incredulous look. "Didn't notice...?! Yuka was practically demanding we kiss!"

He immediately blushed and looked away. "I mean, I noticed that, but..." He shrugged. "I've never thought much about what others think or do. Y'know, unless they were important to me."

Ranma gave him a skeptical look. "What are you talking about? You've always been on my case about what I think or do, even back in Middle School!"

Ryouga cleared his throat but did not look at her. "... Yeah."

Ranma felt a sudden rush of warmth to her cheeks and looked away quickly herself. She had walked directly into that. *Augh! I'm making it worse! WHY AM I MAKING IT WORSE?!! Just... just shut up Ranma. Just don't say anything. Don't say ANYTHING, especially that thing you were GOING to ask.*

Ever try really hard not to think about pink elephants?

"... So what's the second date?"

"... What?" Ryouga stared at her, confused.

Ranma felt the blush deepen and squirmed. *Why am I so stupid?! No... If I'm gonna ask, I'm gonna ask!" You had that first date planned out forever for when you finally asked Akane out, right? So... what did you have planned for the second date?"

Ryouga studied her for a moment, as if trying to figure out if she were making fun of him. The skepticism faded gradually when her own internal struggle became plain. His fingers twitched and he jammed his hands into his pockets as he looked away. "I... never really thought that far ahead."

"Why?" Ranma looked up, taking her turn to study him.

"The first date was never going to happen. Even if I did go on a date with Akane, or Akari, or anyone else, I couldn't be the guy I imagined myself to be when I planned that out. The fake date with Akane at the Waterpark sealed the deal on that." He sighed. "I get nervous or anxious or lost... and I panic and do something stupid... or... or desperate. I sorta always knew that I'd screw it up."

"Well... that's kind of defeatist, isn't it?" Ranma chided him.

Ryouga gave her a sour look. "It's not like it's a problem you ever have, so I don't expect you to understand," He started walking faster.
"Don't be like that!" Ranma sighed and jogged a bit to catch up. "Look… I never even thought about planning out a date like that. Dates for me were always… well, they were chores that I hadda do. Because Pops and Mr. Tendo demanded I take Akane out or because I had gotten in trouble with one of the girls or to get something I needed…"

"You're not helping your whole argument about not being a chauvinist jerk, Saotome," Ryouga growled.

Ranma huffed and put on a little more speed to get in front of him then walked backwards so she could face him. "Look, I know that sounds bad but it wasn't 'cuz anything was wrong with any of the girls or nuthin'. I just didn't get it until Nabiki showed me that it should be… something you do with someone you wanna be with… to spend time with 'em and get to know 'em…" She paused a little uncertainly. "... Right?"

Ryouga slowed his pace, the hard set of his jaw relaxing. "... Yeah, pretty much."

"You 'n me are kinda the same. We didn't spend a lot of time with other people. But you still figured out what dating is, an' I didn't, so… I never really thought about it much. Dates were just somethin' that happened. But..." She took a breath, color rising in her cheeks again. "... there's somethin' nice about imaginin' a perfect date. How that might go an' stuff. But I don't know how to do that. So I liked piggybacking on yours. You've got an idea how this is supposed to go. I've always just winged it or tried usin' some stupid old scroll I got from Pops. So..." She dropped her gaze and fidgeted. "... So I was hopin' you could count that first date as done, so... so you could show me what you'd think up for the second."

Ryouga cocked his head. "Even though... I mean... we were talking it out like it was the two of us on a date."

"So?" Ranma said, though her voice didn't carry the confidence of her words. "I-I mean... it was just a story, right? A-and... if it helps me sort out some of the stuff going on in my head and it helps you get to be that guy on a date you always wanted to be... there's nothin' wrong with that... right?"

Ryouga continued to just look at her. A series of emotions flickered across his face, too quickly for her to identify. Finally, he sighed and seemed to deflate a little.

"All right, Ranma. I'll try and think of something tomorrow," he said, looking a little sheepish.

"Yes! Thank you Ryo!" Ranma wasn't entirely sure why she was so happy that he'd say yes, but... it was a victory of a sort, right? And victory was always good.

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Ranma was still in a good mood when she reached the Nekohanten. The dinner rush was just starting, so she slipped in quietly and waited to get waved to the back.

Shampoo was waitressing as usual, as was Nabiki and, to her surprise, Akane.

"Top Ramen, order up, new girl," Cologne's croak came from the back. A full bowl of ramen came spinning out of the service window like a frisbee, but somehow it didn't spray its contents all over the little restaurant.

Akane - who was in the middle of taking an order - spun, caught the bowl and set it down at the correct table then smoothly resumed taking the order. She flashed Cologne a smug grin over her shoulder.
Ranma winced. *That was a MISTAKE, 'Kane...* 

Deluxe Ramen, five bowls, order up, new girl!"

Akane's eyes widened. "Wait, what?!"

Five bowls of piping hot soup and ramen came whizzing out of of the order window. Akane scrambled and managed to catch four of the bowls on her outstretched arms and balance the fifth on her head, though she was teetering precariously.

"... And an order of pot stickers," A final plate came sailing out, hitting Akane squarely in the forehead and causing her to topple over and all of the dishes to come crashing to the floor.

NEVER get cocky with the Old Ghoul, Ranma thought sympathetically. Though, on the upside, Akane was rather cute in the waitressing outfit.

She glanced over to see Nabiki, also in a waitressing outfit, looking rather haggard. She only had three bowls but was struggling to balance them. She had a determined look on her face as she carefully delivered them to their table.

"Step it up, Ms. Part-time! And don't spill a drop or you'll have to do it all over again!""

"Yes, Great-grandmother Dearest," Nabiki growled through clenched teeth. She noticed Ranma and straightened a little, a smile spreading across her face. "Ranma!"

That was apparently the magic word. A lavender blur exploded through the kitchen door, glomping Ranma hard enough to pin her back against the wall next to the door.

"Ranma!" Shampoo said excitedly. "You come take Shampoo to date?"

Ranma wheezed, needing a minute to get her wind back. "That... *gasp*... was... *wheeze*... why I came..."

Shampoo leaned in a little closer. "Say, please? Shampoo wait for so long for Airen to say."

Ranma chuckled a little, though it came out a bit more like a cough. "Okay, okay... Shampoo, would you like to go on a da- mmmmpfh?!"

She was unable to complete the sentence as the Amazon smothered her lips in a passionate kiss. Ranma knew better than to try and resist at this point so she simply relaxed into it and slid her arms around Shampoo to kiss her back. Though, mindful that Akane and Nabiki were there, she restrained herself from getting too far into it. It was not easy.

"I... uhh... should take a shower and get changed," Ranma said sheepishly, aware that pretty much the whole restaurant was watching them now.

"Can come wash back," Shampoo purred suggestively.

"I think if I let you do that we'd never actually leave on our date..." Ranma said, her face flushed scarlet, though the idea was painfully tempting. She glanced to her left and spotted a soup-drenched Akane glowering at them. "... Aaaand Akane would kill us."

"Yes, Akane *would* kill you!" Akane growled.

"Order up new girl!"
Akane whimpered. "Why am I even **doing** this? I'm not your trainee!"

"For moral support because you love your sister?" Nabiki said tightly as she struggled to balance four bowls.

"I don't love you *that* much, Nabiki!"

"We… should go get ready…” Ranma said quietly, not wanting to attract any more attention.

Shampoo paced nervously at the bottom of the stairs.

It wasn't that Ranma had been upstairs very long, but… this was something she had been anticipating for such a **very** long time, and she couldn't shake the nagging fear that something was going to come along and snatch it all away.

She did a quick scan to make sure everything was perfect, checking herself in the mirror. Ranma had suggested casual attire so she had gone with a modest red cheongsam. With Nabiki's permission, she had changed out the plain braided fabric collar for a somewhat more stylish black leather choker (Though she kept the tags) and she had brushed her hair until it shone.

*Perfume, light, not overpowering, check… stud earrings, not too flashy, check… purse with money in case Airen broke, check…*

There was an outraged quacking from the nearby kitchen and the rattling of cage bars.

*… Stupid Mousse in a cage so he can't ruin things, check…*

"Hey Shampoo… Ready?"

She whirled to see him on the stairs. He was just wearing one of his long-sleeved red silk shirts and black pants but, in her eyes, he *sparkled.*

The best part, though, was his expression. In the past he had always been distant, aloof and distracted… Indeed, it had always seemed that he wanted to be anywhere *but* with her. That had hurt. Though she had brushed it off, it had fueled her desperation and fear.

But now… he looked nervous… sheepish… perhaps even a little awkward… everything Ranma typically **was not.** And it was because of *her.**

It wasn't much, but it was a start.

"Always ready," she said, bouncing over to him and taking his arm, hugging it tight. He didn't flinch like he normally did though she still felt him stiffen a little. Better, this time she could feel him start to relax after a moment.

*He still needs time to be comfortable, she thought and hugged a little tighter. But… it's so much better than it was!*

"Where we go, Airen?" she asked brightly, looking up at him. She expected something cliche like a movie, but… it didn't matter. Just spending time with him… even if he was just doing it to be 'fair'…

But he surprised her.

"Actually," he rubbed the back of his head. "This kinda sounds like a cop-out now, but… I'm sorta
realizin' I don't know a whole lot about what stuff you're into - aside from martial arts, anyway - so I
was hopin'... maybe you could show me?" He smiled hopefully.
She blinked at him, stunned. It took a couple of tries to find her voice. "A-Airen serious?"
"Yeah…" He blushed a little and looked away. "It kinda sucks that we're supposed to get married
and… I realize I don't know a whole lot about you like I do Akane or Nabiki. That's… that's kinda
on me, so… I know it's selfish of me to ask…"
She shook her head violently. "No! Shampoo… Shampoo happy to show Airen!" She beamed,
hugging his arm tighter. "... Sure, though? Airen might find boring."
He shook his head. "If you're into it, there's gotta be somethin' to it, right?"
She nodded then tugged his arm. She already knew exactly where she wanted to go. "Then… hurry!
Must get going or museum will close!"
He let himself get dragged along but there was already a note of worry in his voice... "Museum?"
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The Museum was a large, imposing stone and brick building. It was an older building in a distinctly
western style which had a pair of greco-roman columns framing the entrance.
"Are… you sure we're allowed in a place like this?" Ranma asked uncertainly.
"Ranma never be to museum before?" Shampoo asked.
He shook his head, looking a little self-conscious. "Pops didn't see much point. You?"
"Twice in China. Parents think it important to know history of outside world, and Great-grandmother
want show where Joketsuzoku came from." She gently coaxed him by the arm, leading him in as she
spoke. "Joketsuzoku have roots in Ancient Greece. Not much of Greek culture remain, but good to
know roots. Is why wanted to come: Exhibit on Ancient Greece and Greek Mythology this week!"
She paused to pay the entry fee for the both of them.
"Would you like to take our audio tour?" The attendant asked.
Shampoo brightened, hopeful at the prospect of having someone who was more articulate than she
was to explain things. "Please!"
The attendant brought out a small black box, a proprietary digital player of some kind. "Here, this is
set to explain each of the showpieces in the exhibit as you approach them. This button here will
pause it. Humm… "She fished around a little. "Seems I only have the one… wait, don't worry! I
have a solution!" She rummaged around and produced two headphones and a splitter cord. "I'm so
sorry but we've got an elementary school group in today and we've run a bit short. You and your
boyfriend don't mind sharing, do you?"
Ranma ducked his head but didn't protest the label, which was encouraging. Shampoo let him take
the box as he had a belt to clip it to whereas she did not. She hoped the box wasn't too complex, as
she hadn't used anything like it before.
She took his arm and led him inside with a happy sigh. It didn't really matter if Ranma ended up
sharing her enthusiasm or not - just the fact he had been interested in finding out about it was more
than Shampoo could have hoped for!


They walked into a large hall with a high ceiling. All along the walls were various alcoves and displays and in the center was an absolutely massive, highly detailed diorama representing what she decided must have been the fall of Troy.

As they approached the exhibit, the voice started. Much to Shampoo's surprise, the narrator introduced himself as Odysseus and began talking about the battle from his own perspective, complete with sound effects and the cries of battle in the background.

Ranma's eyes widened a bit and he walked closer to the central display, frowning as he followed Odysseus' recounting of the ten year long war.

"So… if this is mythology, why is it here in a museum?" Ranma asked, glancing at Shampoo.

"Troy real place. Trojan War actually happen, city get razed," Shampoo said. "Maybe not like in myth, but archeologist find city in 19th century. Myth important because is only real story of what happen. But wars like this happen all over region. Caused Greek culture to scatter and spread, some from conquest, some from survivors fleeing, some from soldiers lost after war finding new lands to settle when unable to find way home. Is same sort of thing that cause Shampoo's ancestors to travel all the way to China."

"Is that in a display here somewhere?" Ranma looked around curiously.

Shampoo scowled, huffing. "No. Stupid archeologists not listen to Joketsuzoku. Say claim is 'far fetched'. Hmph! Stupid Outsiders trying to tell Shampoo own village history! Wonder if Inuit feel same way when stupid Outsiders tell them they no meet Vikings…"

"... Who?" Ranma blinked, confused.

Shampoo sighed and waved her hand, not wanting to overload him. "Different history. Canadian. More stupid Outsiders thinking they know better until they finding out they don't."

"Okay," Ranma rubbed the back of his head. "So… the Greeks were pissed at the Trojans, sent a huge fleet and spent ten years tryin' t'take the city… why?"

Shampoo giggled, overjoyed that she had sparked curiosity in him. "Airen should be able to sympathize. Come, Shampoo show. It start with three very vain Goddesses and one troublemaker."

"That already sounds like my life," Ranma said glumly.

In the end they did the full circuit, listening to remarkably well-done audio clips as each of the characters from the Homeric epic told their parts of the tale. Any other historical exhibit likely would have had Ranma chafing at the bit to go home, but the tale of Gods and Heroes, told against the backdrop of a war of such a grand scope captured his attention.

"So alla this was started over an apple?" Ranma said incredulously as they looked at the diorama depicting Paris judging which of the three Goddesses would receive the Golden Apple.

"Greek Gods incredibly vain and petty," Shampoo said.

"No kidding." He shook his head. "I feel bad for Helen, though. I've been through the whole magically induced love thing. It sucks when it wears off."

Shampoo felt a pang of guilt at that. "Sometimes lonely and desperate make bad choices," she said.
quietly.

There were shrieks of laughter as a group of schoolchildren started running down the aisle, ignoring their harried teacher's best attempts to corral them. Shampoo's attention turned to them and a slight smile crossed her face while Ranma focused on the narration for the next display.

So when she spotted the janitor's bucket in the path of one of the children, she had a second or two more warning than Ranma.

The child tripped over the bucket, toppling it and sending the contents spraying in a wide arc as he crashed to the floor. For once, the water magnet effect did not kick in. Ranma yelped and stepped to one side as a cascade of water hit the floor next to him, spattering slightly, but not enough to trigger his curse.

Shampoo was not so lucky.

She felt herself shrink as she and her clothes tumbled to the floor in a heap of tangled limbs and wet fabric. She yowled and struggled to get free before she finally managed to push her head out through the neckhole of her dress.

"Kitty!" One of the kids cried gleefully, looming over her. The other children converged on her rapidly, reaching out with their grabby hands. Experience had taught her to be wary of unknown children and there were entirely too many of them here. She looked around for salvation and her eyes landed at last on Ranma.

The look of sheer terror on his face broke her heart.

She had always known his fear of cats ran deep; beyond reason or willpower. It was a fault line in his psyche that overrode everything else. It was number one on her list of reasons for wanting a Panda skin rug for a wedding present. But still, to see him looking at her with such unfiltered fear and horror… to know that she wore the form that haunted his nightmares and to have her nose rubbed in that certainty…

Now of all times?

She shook her head, pulled herself free and scampered away from the grasping hands of the children, her claws clicking on the tile floor as she ran. It's not your fault, Ranma… It's not… please forgive me… Please…!

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In the end, it had taken quite a bit to evade all those trying to catch her. Getting outside wasn't possible and the security guards were doing their best to try and flush her out.

She had managed to get up into the crawl space above the ceiling. There were catwalks hung all along where lights and rigging could be adjusted without needing to remove sections of the ceiling. It was only a matter of time before they found her here… or animal control did… but at least she was safe for the moment.

She curled up into a miserable ball at the end of the catwalk. She had always regretted her curse, from the moment she discovered how abhorrent the form was to her beloved. She had used it to punish him when she felt particularly neglected, but she had always regretted it afterwards - and regretted how much he had feared her.

She knew that he couldn't help it. He couldn't fight it. It didn't make it hurt less. And it didn't make
her feel any less alone, knowing that there was no one to help her now, even though he'd been right there with her. All it had taken was a cupful of cold water to break them apart.

"Shampoo…?"

Her head snapped up, ears swivelling towards the sound in the gloom. It COULDN'T be!

She could hear his ragged breathing and the sounds his footfalls made on the catwalk. She knew it was too dark for him to see her. Of course that would just make his fear worse. For him to have come to such a dark place knowing that there was a cat in it…!

"Mew…?" she squeaked plaintively. She didn't dare to hope…but her heart rose up in her chest. He was coming to her. "Shampoo…?

She heard him freeze up. He made an almost sobbing gasp. Then, his footfalls resumed, slow and deliberate. He was forcing himself forward, she knew. "O-okay… okay you're here. G-good… good… j-just keep makin' noise, okay? Lemme know where you are…"

"Mew!" She did her best to sound as non threatening as possible, though she knew that had never helped. He paused again, and then once more resumed his slow march along the catwalk towards her.

"O-okay… okay I see your eyes…" he said. His breathing was growing more ragged but he still managed a few more steps. "I-I got some hot water… J-just stay put and…" She could see him now, gritting his teeth. His muscles tensing as he struggled with his urge to flee, either physically or into whatever abyss claimed him in the throes of the Neko-ken.

He got within ten feet before he stopped. He squeezed his eyes shut as he knelt to set a coffee cup down on the catwalk. "Y-you're gonna… gonna have to do the rest… I'm sorry…" his voice was… ashamed. Exhausted. She could feel the tension around him as he fought for every inch, extending the cup as far as he could.

She got up and bolted. She knew it might startle him, but she wasn't going to wait anymore. She flipped the cup over with her paw, dousing herself with the steaming contents.

The change had never felt so good.

The instant the cat was gone Ranma relaxed, some instinct uncoiling as the object of his terror was replaced by something far less unbearable. He had all of a second of blessed relief for the tension to bleed away before he had to catch an armful of very naked, very affectionate Amazon.

"S-Shampoo, I - mmmmph…" He quite foolishly tried to say something, but she quickly made certain that his mouth was otherwise occupied.

Part of her still expected him to struggle, to push her away, to run… but he didn't. His arms slid around her and tightened. His lips pressed back against hers. He accepted her. He held her. He wanted her. It was a beautiful moment - the crystallization of everything she had ever wanted from him.

She finally ended the kiss and took a shuddering breath. He had actually outlasted her this time. She could feel the wetness on her own cheeks and her breathing came in half-sobs.

"You're crying…" he said, wiping away a tear. "I'm… I'm sorry, Shampoo, I didn't know it was that bad… I…!"

She put a finger to his lips, beaming at him. "Happy tears," she said softly, looking into his eyes. She
could see confusion there, but wonder too. They were the eyes that were seeing her, with that same wonderful, confused look he had worn when she had first called him 'Airen'. Before she had become the nuisance - the complication.

"I… uh… I brought your clothes…” He held them up, and she realized he had draped them over his arm. "They're still kinda damp, uh… so…” he quickly disentangled himself from her and hung her clothes over the catwalk railing, then pulled off his shirt and handed it to her. He blushed and looked away modestly. "J-just until it dries a bit."

Shampoo giggled. She didn't have the same hangups about nudity that he did, but she accepted his need to make the gesture. She slipped the shirt on, drawing it around herself. It was soft, well worn, and smelled like him, suffused with his warmth.

"Wanna sit for a bit, until your things dry?" he asked sheepishly. "Fightin' off the Neko-ken takes a lot outta me…”

She led him over to the spot where she'd been hiding and sat down next to him. "Oh, hey, the box is pickin’ up the display below us." Ranma pulled the headphones from where he had hooked them on his belt. He handed hers over. "Somethin' to listen to while we wait, right?"

She nodded and smiled, slipping them on. She leaned against his shoulder as he closed his eyes and listened to Odysseus recount the scheme of the Trojan Horse and the sacking of Troy. She closed her eyes as well, head pillowed on his shoulder as her hand found his and their fingers twined together.

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Ranma stared down at the golden apple in his hands.

"Well, Paris? Who will it be?"

He looked up. Three goddesses wearing flowing robes smiled back at him. Akane, Ukyou and Shampoo. Each was radiant and beautiful, lovely beyond measure.

"You can choose any one you like!” Soun said, for some reason dressed as a greek philosopher.

"I can… just choose?” Ranma asked.

"Yes!” Soun replied. "Then the others will take offense - a great war will start and your city and all you care about will be destroyed!”

"What!?” He nearly dropped the apple. "Why would I do that?!”

Akane stepped forward. He realised that she was dressed as the Goddess Hera. "Don't you want us, Paris?” she asked throatily. Her eyes shone, causing his breath to hitch in his throat.

"We love you more than life itself, Paris," Ukyou stepped forward next to her, garbed as the Goddess Athena. "We will wage war for you and die for you."

"You need choose just one of us," Shampoo stepped forward last, playing the part of Aphrodite. She reached up to caress his cheek. "Are we not worth tragedy? Doom one of us to the tragedy of love."

"Doom the rest of us to the tragedy of wrath," Akane finished.

"I-I… don't want to doom any of you…” Ranma/Paris said, backing away. "C-can't you pick someone else?"
"They can," another voice said. Ryouga stepped forward, dressed as Odysseus.

Next to him stood Mousse as Ajax. "Once you choose, we are the ones who will sack and burn your city to reclaim her."

Kuno stepped forward filling the role of Achilles. "We will fight and return with our Goddesses, or upon our shields!"

"What?! No! I don't wanna fight you guys!" Ranma/Paris said, shaking his head.

A small hand scooped the apple from his. Bright blue eyes and red hair, it was his own girl side presented as the Lady Penelope of Ithaca. "Shall we keep it for ourselves then?" she asked. "Lock it away tight behind citadel walls, dangle the promise of it to fend off the Goddesses? Shall we play Goddess ourselves to fend off their suitors?" She skipped over to Kuno/Achilles, smiled at him and caressed his cheek, then spun away from him as he reached for her. She paused in front of Ryouga/Odysseus. "Perhaps… we might even forget ourselves in the role?" She started to hold the apple out to him.

Ranma/Paris snatched it back from her. "No! That’s not who I am!"

"Are you sure?" Akane/Hera asked, walking up to the redhead and pulling her into an embrace as she looked at him. Ranma/Penelope sank into the embrace, buried her face in Akane/Hera's neck and looked back at him with pleading blue eyes.

Suddenly, she was the redhead. She could feel Akane's arms around her - her warmth - her scent - all so close and so real. She closed her eyes and tightened her own arms around the goddess. "I would be this for you…" she whispered to Akane/Hera.

"No way, I'm a guy! A real man! A man among men!" Ranma/Paris said, clutching the apple tightly.

Ranma/Helen looked up from Akane/Hera's shoulder and glared at him, feeling anger welling up within her. She felt… betrayed. She slipped from Akane/Hera's arms to approach Ranma/Paris, intent on taking the apple away. "And what about me?! I didn't have a choice in any of this! What about what I want!? I could be happy… we could be happy if you'd just stop fighting me!"

"I…" He stared at her. "Wait, that doesn't make any sense!"

Another hand plucked the apple from his grasp. This time it was Nabiki, dressed as the Goddess Eris. "You've gotten yourself into quite the predicament, haven't you Saotome?" she said.

Abruptly he was male Ranma again. He watched as Nabiki/Eris walked over to a table, pulled out a knife and cut the apple into six pieces. She placed them on a plate and walked over to him with a seductive look in her eye. She held out the plate and Akane/Hera, Shampoo/Aphrodite and Ukyou/Athena each took a slice. She took one for herself then held out the plate to him and his girl side with the last two slices.

"There's no way to prevent the war, Paris," she said softly. "But perhaps this way we can change who wins."

His girl side took the second to last slice and looked at it thoughtfully.

Shampoo/Aphrodite placed her slice of apple in her mouth, then took the last slice and stepped in close, slid one arm around his neck and slipped the last piece into his mouth. As one, they began to chew and then she kissed him, the sweet ambrosia of the fruit mixing in their mouths. The other Goddesses gathered around him to take their turns.
He turned his head a bit to see what the Suitors would say. Kuno/Achilles was laid across his shield, battered and broken. Mousse/Ajax was staring out towards the sunset over the sea, distracted by the golden hue.

And his Ranma/Penelope was just offering her slice to Ryouga/Odysseus.

At that point, a gigantic Panda made of wood erupted through the wall of the dream and split open to spill forth thousands of Happousais dressed as Spartan warriors.

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Ranma started awake, and batted the headphones away with a shudder.

"Ranma okay?" Shampoo asked, sitting next to him. "Bad dream?"

He closed his eyes let himself relax. "Yeah… yeah… just… education is a helluva drug…"

She tittered. "Clothes should be dry now. She stretched. The shirt was still open and it was only keeping her decent in the most technical sense. The curve of her breasts was visible, decency only maintained by the angle and fortuitous positioning of her leg and the fall of shadow. He swallowed, remembering the image of her as Aphrodite.

She noticed his reaction and smiled, leaning over to whisper in his ear. "Maybe wear shirt for Airen later, yes?"

He nodded before he could catch himself. He looked away self-consciously as she got up and walked towards her own clothes on the railing.

His shirt hit him in the face. He pulled it down, but she was already dressed, having mastered the technique for fast-changing long since.

"Should go before museum close," she said, winking at him. "Still want get dinner before we go home, yes?" She beckoned him to follow and started making her way along the catwalk.

He struggled to his feet, pausing for a moment to slip his shirt back on. It was still warm from her body and there was a hint of her perfume clinging to it. He did it up quickly then trotted after her, hoping they could avoid running afoul of security on the way out.

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They were fortunate - they managed to skirt uncomfortable questions and ducked out just as they were locking the doors. The knowing look they got from one of the security guards suggested that they weren't the only young couple to have snuck off to find a quiet corner, though Ranma imagined their reasons were different from what the guard was imagining.

The memory of Shampoo all but falling out of his shirt flitted across his mind's eye making him wonder if maybe the guard wasn't too far off the mark after all.

"Where did you want to go eat?" he asked as they walked along the street. The night air was already crisp and getting a bit colder. She stepped closer to him and, unconsciously, he put his arm around her shoulders.

She snuggled into his side and grinned up at him. "Shampoo know a good place." She started to guide him gently, though their pace remained leisurely.
Ranma spent a moment marvelling at how easy this had gotten... to just have his arm around her like this and walk like… like a normal couple.

Shampoo lead him to a back alley where there was a small cafe. The outside and inside were adorned with hanging plants, vibrant and lush and obviously expertly cared for. The inside was rather plain, the decor well worn and homey, if a little dated. There were pictures on the walls - some black and white while others were color pictures that had the blurry look and slightly oversaturated tones common to older color film. There were a few customers sitting at tables - mostly older people.

"Ya Ya?" Shampoo called into the cafe, peering past the large counter.

There was a bustling in the back and some chatter in a language Ranma assumed was Greek. A stocky older woman with steel grey hair and clad in various shades of black came out from the kitchen and, upon spotting Shampoo, bustled over immediately to give her a hug as if she were old family. "Xian Pu!"

Shampoo returned the hug happily. The older woman cupped Shampoo's face and said a few things in Greek to which Shampoo responded in kind, earning a merry laugh from the woman.

"Ya Ya, this is Ranma," Shampoo said, gesturing towards Ranma.

The woman identified as 'Ya Ya' frowned at him and said something else in Greek.

Shampoo sighed. "No, Ya Ya. Is not Greek boy. No Greek boys in Tokyo! Please speak Japanese so he can understand?"

The older woman huffed. "Hmph! Such a shame, I'm sure I could have found you a nice boy in the old country." She looked Ranma over with a critical eye. "Well... he's not as scrawny as the other Japanese boys at least."

"You like him. He's a big eater," Shampoo said with a knowing smirk.

"Oh is he now?" The older woman said. She smiled and patted him on the cheek. "Well, you look famished. Come, come, sit and I'll bring you out some spanakopita."

"Uhhh... thanks?" Ranma said uncertainly as Shampoo led him to a table. "But... shouldn't we order first?"

"Feh!" the older woman said as she headed into the kitchen. "Never order food on an empty stomach! You order after spanakopita." She bustled into the back. "Pappou! Pappou your granddaughter is here, come bring them some tea and be sociable!"

"Did... I miss something?" Ranma asked, glancing at Shampoo.

Shampoo blushed a little. "Ya Ya and Pappou... not have any family. Lost them all in Hurricane in America," she started. "Son was going to move to Japan for work - bring them with. Paperwork already all done, so... they come alone, get away from memories. Open cafe like one they had in America. Shampoo find place when doing deliveries one day. Speak Greek, so talk to them in own language. Tell them story of village, origin of Chinese Amazons." She smiled fondly. "Decide Shampoo family then and there. Tell everyone Shampoo is granddaughter."

"That would probably need some explaining," Ranma noted playfully. "This isn't exactly what I expected."

Shampoo shrugged. "Both strangers here. Maybe this not like home..." She looked around. "But...
spend many hours here, hearing stories of Greece. Hear echoes of where Joketsuzoku come from."
She smiled. "Want to visit Greece someday."

An older man - tall, wiry and balding a little - stepped out of the kitchen carrying a tray with two tall glasses, fending off a few swats from Ya Ya as he went. "Yes, yes, I'm going!" he grumbled. He wound his way deftly past the counter and walked over to the table.

"Pappou!" Shampoo cried with glee, reaching out to hug the man as he set the tray down.

"Ooof, you have the grip of a wrestler, Kopelia mou," he said chuckling. He set glasses of iced coffee in front of them. "Ya Ya, she say 'Pappou, turn off the TV, your girl is outside and she bring home a boy!'" He smiled at Ranma. "All bent out of shape is she! 'Our girl should be with a nice Greek boy!' she say. Feh! A Greek boy! In Japan! Ya Ya dreams too much I think."

There were some complaints - in Greek - from Ya Ya in the kitchen, to which he responded in kind.

"We joke, we joke," he laughed, patting Ranma on the back. "Ya Ya likes you. Already, she cooks for you! I come back with spanakopita, and we talk, yes? Tell us all about this boy you bring home, Kopelia."

"Yes, Pappou," Shampoo said, beaming as he ambled back towards the kitchen.

"You didn't tell me you were bringin' me home to meet your secret Greek family…" Ranma said with an eyebrow raised.

Shampoo blushed. "No tell Great-grandmother? Not want her to think Shampoo replacing her!"

Ranma snorted. "No worries. I get the whole jealousy thing."

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"... so, my father, he comes back from the War. I was three years old by this point. Never have I met Papa. He comes into the house to greet my mother and he steps on my cat!" Pappou's hands were animated as he talked, smiling.

Ya Ya slapped him on the back as she got up to clear some dishes. "Such a liar, Pappou! You didn't have a cat!"

"Yes I did!" he replied, sounding wounded. "It was an invisible cat! Always it was underfoot! I would tell Mama 'watch out for the cat!' or 'Do not step there, you will step on the cat!'".

"Your Pappou, he has an imaginary cat, and this is his father's fault," Ya Ya said before heading back towards the kitchen.

"Feh! You are ruining my story, Ya Ya! Anyway… he stepped on my cat. Well… that would not stand. So… I pretended he did not exist! For a whole week I would not talk to nor look at my Papa!"
Pappou finished, thumping the table with his fist

"And you pooped in his boots!" Ya Ya added from the kitchen.

"... And I pooped in his boots," Pappou said, thumping the table again.

Ranma laughed. There was something about the exuberance and energy with which the story was told that was infectious. The whole pretense of the cafe had quickly been dropped and it had turned into dinner with the friendly couple. It was a very different experience for Ranma from mealtimes at
Ya Ya came back out of the kitchen and settled back into her seat across from them as she put down platter of a dessert pastry that was cut into rough wedges. "Come, come, fresh baklava." She produced two smaller plates, placed one of the sticky looking wedges on each, and put them in front of Shampoo and Ranma.

Ranma leaned back, eying the flaky confection suspiciously. Not that it didn't look anything but delicious, but… he was suffering from a profoundly unfamiliar condition.

He was full.

Stuffed, in fact. Food had been brought out from the kitchen all night in a steady stream, and it had finally overwhelmed even Ranma's considerably capacity.

"No more… please…" Ranma whimpered, holding up a hand in surrender.

"Two bites," she insisted. "You are skin and bones! You can forgive an old grandmother for wanting to feed all these poor starving children here. Is why we started this cafe, Pappou and I." She sighed at his continued reluctance and took the plates back. "Very well, I wrap it up for you when you go. Take some for your friends. Tell them about us so I can feed them too!" She got up again and headed once more into the kitchen.

Shampoo smirked. "Ya Ya not know what she accomplish. Fill bottomless pit!" She nudged Ranma's side.

"Oof, easy, I'm liable to pop…" Ranma grunted, though he smiled at her.

Pappou got a shifty look on his face. He glanced toward the kitchen, then reached behind him and pulled out a large clear bottle and two shot glasses.

"Ya Ya, she does not think you are old enough, but a little ouzo never hurt anyone," he said with a chuckle. "Come, come, you are a man now, you should have a man's drink!"

Shampoo held up her hand and shook her head with the expression of someone who had been through this experience before. "Shampoo think this should be Airen's experience, yes?"

Pappou poured the two glasses, handing one to Ranma. The liquid was clear and chilled to the point that ice crystals were forming on the surface.

Ranma sniffed the liquor and immediately regretted it. It smelled strongly of black licorice and burned his eyes. He blinked and jerked his head back as Pappou laughed merrily.

Not willing to surrender, Ranma took a deep breath. *I've downed the worst cooking Akane could throw at me... this is nothing.* He looked at the shot glass one last time, held it up in mock salute and then downed it in one gulp.

It very nearly came right back up.

He doubled over coughing. Pappou laughed harder and clapped him on the back as he tried to recover.

"Pappou!" Ya Ya huffed as she came out of the kitchen. "You and your ouzo!"

"Better than sake!" he shot back. "No bite, like watered down vinegar!"
"Duì bu qi, Airen," Shampoo said sheepishly, rubbing Ranma's back.

"Nah... *cough* it's... it's actually not that bad..." Ranma wheezed hoarsely. "... I've had worse."

"There, you see?" Pappou said. "He likes it!" He clapped Ranma on the back. "You come back next time, we drink more ouzo. Make a proper man of you for our Kopelia!"

"Oh leave him alone, Pappou!" Ya Ya admonished him, swatting him on the back. She held out a large tupperware container to Shampoo. "I taped my spanakopita recipe to the lid. Easy, easy recipe! Your friends will say it is the best in all of Japan, you'll see!" She made a sour face. "Not that there's much competition!"

Shampoo bowed as she accepted it. "Thank you, Ya Ya."

"Oh pish, always with the bowing," Ya Ya scoffed. "Too formal!" She reached out and pinched Shampoo's cheek. "You come back soon, bring Ranma, and I'll have more for you."

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The walk home was quiet contentment, the chill of the night air offset by their shared warmth and the residual fire of the ouzo. Ranma carried the tupperware container under his arm as Shampoo leaned against his other side.

"You have the coolest Greek Grandparents, Shampoo," he said finally.

She giggled and sighed. "Good. Now whole family meet Ranma, approve of Airen."

"It's weird how different families are," Ranma said softly as they walked. "You're gonna hafta tell Cologne about them sooner or later."

"Shampoo know," Shampoo said. "Always a little nervous, though. Shampoo know how much her visits mean to Pappou and Ya Ya, but afraid Great grandmother not approve. Not Greek Amazons, after all."

"If Cologne can put up with me, I doubt Pappou and his ouzo will faze her," Ranma said with a wink.

She giggled again. "Think maybe ouzo go to Airen's head?" She rested her head on his shoulder. "Not mind, though. Nice to see Airen relaxed."

They reached the Nekohanten. The restaurant was closed and Cologne was sitting outside on a stool, smoking her pipe.

"Have a nice night out, kids?" she asked, a smile stretching the wrinkled skin of her face.

"Best night," Shampoo sighed happily.

Cologne chuckled. "I'll believe that when I hear about the first of my great great grandchildren!" She waved her pipe towards the restaurant. "Nabiki is upstairs, licking her wounds after her training. You should go give her some encouragement, you two."

"I..." Ranma suddenly became nervous. Something told him that this was the point where things would stop being simple. If he went inside... "M-maybe I should head back to the dojo..."

Shampoo tightened her grip on his arm. "Airen not be silly. Planned to stay over, yes? Nabiki be upset if you leave now." She started dragging him into the restaurant.
He didn't resist but he was getting increasingly uncomfortable as that sensation of approaching a point of no return increased. She lead him up the stairs to the apartment above the restaurant and towards her room.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. *Stop being paranoid, Ranma. It's not even like you haven't slept in the same bed with Nabiki before, much less the same room! This isn't gonna be any different.* He reached out and opened the door himself, then stepped into the room. "Hey, Nabiki, heard you had a rough day…"

Three things happened all at once.

First, he heard the door close with a very deliberate click and Shampoo released his arm to slip behind him and plant herself between him and the door.

Second, he realized what Nabiki was wearing (what little there was of it) and that she was strategically positioned in front of the window - which was closed and undoubtedly locked.

Thirdly, he realized that yes… yes it *was* going to be different this time.

Nabiki was wearing a black lace bra and panties with a sheer, negligee overtop. The light from the lamp behind her outlined perfectly the curves of her body through the translucent fabric and gave the impression that she was wearing nothing at all under it. She had that *smile* on her face, too - the one he had become acquainted with during that beach weekend - the one that elicited certain *expectations*.

"Nabiki! Hi!" he said nervously. He took a step back but bumped immediately into Shampoo.

"Airen not run this time," she purred softly in his ear. She wrapped her arms around his waist in a gentle but firm hug that promised to quickly become inescapable if he tried to bolt.

His eyes widened in fear as Nabiki stood smoothly and sauntered gracefully towards him.

It wasn't that he didn't find the situation arousing. In fact he had never wanted so much to just *give up* at any point in his life! But… this had *always* gone badly in the past. It was *always* too good to be true, or had strings attached that he simply couldn't cope with. It would *change* things! He squeezed his eyes shut and looked away. "I*don't think I'm ready for this!"

"Ranma…" Nabiki said softly. "Open your eyes."

He did, then immediately closed them again even more tightly. She had let the nightie slip from her shoulders and she was so *very* close... He could feel Shampoo pressed up against his back, and the image that haunted him was of her wearing his shirt and nothing else and giving him the same look that Nabiki now wore. He would have run for it already but he couldn't figure out how to get away without hurting one or both of them.

A hand brushed his cheek gently. He gasped, eyes snapping open again.

"Ranma, calm down," Nabiki smiled warmly at him and this time it was a gentler smile one of understanding. Her look had softened. "It's just us, Ranma. We're not going to do anything bad. We just want to be with you tonight."

"That is bad though!" Ranma said, taking a shuddering breath. "It-it'll change things!"

"Yeah… it will," Nabiki said softly. She slid her arms around his neck, her body pressing up against him. Shampoo tightened her hold on him from behind and he whimpered through gritted teeth.
"Things change all the time, Ranma. It's not a bad thing," Nabiki all but whispered. "I know you're afraid… because you've had it driven home that this is something that will change your whole life forever, right? You're afraid that if you do this, you'll lose control."

He took another shuddering breath and nodded.

Nabiki chuckled warmly. He couldn't look away from her eyes now - luminous brown pools that held him trapped in their depths. "And here I thought that if you had a random weekend fling with a stranger it would solve all your problems," she said ruefully. She started to toy gently with his pigtail. "Ranma… it's us."

"Airen have reason to be afraid," Shampoo said softly, hooking her chin over his shoulder. "Shampoo betray trust, over and over. Magic potion, hypnotic mushrooms, magic string…” She hugged a little tighter.

"N-no, that's not…” Ranma said, though he felt a stab of guilt as he realized that she was right, and that it was part of it. "L-look, I just…” He closed his eyes. "I… I know you're expecting something from me… a-and… I… I want to…” He struggled a bit as he forced himself to face an old fear. "B-but… I don’t… I don't know what to do. I don't know how it works. I don't…”

"You're afraid you'll disappoint us?” Nabiki asked quietly.

He let out the breath he had been holding. His shameful secret was out in the open. "How pathetic is that, huh? I'm half girl, and I still don't know how… how to…” he closed his eyes, "... how to be a man… you know?"

"Ranma… no one knows this stuff their first time," Nabiki said gently. "Nobody."

"Y-yeah, but…” he protested weakly.

Through some unspoken communication, Nabiki relaxed her hold on him as Shampoo took hold of his shoulders and turned him to face her. She reached up to cup his face in her hands.

"Ranma…” she asked softly. "Do you love us?"

Ranma's eyes widened a bit. The question still scared him, because it was another of those things that would Change Everything. But his resistance to this one had already been worn down by considerably more. He swallowed and looked into her eyes. "Wo ai ni," he whispered, finally saying the words.

She smiled. "We love you. We just want to be with you," She stroked his cheek. "Want to show you how… say that with your body, not just words. Not have to do more."

"Think of it like learning a new kata for the first time," Nabiki murmured in his ear.

He chuckled weakly. "Somehow I don't think most people's first time is a threesome… Kind of an advanced kata for a beginner, right?"

Nabiki took his right hand and Shampoo took his left. The girls turned him once more towards the bed and led him to it.

"You learn fast,” Nabiki said and pulled him down with her.

000 (Chapter 20 end)
Where did the popcorn come from? It was the most cynical thing I could imagine Yuka eating at that moment. Therefore she MUST have some. Because she is Yuka. It's one of those Quantum Physics things.

Some people have noted Ryouga hasn't seen Ranma as a male since this whole mess began. This will be a long term plot point. I am QUITE aware of the double standard that currently exists in Ranma's relationships, and I plan to address it.

duì bu qi - I'm sorry

Kopelia or Kopelia mou - (Girl, or My girl) Affectionate term used by adults to address a younger female, even ones who are themselves adults.
Cotton Candy and Backstories

Morning seemed surprisingly ordinary. Almost disappointingly so.

Ranma lay in bed, staring at the ceiling with his hands folded behind his head. Shampoo's long lavender tresses cascaded across his chest, her head nestled up under his chin and her body snuggled against his left side. Nabiki had retreated under the covers on his right, curled into a ball with her back against his side, squeezed once more into that surprisingly small shape she seemed to sleep in sometimes.

He had woken up nearly an hour ago. He hadn't wanted to disturb the girls, so he'd been left in silence, alone with his thoughts. Mentally, he replayed the night he had just had - it hadn't been what he had expected in so many ways.

The expectation was that losing his virginity would be some sort of magical transformation. He would start the night as a boy, end it as a man, and everything would be different. That part had definitely not happened. There had been no startling revelation, no sudden clarity, no magical maturity or newfound confidence. He didn't feel any different, other than an odd sheepishness that he had been so apprehensive about it all.

He closed his eyes. It had been wonderful, but in ways he hadn't thought of. It hadn't been as alien or incomprehensible as all the buildup had made it seem. At first he'd been terrified and self-conscious, but… after a while he realized it was just *them* - the girls who already knew all of his darkest secrets and his deepest shames. For all his fears, he learned he really had nothing left to hide from them. The night had evolved slowly from his expectations of some grim test of performance into a game - they were showing him a new way to play with them and a way to be close to them that he now realized had terrified him, irrationally and for no good reason.

*Then* they had blown his mind.

Something about the combination of Shampoo's enthusiasm and Nabiki's almost *maddening* capacity to tease and entice had kept them going most of the night. He was certain he would be stiff and walking funny that day but, paradoxically, he had never felt better in his life.

Shampoo stirred and he slipped his arm around her. She mumbled something unintelligible and snuggled in closer. He trailed his fingers through her hair… for the first time he had a glimpse of what life might be like on the other side of all the strife and chaos.

*We're DEFINITELY going to need a bigger bed,* he thought wryly.

He glanced at the alarm clock next to the bed. It was starting to get close to time to be up, and as much as he would have liked to snuggle longer, he was starting to feel a little restless. He decided that Shampoo was probably the safer of the two to rouse and shook her gently. "Hey, Shampoo…"

"Nnnn.." she protested, squeezing her eyes tighter shut and muttering something in Mandarin.

"You're gonna have to wake up enough to repeat that in Japanese," he said teasingly.

"Mnnnh… *Airen* mean… too early for Japanese," Shampoo mumbled sleepily. She did, however, crack open one eye and look up at him. A smile spread across her face as she woke up enough to realize that he was really there, rather than the usual fading dream. "... Hi."

"Hi," he smiled back at her. Right then, with the morning light coming in through the window, her
hair a dishevelled mess and a sleepy, guileless smile on her face, she was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

"Stay in bed today?" Shampoo asked plaintively, resting her chin on his chest. From her expression, he could tell that she already knew what the answer was.

"Sorry. Can't miss any more school or the Principal will mess things up for me," he said, though he felt a pang of regret. "Once I've won the challenge, though... We've got time, right?"

She smiled again and closed her eyes. "Mmmm... yes..." she mumbled softly.

Ranma decided to risk the second part of things and lifted the blanket on his right side, revealing a tousled mop of brown hair. "Hey, Nabiki...?"

"Come back with caffeine," she growled, pulling the blanket back over her head and curling up tighter.

"Aheh... I love you?" he said tentatively.

There was a sigh from under the blanket and she uncurled a little. "That's not fair..." she mumbled.

"We'll get you some coffee, I promise," he said. "But we gotta get up if we want to get a shower in before school."

"Shampoo first," Shampoo said, sitting up in bed. The blanket fell away to reveal her in all of her nude glory as she stretched.

Ranma just watched, fascinated. Now that the initial self-consciousness about seeing her in close-proximity without her clothes was (mostly) gone, he tentatively allowed himself to admire her. He wondered if he was going to get little moments like this with the other girls as well, and was starting to agree with the other males at Furinkan about how unworthy he was.

Shampoo gave him a knowing smile and he blushed and looked away self-consciously before she gently turned his head back to face her.

"No. Look. Shampoo like how Airen look at her." She leaned over and kissed his nose. "Would invite to wash with, but... definitely be late then." She slipped slowly out of the bed. "No let Pintou fall back asleep, okay?"

"I won't." Ranma watched her go. He could feel Nabiki moving next to him, so he didn't have much worry about her going back to sleep, though instead of rising, she seemed to be burrowing further under the covers. "Hey, Nabs? You gonna come out and talk?"

There was no immediate answer, but he felt her squirming deeper.

"Hey, you can't escape morning that way," he said, lifting the edge of the blanket again. "Nabs, you..."

He suddenly went very quiet, his eyes widening. Nabiki hadn't been trying to evade getting up after all. And she had apparently found something to do with her mouth besides talking.

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"So what is this stuff called?" Akane asked, chewing a mouthful of pastry thoughtfully.

"Baklava," Shampoo said, holding the tupperware container as the entire group sampled the dessert.
"And they were just giving it away?!" Riko asked. She took a bite, and then made a small noise of pleasure. "It's so good!"

"They kinda adopted Shampoo as their unofficial grandkid," Ranma said. As predicted, she was walking a bit stiffly. Her legs felt a little weak and rubbery, especially after Nabiki's insistence on a 'morning quickie'.

"Oh yes, Shampoo is living a sordid double life," Nabiki teased. Unlike Ranma, she was practically bouncy, which was unusual enough for Nabiki. She definitely had a glow about her that left little doubt as to what had gotten her so perky.

"Still, an authentic Greek cafe would be worth checking out," Sayuri said around her own mouthful. "Especially if all of it is this good!"

Ryouga walked along slightly behind the group, chewing on weighty thoughts as well as his piece of baklava.

It was pretty obvious from how they were acting that Ranma's date with Shampoo had gone well, and that, at some point, Nabiki had joined in on the ride. Against all odds, it had worked. Ryouga felt a sting of jealous resentment at that. I travel across half of Asia trying to deal with my feelings for ONE girl and he goes on a date at a museum and gets TWO - and has the girl who broke my heart waiting happily in the wings to be with him next. He glanced at Akane and felt a brief flare of the old torch that, despite its cooling, he yet carried for her.

His gaze shifted, inevitably coming to rest on the redhead who was at the center of all this - the person on whom he could so easily have pinned his resentment on in the past - and he couldn't do it. He felt another emotion stirring as he watched her laugh and smile, the way the light played on her hair and drew out the highlights and subtler shades of red. It was easy to understand why someone would go so far just to be with someone like her...

His gaze dropped to the sidewalk again and he grit his teeth.

It was easy to resent the cardboard cutout - that was what it had been for after all. But now? The images of the boy he had resented so deeply for so long and of the girl who had become more important to him than he could readily admit just wouldn't reconcile in his head.

When was the last time he had seen Ranma's guy side, for that matter?

That's what I should do, he thought. Get Ranma to change so I can remind myself of who he is and stop this getting so... so ABSTRACT. He nodded resolutely. Just need a dose of reality to snap me out of this.

He looked up, opened his mouth to call out to Ranma and make the suggestion to hang out together as a couple of guys, maybe even spar...

... And realized he had no clue where he was. The group was nowhere to be seen and there was nothing to give him any clues as to which way they had gone.

"Awwwww, crap..."

"You should know better than to wander off like that, Ryo," a familiar voice said from his left. He turned to see Ranma hop off of a nearby fence and walk toward him with a smug look on her face.

He blushed and looked away. "I... was thinking," he muttered. It was true enough.
"You're brooding," She walked up to him, hands clasped behind her back. "By the time I noticed you'd wandered off you'd got pretty far. Luckily, you're easier to find when you're gloomy."

"I am?" Ryoga glanced behind him, checking to see if he had walked through any walls or destroyed anything while he had been pondering so absent-mindedly, but there was no evidence of obvious damage. After a moment, he realized what she was talking about. "... you mean the link!?"

She nodded, scuffing her shoe on the ground as though mildly embarrassed. "It works both ways, right? I mean… I can't always tell, but… it gets stronger when you're emotional."

**DOES it work both ways?** Ryoga pondered, not able to remember anything his parents had said or done that would confirm it one way or another. They had always been together until… He sighed and pushed that line of thought away. "It's nothing you need to worry about." He jammed his hands in his pockets and started walking, no longer really caring if he made it to school or not.

She came up beside him. Rather than stopping him, she took his arm and gently corrected his course… which meant they were now walking with her holding his arm. "I do need to worry! It's upsetting you enough that I can feel it without even touchin' ya!"

Ryouga scowled. *Damnit, Ranma...* "I'm not gonna blow myself up again."

"That's not the point," Ranma said crossly. "Can't always be about the extremes! This stuff sneaks up on ya, right? Besides, you've been helping me out. Just lemme return the favour, wouldja?"

Ryouga stared at her for a minute. It was getting hard to keep from seeing her for… for what she was right now. Which was cute.

"You shouldn't hold onto my arm like that," he mumbled. "People will think we're in a relationship or something."

She blinked. She was *supposed* to release his arm with an expression of disgust. He had been counting on it, in fact. Instead, she got this thoughtful expression on her face. She looked down at the sidewalk and, if anything, held onto his arm a little more tightly.

"I'm in a relationship with a lot of people," she said softly. "What's one more?"

Ryouga stopped dead, forcing Ranma to halt as well, despite her tugging on his arm.

"We're not in a relationship," Ryouga stated firmly. It wasn't a vehement denial. There was an odd sense of calm in his words. He was reaffirming reality, nothing more.

"We're kind of in a relationship," Ranma said quietly.

He gaped at her, eyes wide, as a whole slew of violently conflicting emotions temporarily locked up his brain.

"Anchor, remember?" She patted her chest. "You're kinda stuck with me."

"Oh." He felt an odd mix of relief and… *disappointment*? He brushed it off and resumed walking, keeping silent to avoid invoking any sort of clarification on that.

"... Were you thinking I'd say 'fiancé'?" she asked, an impish smirk on her face.

Ryouga paused again but very quickly remembered the cover story they had given to the hospital which had then bled over to the school. Again, he felt a pang about that, though he wasn't sure what
it really was. "I dunno," he mumbled. "I mean… that's the cover story, right?"

"Well… Someone has to look out for you until we find you a proper girlfriend," Ranma said.

Ryouga rolled his eyes. "Trust me, Ranma, after watching your little dramas unfolding day after day, romance is the furthest thing from my mind."

"So you haven't called Akari yet, have you?" she asked, glaring at him again. "I knew it!"

"I…" Ryouga realized that it had slipped his mind. Again. "I'll… I'll get to it."

"Honestly… are you gonna make me dial the phone for you?" Ranma huffed. "You should tell her about the stuff we're doing with the doctor to cure your directional problems. I mean… that was what caused the big problem in the first place, right?"

"I'd rather save that for when we actually make some progress," Ryouga sighed. "I wanna be able to give her something to prove that I'm gonna fix this. I don't wanna give her false hope."

Ranma rolled her eyes. "If you wait until you fix all of your issues before talking to her, she'll be dead of old age!" She considered a moment. "Well… you can take her on that date you talked out with me, then. That should be a good way to reconnect, right?" Ranma said, though her tone got unusually quiet. He glanced at her, and she was looking at the sidewalk, pensively.

Ryouga thought for a moment. "I'd… do something different for a date with her," he said finally.

"O-oh…" she said, still looking forward.

He thought he saw a slight smile on her face, a little color in her cheeks, a shift in her weight as she leaned on him just a touch more. Things he normally wouldn't notice, but was noticing now. Ryouga squeezed his eyes shut. You're going the WRONG WAY, Hibiki! Just cut off the nonsense now before it goes too far!

"I'll think of something better. That date was for Akane anyway," he said casually.

She looked up at him and scowled. "Oh," she said tersely and looked away.

Ryouga felt the shift in the air as the mood suddenly chilled and wasn't entirely sure why. But it broke the odd tension, so he let it be.

"You want any help?" she finally asked, surprising him. "Comin' up with ideas, I mean."

"No," he growled curtly.

"Oh…" Her pace slowed and her grip slackened. Disappointment.

He felt a stab of guilt and had to wrestle down the urge to amend it. He almost felt like laughing; here he was, feeling guilty about disappointing Ranma. A few weeks ago he'd still been trying to kill Ranma.

No I wasn't, he admitted. Let's face it, I never really was. I had lots of chances to do it. I didn't want to KILL her I… He glanced down at her, his expression softening. I just wanted her to understand how I felt... WHY I was so angry. Now she DOES understand… and I don't know what to do with it.

He sighed and resigned himself to his fate.

They walked quietly for a few more minutes. He could see the school gates now; the others must
already be inside.

"Hey, Ryouga…" Ranma asked. "... How do you feel about apples?"

Ryouga gave her a quizzical look. "I… they're fine, I guess? Why do you ask?"

"Just… It's… nevermind, it was just a random thought," Ranma replied.

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The day seemed to drag on endlessly for Ukyou. Mentally she ran through the checklist for the day, reassuring herself she had set out all the ingredients Konatsu would need. Tuesdays were generally slow so she didn't think the kunoichi would have much trouble and he certainly seemed eager to prove himself.

The teacher left the room briefly after telling the class to study. Ukyou pulled out the flyer she had been keeping in her bag, opened it up and sighed happily as she looked over the colorful artwork.

"Oooh, are you going to the carnival too, Ukyou-senpai?"

"Eeep!" Ukyou crumpled the flyer against her chest and nearly jumped out of her seat.

Rin blinked at her innocently and cocked her head.

Ukyou closed her eyes and took a deep breath to let her heart rate drop a bit. "You scared me, Rin!"

"Sorry…" Rin's face fell and the whipped puppy look she adopted made Ukyou feel bad… and gave her a powerful urge to pat Rin on the head.

"It's okay," Ukyou said, fending off the urge for the moment. "I just… the Carnival wasn't advertised in Nerima. I only found out about it because a customer left this flyer behind. I was hoping to keep it quiet so half the school doesn't end up going."

"Ooooooh... so are you going there on a date with Senpai?" Rin asked. Her eyes started to sparkle in that way that signaled a 'squee' was imminent.

"Yes, but it's a secret!" Ukyou hissed, glancing about to make sure no one else in the class had overheard - especially not the redhead currently wrestling with the lines of English phrases the teacher had assigned her as punishment. Then she remembered what Rin had said at first and raised an eyebrow. "Are you taking someone on a date there, Rin?"

Rin blushed a bright cherry red and waved her arms frantically. "N-no! I-I'm just going b-by myself!"

Ukyou could smell the blood in the water already, however. "Oh?" she asked, arching a skeptical eyebrow as she assumed a listening posture.

Rin squeaked, glanced about then pulled her chair from her desk and scooted closer. "I-I'm trying to find Mu Tsu's family," she said conspiratorially. "His circus family, I mean."

"You think that this is the same circus Mousse was travelling with?" Ukyou asked.

Rin shook her head. "No, b-but… they're a travelling carnival too, a-and if anyone would know where to start looking for a carnival, it would be people from another circus, right?"

Ukyou couldn't find any fault with the logic, though she expected getting any useful information in
locating a circus that none of them were likely to know anything about was a longshot at best. "Why is it so important to find them, sugar?"

Rin sighed. "I-it's... Mu Tsu just seems so lonely. A-and he seems to think that's the way it should be. The other Amazons are mean to him a-and I just thought it'd be nice if he could get back in touch with... with the family that accepted him." She squirmed a bit self consciously. "You won't tell him, will you?"

Ukyou shook her head. "Lips are sealed, don't worry. But... don't be too heartbroken if it doesn't work out, okay? Sometimes these things are more complicated than people let on and there might be many reasons he doesn't talk to them anymore."

"I-I know," Rin said. "But I want to try, at least!"

Ukyou grinned. "You really like him, don't you?"

Rin squirmed, blushing, and finally just nodded silently.

"Well, if you need any help..."

"O-oh no!" Rin shook her head. "I don't want to interfere with your date with Senpai! J-just don't tell Mu Tsu, please? I don't want to get his hopes up, o-or... or make him cross with me for meddling..."

"I won't," Ukyou said with a smile. "But we can take the train there together, at least?"

"You don't mind?" Rin asked hopefully.

Ukyou finally surrendered to her urge and patted Rin on the top of her head. "Never, sugar. You've been a good friend to Ranchan, so that makes you my friend."

Rin beamed at the pat and nodded. "Thank you!"

Nabiki handed over the bright pink flip phone somewhat reluctantly, her fingers twitching as she finally forced herself to release it. There was a lot of her budget wrapped up in an extremely destroyable package and she was placing it in the hands of one who might possibly be the most unsafe individual in all of Japan. "Ranma... this phone represents a lot of my remaining capital... please, if you ever loved me..."

Ranma blushed and sighed. "I'll take care of it, okay Nabiki?" she groused, taking it and flipping it open. "So... has it got any games on it?"

Nabiki snatched it back and snapped it closed. "Emergencies. Only," she growled. "And if you break it..." She sighed, shuddered and handed it back over. "... Don't break it."

"And... why's it got to be pink?" Ranma whined, looking it over.

"I don't want you liking it too much! If you want a manlier color, get a part time job and earn it yourself, like the rest of us!" Nabiki growled.

"Geez, Nabiki, it's just a stupid cheap phone," Yuka said.

"You don't have our repair bills to deal with," Akane muttered.

"You don't gotta worry none, Nabiki. I'll take good care of it." Ranma said as she tucked it into her
pocket - or tried to. She missed on the first try, fumbled the phone and nearly dropped it, only managing to catch it at the last second. "... Aheh."

"So we ready to head out?" Ryousa asked. He rubbed the back of his head self-consciously.

"Just waiting on Rin," Ukyou said. "Rin wanted to shower and get changed. She's headed the same way as me'n Ranchan, so she thought she'd save herself a trip home and join us."

"She is?" Ranma said, raising an eyebrow.

"She's got some personal business," Ukyou said with a knowing smirk. "And that's all I'm at liberty to say."

"Ooh, does Rin have some deep, dark, personal secret?" Riko asked curiously.

Sayuri made a face. "Okay, I'm not having much luck reconciling the concept of 'Rin' with 'Deep, dark, personal secret'," she admitted.

"Yeah, me neither," Yuka said. "Please tell me she's going to go visit her Auntie or something so my brain can stop trying to eat itself over the mental image of Rin being secretive?"

Ukyou smirked. "Ask her yourself, sugar. Here she comes."

Rin had changed out of her school uniform into a simple blue skirt and a yellow blouse with a blue jacket. Her school bag was slung under her arm. She waved as she ran up to them, a little out of breath.

"Sorry to keep you waiting!" she panted.

Sayuri and Yuka exchanged a glance, then returned their attention to her.

"Well… you look…" Sayuri started.

"Who is he?" Yuka asked, cutting Sayuri off.

Rin scowled. "I'm not going on a date," she muttered. "I'm just going to the carnival and I wanted to look nice."

"The carnival is in town?" Riko asked, eyes widening.

"In Shinjuku," Rin replied. "They're in town for the whole week. It's just a small travelling carnival, so they didn't advertise much."

"We should check that out this weekend!" Riko said. "I love fair food!"

"Why didn't you tell us, Rin?" Sayuri asked.

The diminutive striker squirmed. "I-I… wasn't sure if it'd be any good... and… and we've got our game tomorrow... and... I… wanted to check it out before I told you, just in case it was terrible." She ducked her head.

Sayuri smiled. "That's actually really sweet of you, Rin." She reached out and tousled Rin's hair. "We'll look forward to your report!"

"Sample the food! I have high standards for funnel cakes!" Riko added.
Nabiki sighed. "All right, let's go. I don't wanna think what the dried up mummy will throw at me if I'm late."

"Should be more respectful, Pintou," Shampoo chided her. "Respect for elders and use of proper titles very important to Joketsuzoku."

Nabiki made a face. "Sorry. Honorable Elder Dried Up Mummy."

"Better."

They started walking. Ranma fell into step beside Ukyou.

"Aren't we going to the Carnival?" Ranma whispered.

Ukyou smirked. "Don't worry. Rin isn't going because of us. She has a mission of her own. It's nothing we need to worry about. I'm sworn to secrecy on the rest."

Ranma raised an eyebrow but didn't press the issue.

"You know, even if the Carnival doesn't pan out, we should all do something together this weekend," Riko said, walking backwards in front of the group. "We could go to Ueno Park or Tsutaya Electric Town…"

"If we're going shopping, somewhere less expensive please," Yuka said with a sigh. "I don't think my allowance would survive the temptation."

"We could also go to Fujikyu Highland."

"Too crowded," Sayuri made a face.

"Yoyogi Park?"

"Too laid back."

"Sumida Aquarium?"

"Ugh! Too 'Date Spot'-y."

"How would you know, Yuka?"

"Shut up, Daisuke!"

Ukyou smiled. "You know… I used to see big groups like this walking to and from school at my old high school," she said to Ranma. "I didn't use to see the appeal, but… It's kinda nice, isn't it?"

"You didn't at your old school?" Ranma asked.

Ukyou's face fell a bit. "There was one girl I used to walk with, at least as far as the bus stop," she sighed. "I'll tell you about her later. But for the most part I kept to myself. It… cut down on the awkwardness and on the chances of being found out. I kinda got… disdainful of the groups… I figured they were just herds. But when the rest of your school is insane, it's kinda refreshingly… normal, you know?"

Ranma rolled her eyes. "I dunno, I'm starting to learn that 'normal' people are either lying about being 'normal', or I've been misled about what 'normal' actually is."
"What was that, Ranma?" Yuka called back in a singsong voice.

"I said you're weird, Yuka!" Ranma shot back with a grin and no hesitation.

"Ha! Coming from you?! That's a COMPLIMENT!"

They continued on and dropped Ryoga off at his house. That had become the unofficial split up point for the group in the same way that the Tendo Dojo had become their gathering place in the mornings. Nabiki, Shampoo and Akane headed off toward the Nekohanten, while Sayuri and the rest of the volleyball team, save Rin, split up to head to their respective homes. Ranma went with Ryoga to greet his mother in the front yard and exchange pleasantries. Ukyou hung back, still a little unsure how to approach Ryoga's actual family.

Oh, hey Mrs. Hibiki. I'm Ukyou Kuonji! I occasionally try and fix your son up with the girl my fiance likes so I can split them up, and I occasionally leave spatula-shaped impressions in his skull! Also... she glanced down at herself and the boy's uniform she was wearing. I'm actually a girl!

Of course that didn't even begin to cover the current level of complexity, and she had no idea how much of that Ranma had prepared the woman for. Ukyou could see the sly glances Mrs. Hibiki was giving Ranma and Ryoga; the type that said she was humoring them while imagining good names for her future grandkids. It was a safe bet Ranma hadn't told Mrs. Hibiki much.

That's right, Ranchan said she doesn't even know about the curse. She thinks Ranchan is a girl. She had a momentary impulse to march over and introduce herself as Ranma's boyfriend but she figured that would only add more needless complication to the situation. At the very least, she thought she ought to run the idea past Ranma first.

Besides, poor Ryoga didn't really deserve more awkwardness. She imagined he must be squirming pretty badly as it was.

She watched them for a moment, thoughtfully. She knew Ryoga was terrible at processing his own feelings - not that it would be unusual in their emotionally stunted little group - but she could already see things he would never admit to in how close he stood to Ranma and the slightly protective stance he took with her. He alternated between sneaking glances at Ranma when he didn't think she was looking and trying, very intentionally, to look at anything but her. And now he kept slipping into the same flustered awkwardness he used to show around Akane.

Ukyou would be taking strips out of him if she hadn't gone through almost the exact same thing with Akane. As it was, she could almost narrate what was going on in his head.

Kind of ironic isn't it, Ryouga? she thought. We scheme and plot together to get you Akane and me Ranma... now here I am practically living with Akane and you're falling hard for Ranma. She felt a slight pang of guilt. Of course... I got Ranma too, didn't I? Even if I have to share her. You got left out in the cold.

Her gaze shifted over to Ranma. She considered a moment. She had never been any good at reading Ranma, but she could see differences. Ranma normally had a wariness to her stance, even when relaxed - a learned reflex from being in danger of coming under attack at almost any time. That wasn't there right now.

She trusts him. Not just to not attack her, but to protect her if she IS attacked. She feels safe enough around him to let her guard down, even with others around, Ukyou thought. Ranma isn't even that relaxed around KASUMI. Since when has Ranma trusted someone else to protect her?
She wondered if Akane and Nabiki were right and this thing was going both ways?

*Whatever happened between them with that Shi shi Hokodan was powerful, that much is obvious. But… I guess it's not done yet? That would explain why he's avoiding Akari… His glass heart has been snatched up by a redhead who probably doesn't even know what she's done. She folded her arms, deep in thought. So what does that mean if Ranchan decides she wants to keep it? Another in the Harem? Would that even work? How do I feel about that? She glanced at Ryouga again. I mean… He OBVIOUSLY needs someone to take care of him or he's not going to make it past twenty, but… Akane will blow her stack. Nabiki will… well, she keeps threatening to take pictures but that doesn't give any idea how she'd REALLY deal with it. Shampoo would have fun with it of course. She blushed a bit as she briefly considered the hedonistic girl's reaction. That doesn't matter! How do I feel about it? She took a breath, closing her eyes and trying to focus. It'd… be WEIRD. Ryouga is like a brother to me. How do you share a spouse with a sibling?... Okay, okay, so Nabiki and Akane manage, but Akane is a giant ball of repressed sexual tension on the BEST of days, and Nabiki is the poster child for not giving a damn what anyone thinks…*

"Ucchan? You home in there?" A hand waved across her face.

Ukyou started back a step, blinking. Ranma was peering up at her curiously.

"Whatcha thinkin' about so hard?" Ranma asked.

"I…" Ukyou blushed and shook her head. "Umm… nothing really serious. C'mon, let's get going. We want to get there before it gets dark, right?" She looked around. "Where's Rin?"

"She got hungry and said she'd go ahead so she could get an okonomiyaki for herself while she waited for us," Ranma said. "You were kinda zoned out a while."

Ukyou turned redder still and coughed. "Yeah, well… I can be introspective too, y'know…"

They started walking again. Ukyou jammed her hands in her pockets, her thoughts settling back on the whole thing with Ranma and Ryouga. She found herself studying Ranma's back as she walked ahead of her.

*Ranchan's vamped guys before, but… she isn't cruel enough to mess with Ryouga right now, right? Not after going to those lengths to save him. So… something's shifted with her too. Ukyou pondered. Nabiki said she was attracted to him, but didn't think it would go further… but is that really all it is?*

There was really only one way to know for sure. Ukyou quickened her pace a bit to draw even with the redhead.

"Hey… Ranchan…" she said a little timidly. "Can we talk?"

Ranma looked at her. "About what?" She seemed a little nervous.

"A lot has happened in the last little while…" Ukyou said. "... A lot, honestly. And… I haven't really had a chance to talk with you like we used to. I feel a bit out of the loop on what's going on with you."

Ranma gazed at her for a few moments, then looked away, considering. She kicked a pebble along the sidewalk as they walked. "Yeah… I guess there has been a lot."

"Are you okay?" Ukyou asked. "I mean, I already gave Ryouga the grilling over this, but… Is there more than you're telling us to what happened with you two? With the whole Shi shi Hokodan thing, I
"What do you mean?" Ranma asked. She was already sounding on edge.

Ukyou sighed. "Ranma… Your whole paradigm shifted. Ryouga went from hating your guts to acting like… like you're Akane. And you're different too. I'm not being jealous and I promise not to get mad, no matter what you tell me. I'm not even saying it's bad! I just… I just want to know what's going on?"

Ranma was quiet for a bit as they walked, eyes downcast. She wet her lips, looking like she was trying to consider what she was going to say.

"Me'n Ryuga… after the Shi shi hokodan… We kinda came to an understandin'. Or… maybe I got an understandin' of just how much hurt there is in him, an'… I wasn't okay with just leaving it," Ranma said. "I had to decide between bein' his rival, an' maybe watchin' him kill himself one day try'n beat me… or be his friend and say that his life was more important to me than winnin'. So… I chose the latter. I found out just how much that lack of a sense of direction has actually cost him. So I convinced him to see a doctor about it, an'... we've been workin' towards a cure."

"And you got close through that?"

"W-well… tryin' to fix the curse has actually dipped into martial arts an' using Ki a lot," Ranma said carefully. "I've had to dig into some… some dark places in my own head to drive it. And… I dunno, something… popped. I nearly went into the Neko-ken over it. Ryouga talked me down, but… I think it jostled loose some stuff in my own head. Memories I forgot… or… feelings I forgot, rather. Like… like when I realized we weren't gonna go back to see you again back when we were kids. It… kinda compounded all of the stuff that's already goin' on."

Ukyou examined Ranma carefully. She reached over and lightly brushed her fingers through her hair, where she could see the effects of the styling she had gotten done while with Kodachi. "This is old, isn't it... Ryouga didn't cause this, he just popped the lid off… right?"

"I'm not sure," Ranma said softly. "But… I'm not the way I'm s'posed to be. I don't know why. It's not because of the curse, I don't think, but the curse makes it easier for it to come out. I kinda figured it out talking with Rin, about Yin and Yang. How most people are a mix, but usually a lot more of one than the other. But... I got too much Yin or… or not enough Yang or somethin'. It useta be it'd just come out as me actin' a bit more girly than necessary when I was in my girl form, but lately…" she chuckled bitterly. "Guess this is kinda how I realized I was never gonna be enough of a 'man amongst men' t'satisfy Mom…"

"Because you wear a dress sometimes?" Ukyou asked.

Ranma squeezed her eyes closed. "B-because… because sometimes I'd rather wear the dress! Because… sometimes when I'm yelling at the top of my lungs 'I'm a guy!'... it feels like I'm lying." She looked at her hands. "Because I'm sick of being afraid of this part of me. Because sometimes bein' a guy doesn't make any more sense to me than bein' a girl."

Ukyou stepped in close and quickly pulled the redhead into a hug.

Ranma didn't resist, going limp against her. "Ryo… Ryo knows all this an'... an'... he was okay with it…" Ranma said, muffled against Ukyou's chest.

No WONDER Ryouga was acting all protective of you! Ukyou thought. And since he already knows all of your deep dark secrets… you're relaxed around him. He's 'safe'. "Ranchan?" Ukyou started to
stroke her hair. "Can I tell you a secret?"

The redhead simply nodded against her, though she also slipped her arms around her waist.

Ukyou took a deep breath. "I… don't dress up like a boy out of habit or because I don't know how to look good as a girl. I like to think I proved that last part false pretty conclusively." She smirked as she remembered the stir she had caused at Furinkan just by showing up in a girl's uniform. "It's not an honor thing either. The truth is… the truth is that was just an easy excuse. Maybe not when I first started but…" She sighed. "Ranma, I changed my gender on my family register because I felt more comfortable as a boy - because that's how I fully intended to live… not as a penance or anything, but… because that's how I felt."

Ranma was silent.

"That changed when I met you again..." Ukyou said fondly, smiling down at her. "But… there are still days when I just wanna… be a guy again. Not forever… I don't think I'd ever want to go so far as a curse or anything either. But… in my own head at least."

Ranma looked up at her, her eyes wide. "L-like… you forget a little bit that you're not a guy? Like… you know, but… but..."

Ukyou nodded.

"A-and… certain situations… or… or people… kinda push you one way or another?" Ranma continued.

"I think I just implied that you do that to me," Ukyou said with a smile.

Ranma shuddered. She closed her eyes and slumped against Ukyou. "Oh thank god… I thought I was the only one. I thought I was going crazy!"

"You know people like me or Konatsu or Jiro and yet you think that you're the only one?" Ukyou asked incredulously. She ran her fingers through Ranma's hair again and tightened arms around her. "So… where are you right now on the scale?" Ukyou asked.

Ranma was quiet.

Ukyou smirked. "I promise I'm not going to get mad."

"... Pretty… pretty deep into the girl side," Ranma said softly. "I was hopin' by the time we got to Ucchan's..."

"It doesn't always work that way," Ukyou replied with a soft chuckle. "Some days you have to fake it." She had a thought and considered it, surprised at how much the idea was appealing to her. Maybe Ranma's not the only one on the wrong side of the fence today? "Ranchan… do you feel like indulging me a little today?"

"Mnn?" Ranma blinked up at her. "Uhh… sure?"

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Rin squealed in pleasure as she chewed, the piping hot, savory pancake practically melting in her mouth. She kicked her heels on the stool as she finished the morsel. "Ms. Konatsu, that's so good!"

Konatsu smiled and inclined her head slightly. "I'm pleased you enjoy it, Ms. Rin. I'm afraid it's not
quite to Lady Ukyou's standards yet, but…"

Rin shook her head. "Mnnn! I think Ms. Konatsu's are just as good!" she insisted. "You get so much flavor from so few toppings!"

Konatsu blushed and smiled. "I… have been frugal most of my life. But bland okonomiyaki don't sell and are a waste so… I've learned some tricks of my own to find a balance."

"Ukyou doesn't mind you changing the recipe?" Rin asked.

Konatsu smiled. "Lady Ukyou is very supportive. Once she was sure I had mastered the basic recipe she has been happy to let me experiment, so long as she is allowed to sample my attempts first to ensure they are of sufficient quality to serve the customers. It's not so different from serving tea. Temperature, balance of ingredients, time… they all play a part. I am blessed that she saw fit to share her family's art with me as well as to allow me the freedom to develop my own 'style'."

Rin nodded. "Dad was the same with Volleyball. He used to tell me that learning to hit the ball like he taught me to hit it was just the first step."

"I have heard Lady Ukyou speak on your prowess at the game," Konatsu said. "I understand your skills are quite impressive."

Rin blushed and ducked her head. "I'm… I'm still learning a lot. I really only do the one thing really well…"

The door slid open and Ukyou and Ranma stepped in. Rin turned on her stool and smiled. "You're here!"

"Sorry for the wait, Rin," Ukyou said. She turned to Konatsu. "Her order is on the house, okay Konatsu?"

Konatsu smiled and bowed. "Of course."

"We just need to get ready, Rin. I hope you don't mind waiting a little longer?" Ukyou continued. Ranma waved from behind Ukyou, a sheepish smile on her face.

Rin quirked an eyebrow. "Uh… sure, Ukyou-senpai. No problem."

Ukyou and Ranma both headed up the stairs. Rin watched them go, curiously.

"You seem concerned, Ms. Rin?" Konatsu said as she started scraping down the grill.

"Hmmmm? Oh nothing bad," Rin said absently, "I've just never seen Ukyou-senpai be Yang with Senpai around her before. Except that one time, of course."

Konatsu blinked. "... Pardon?"

"Oh… sorry!" Rin said sheepishly. "I guess that didn't make sense, did it?" She resumed eating her okonomiyaki.

Konatsu regarded her curiously for a moment, then shrugged and went back to her cleanup.

A short while later, footsteps could be heard on the stairs. Rin looked up again, wondering about what sort of transformation she would see. Senpai was always fascinating with how she could shift and change from moment to moment.
She was a bit surprised to see Ranma come back down in female form. She had unbound her hair and brushed it out, letting it fall across her shoulders. She had applied a little light makeup - just enough to accentuate her eyes - and was wearing a short red jacket over a grey v-neck shirt and a pair of denim shorts over black leggings. It was very cute without being overly 'girly'.

"S-senpai…" Rin said. She blinked and shook herself out of her shock. "Wow! You look good! B-but… I thought you were going on a date with…"

She cut off as a second figure came down the stairs behind Ranma. He wore a pair of dark slacks, crisply pressed, and a white button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up almost to his elbows. He had a blazer-style jacket slung over his shoulder and a cocky grin. His long brown hair was tied to fall down his back in a low ponytail.

It took Rin a second to realize that this was Ukyou.

She blushed and looked away but turned back to look again. She felt self-conscious for staring, but was unable to help herself. Ukyou often dressed as a boy when at school, but Rin had never seen her put this much effort into it before. The presentation was perfect. The cut of her clothing somehow made Ukyou seem taller and more broad-chested than she was and showed not a hint of her usual curves. The change to her hairstyle was calculated to frame her face differently and make it seem more angular and masculine and the way she now carried herself was purely and confidently male.

"Oh my…" Konatsu said, wearing a similar blush to Rin's.

Ukyou winked. "Whatcha think?" Even her tone and style of speaking had changed.

"It's amazing!" Rin said, hopping off her stool to walk over for a closer look. "You're so handsome, Ukyou-senpai!"

"I wouldn't be able to tell…" Konatsu said, wide-eyed. "And… I have some experience with this! I've never seen you undergo such a… a remarkable transformation, La…" She closed her eyes with a smile and bowed. "Lord Ukyou."

Ukyou rolled her eyes. "Don't start with that, Konatsu." She was smiling at the compliment nevertheless. "I haven't tried this hard since I came to Nerima. Ranchan and I thought it might be fun to have a role-reversal date tonight."

Rin giggled. "That does sound like fun! Though… I don't think anyone but the two of you could pull it off. Not like this!"

Ranma gave Rin a knowing smile, stepping back to lean against Ukyou a little. Ukyou put a hand on her shoulder and smiled down at her. "I think you're right Rin. We're a pretty well matched set."

They looked like a completely normal boy-girl couple. The illusion was amazing.

"We should get going," Ukyou said. "You got everything you need, Konatsu?"

Konatsu smiled and waved them off. "Please go enjoy yourselves. It's a slow night and I am fine."

"Oh, wait!" Ranma fished her new neon pink phone from her pocket. "I know Nabiki said this was just for emergencies but… using the camera on this thing doesn't use minutes, right?" She flipped it open, puzzling over the buttons and menus.

"Not if you don't send it." Rin leaned over, gently taking the phone and selecting the camera. "Here, let me." She stepped back and held it up as Ranma and Ukyou posed.
"Nabiki wanted pics if I went on a date with a guy. She should get a kick outta this," Ranma said with a smirk. She smiled prettily as Rin snapped a couple of pictures.

Rin examined the last one on the tiny screen and nodded, satisfied it would do. "Send me a copy later, okay? Oh! I should get your number!" She pulled out her own phone.

Ranma came over and leaned over her shoulder, watching Rin as she manipulated the address book on both phones. "Wow… you're fast with that. I barely know how to dial it!"

"You learn if you use it," Rin said. "It's not that hard… here, watch, each keypress can be a number of characters depending on how many times you press it. If you pause a second, it moves onto the next character…"

Ukyou checked her watch. "Oh, crap, the next train is coming any minute! We'd better hustle - it'll be half an hour until the next one!"

Rin scrambled to finish punching in the numbers and put her own phone back into her pocket. The redhead was grabbing something from under the counter, so she put the pink phone on top of the counter for her and gathered up her own things.

Rin followed behind the couple as the three of them set out. Ranma was munching an apple she had swiped from Ukyou's ingredients box, though she was making an effort to eat much more daintily than normal, even offering a bite to Ukyou as they walked. Rin could see right off that some of it was for show, with Ukyou playing the part of the attentive boyfriend while Ranma was amping up the girlyness a bit. But as they got onto the train and the two started to relax, she could see the roles becoming more 'real'.

They really were an incredibly cute couple, she had to admit.

I feel a little bad for Mr. Boyfriend-san, she thought, as she sat across from them. Though… if Senpai has more than one girlfriend, she can have more than one boyfriend too, right? She smiled, satisfied that it would all work out for the best somehow. People like Ranma were the sort who got happy endings after all, right?

Of course, that left her with her own problem. Deep down, she knew she was probably wasting her time. She wasn't clever like Nabiki or capable like Senpai or determined like Captain Sayuri. She wasn't even certain if finding Mu Tsu's circus would be something that would make him happy, or if he would be mad at her for meddling. But… this strange little world she had been allowed to see… with of all these martial artists and exceptional people… it was all so sad most of the time. And she couldn't really do anything about very much of it because it was about honor or magic or other things she didn't quite understand. This was at least something she could try and do.

"You're real quiet tonight, Rin," Ranma said. She got up from her seat and crossed the aisle to sit next to Rin.

Rin started a bit, then ducked her head in embarrassment. "I-I'm sorry, Senpai. I'm not being very good company."

"No, no, it's okay," Ranma smiled. "Just checkin' up on my junior to make sure she's okay, right?"

Rin nodded then looked at her hands. After a minute, she spoke again. "What do you think of Mu Tsu, Senpai?"

Ranma blinked. "Mousse? Well, he's obsessive, blind in a literal and figurative sense, obsessive, violent, dumb, obsessive, and a half-decent fighter when he doesn't get distracted by something
he *thinks* is Shampoo. Also he's obsessive. So… a pretty normal guy for the people in my life."

"*Hey*," Ukyou growled. "Some of us resemble that remark."

"Aww, you know you don't count in that Ucchan!" Ranma said nervously.

Rin sighed. "I mean… *beyond* that. Beyond the martial arts stuff. Don't you… talk with him, Senpai? Hang out? Do things together? Talk about plans for the future or anything?"

Ranma cocked her head as if confused. "No. Why?"

Ukyou rolled her eyes and got up to sit down next to Ranma again. "Nabiki is right; you really *are* feral, Ranchan."

Ranma shrugged. "I mean, the guy *literally* tries to kill me whenever he imagines I make a pass at his beloved Shampoo. Or when he thinks I *didn't*, therefore slighting her by paying attention to someone else. Or… y'know, thinks that I *breathed wrong in her presence*. That's the sort of thing that makes it hard to pal around with someone, you know?"

Rin cocked her head. "But you get along fine with Mr. Boyfriend-san."

Ukyou snarled at the name Rin had given Ryouga. Ranma blushed and ducked her head. "Ryo is… *different*."

Ukyou put an arm around Ranma, hugged her and kissed the top of her head. "Yeah, we've noticed 'Ryo' is different, Ranchan."

Ranma squirmed uncomfortably at the implication Ukyou was making and quickly changed the topic back. "It's not like I singled Mousse out… I mean, he's not *bad*, and he and I have teamed up a few times, but…" Ranma shrugged. "The Shampoo thing is kinda a deal breaker for him."

"Mnnn…" Rin sighed and slumped a little, nodding.

"Well… maybe if someone were to come along to take his mind off Shampoo…" Ukyou said.

Rin blinked and looked at Ukyou, cocking her head. "Y-you mean like another Amazon girl? O-or maybe a martial artist from Japan?"

Ukyou and Ranma just gaped at her.

"No, you dummy! *You*!" Ranma said, poking Rin in the forehead. "You *like* the big blind idiot, right? That's why you're trying to find his circus for him?"

"Eeee…" Rin blushed and shrank back. "I-I do… But… I'm not doing this to try and make him like *me*." She sighed and smiled sadly, looking away. "Mu Tsu wants… he wants someone *incredible*. Like *him*. That's why he likes Shampoo. I-I'm sure someday he'll find someone like that again, even if he doesn't believe it. But… in the meantime he shouldn't be miserable and alone. He has a family out there that cares about him, I'm sure of it, and… and I want to help him find them again. So at least he knows he has someplace to go."

"Rin…" Ranma said softly.

"Mu Tsu is a nice dream for someone like me to have…" Rin said. "B-but… that's all he is. He's meant to be with someone who can *fly* like he can. B-but… I still want to be his friend. I want to see him smile more, even if it's because I'm selfish. I wanna see all of you smile, really. S-so… I'm just..."
doing this because it's what I can do right now." She looked down at her hands, clasped in her lap. "I know I'm being silly and this probably won't do anything, but… it makes me feel better."

Ukyou and Ranma exchanged a wordless glance and were silent for the rest of the train ride.

"Um… hello?"

Konatsu looked up from her cleaning to see a familiar young man in white robes enter. The light glinted off his thick spectacles.

"Oh, forgive me, Mu Tsu!" Konatsu said, covering his mouth in a ladylike manner.

"I apologize if you're closed… I didn't see any sign…" Mousse said sheepishly. "But then… well."

"No, no, we're quite open!" Konatsu insisted. "It's simply been slow, and so I've been doing some chores." He busied himself getting his ingredients prepared and heating up the grill. "What would you like? Your usual?"

"Please," Mousse sat on one of the stools and folded his hands into the sleeves of his robe.

"You usually come around for a lunch special. What brings you out this late?" Konatsu asked. Mousse was actually one of his regulars - one of the few that typically always came when Ukyou was at school.

Mousse sighed. He pushed his glasses up on top of his head and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Being at the Nekohanten as of late has been… challenging."

Konatsu tested the grill with a few drops of water. Satisfied the heat was correct, he poured the batter. "The 'sisterly bonding' thing again?" He knew some of what was going on from Ukyou, and more still from Mousse himself, who had been coming in rather haggard and sleep-deprived lately.

"Shampoo seems to delight in rubbing it in my face," Mousse said dejectedly. "And Cologne seems to delight in forcing me to endure it."

"Ms. Shampoo does seem to lack a certain… discretion," Konatsu admitted, having been subjected to similar sleepless nights himself. He was already well resigned to his lady never choosing - or even considering - him, but it was still rather mortifying.

"She doesn't need discretion," Mousse said bitterly. "She has everything she's ever wanted - her 'Airen'... sisters who are as skilled as any Amazon with which to snub her peers back home and the freedom to do as she pleases. She has no need of me anymore."

Konatsu nodded and silently set the plate in front of him. "Yet you stay," he said finally.

Mousse broke apart his chopsticks and paused, contemplating his okonomiyaki. "Please don't take this the wrong way… but you couldn't possibly understand."

Konatsu raised an eyebrow, folding his arms across his chest. "Because I have accepted that Lady Ukyou will not return my feelings as I might wish she would?"

"Because you can accept that," Mousse replied as he broke his okonomiyaki into sections. "You have only known Ukyou for a year at most I believe? You had a life before her, no matter how wretched, and you will have a life after her." He picked up a piece of okonomiyaki and studied it,
squinting. "I have known Shampoo my entire life. I have spent my entire life trying to be someone Shampoo would want. I made a foolish mistake when I was a child that pushed her away and I have spent every single day after that trying to rectify it. Everything that I do, everything I have learned, everything that I am is towards that end. I do not have anything else." He popped the morsel into his mouth and chewed.

Konatsu had heard this speech before - several times, in fact. Most of Mousse's conversation tended to revolve around Shampoo and his inability to win her, or rage over Ranma's perceived mistreatment of her.

A smirk crossed the kunoichi's features. Except once.

Konatsu folded his hands behind his back and leaned over a bit, as he had seen Jiro do. Konatsu had always greatly admired the older man's talent for slicing to the heart of a dilemma with only a few words. Konatsu could not hope to achieve such precision, but imitating Jiro's style felt right. "So! Out of curiosity… how did watching the sunset with Ms. Rin make you a better match for Shampoo?"

Mousse froze then started coughing, choking on his half-chewed bite.

*Oh dear… I did it too soon. It ruins the effect if they choke to death!* Konatsu quickly fetched him a glass of water, which he snatched and guzzled greedily to force the errant morsel down his throat.

"That… that had nothing to do with Shampoo!" Mousse finally managed to gasp, thumping his chest to get the oversized bite down.

"My apologies. I merely assumed since you said everything you do is to that end..." Konatsu cocked his head. "So what was the purpose of that, then?"

Mousse gave him a sour look. "Must everything have a purpose? It was simply… impulse." He snagged another bit with his chopsticks and started chewing angrily.

'*Mustn't push too hard*, Master Jiro would say. *Plant the seed of the realization and let them come to it on their own.*'" As you say, then," Konatsu said with a smile. He set to work wiping down the counter when he noticed something laying on it. It was a neon pink flip phone that had been left sitting right at the counter's edge.

*That must be Rin's! She must have forgotten it when they were taking pictures!* Konatsu thought, remembering Rin holding the phone to snap a pic of Ranma and Ukyou. "Oh dear… I fear Ms. Rin has left her cell phone…"

Mousse froze again. "Rin was here?"

Konatsu nodded. "Oh yes! She drops by occasionally as well, after volleyball practise, usually to visit Lady Ukyou or Lady Akane. She was by tonight on her way to a carnival in a neighboring ward."

"Oh. She was going on a date, then?" Mousse asked carefully, pushing his glasses back down over his eyes.

Konatsu raised an eyebrow. Mousse hated wearing his glasses because he preferred people to be able to see his eyes, since they often mistook him for stoic or unemotional with the glasses hiding them. He tended to put them down intentionally when he wished to hide his emotions. "No, I believe she was going alone. I believe she was going to see if it was worth a trip for her friends to go there later in the week."
"And where is the carnival?" Mousse continued to feign only moderate interest.

"In Shinjuku. Yoyogi Park, I believe?" Konatsu smiled. "I can ask Lady Ukyou to return the phone to her tomorrow at school."

Mousse sighed as he pushed his stool out from the counter and stood. "No… a young girl like her shouldn't be out at night alone and that far from home without a phone." He walked over and picked up the phone. "I'll go find her and return it."

Konatsu raised an eyebrow. "That is quite a bit out of your way, isn't it? Are you sure you want to go to that much trouble?"

"It's a martial artist's duty to protect the weak," Mousse quoted a well worn phrase. "Besides, with three cute waitresses working for her tonight, the Old Mummy won't need or want me at the Nekohanten. And I had wanted to get some fresh air anyway."

Konatsu smiled and nodded. "Very well. If I happen to see her first, I'll let her know you have it, then. I imagine she will be quite grateful to you to get it back."

Mousse paused. His glasses hid his face well, but Konatsu was sure he saw a slight blush on his cheeks. "I'm only doing what's right, after all," Mousse said gruffly. He tucked the phone into his sleeve and then placed a few coins on the counter. "Thank you for the food, Konatsu. I will see you again soon." He turned and walked out of the restaurant, hopped up onto a lamppost, and then leapt out of view towards the rooftops.

Konatsu watched him go with a smile and returned to his cleanup duties. *Well now... I wonder how this might develop?* he thought.

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Rin parted ways with Ranma and Ukyou after they paid their admission to the fairgrounds and headed off towards the circus tent. After hearing a few distant roars from caged animals that were more than likely rather large felines, Ranma and Ukyou elected to start at the game stands.

The carnies had seen an attractive young couple and naturally played on Ukyou's male pride to entice them to the games - encouraging 'him' to win 'his' lady a prize.

Ranma seemed content to play along by turning on the charm, and, in spite of herself, Ukyou felt something resembling male pride being prickled. The games were all varying levels of rigged, of course, from merely deceptively difficult to basically physically impossible. But Ukyou had worked food stands at carnivals before and knew how this worked. She dropped a few comments at some of the more heavily rigged games to let them know she was on to them before winning them anyway. She was careful to not win *too* spectacularly, though, as she knew that would just be advertising for more 'marks'.

They still came away each carrying a huge stuffed animal on their backs, a bear in Ukyou's case, and an elephant in Ranma's. Ranma happily sampled several of the treats for which they had won vouchers. They had won other prizes as well, but had given most away to the crowd of kids who had come out to watch Ukyou play.

"It feels a little weird to have a bunch of boys say they wanna grow up to be just like me," Ukyou said with a chuckle.

"Why?" Ranma asked around a mouthful of cotton candy.
Ukyou shrugged. "Well..." she sighed. "I'm a fraud, aren't I? They admire me because they think I'm 'manly', but it's all bindings and carefully cut clothes and feathered eyebrows."

Ranma was thoughtful for a moment. "Y'know... I've sorta been wrestling with that myself a bit. A few days ago Sayuri said being a 'man amongst men' didn't mean I couldn't also be a 'woman amongst women'. I brushed it off as nonsense at the time, but..." She stepped a little closer and took Ukyou's arm, leaning on her a little for support. "I mean... everything they admire about you... your strength, your skill, your generosity, your sense of right and wrong when showin' up those crooked games... that's not fake. So... if that's 'manly', then you are manly. You're probably the manliest guy here. Doesn't matter what you are under your clothes."

"I am?" Ukyou raised an eyebrow. "You're willing to surrender the title to me that easily, sugar?"

Ranma just smiled and hugged Ukyou's arm more tightly. "Takin' the night off."

Ukyou snorted then examined the redhead a little more closely. "I guess this has been a bit rough for you, huh?"

Ranma was quiet for a moment.

Ukyou sensed that this was something important, so she guided Ranma gently toward a set of benches set off the main path where it would be quieter. She sat down with next to her and put an arm around her shoulders.

"Is it... is it supposed to be easier to be a girl?" she asked timidly, giving Ukyou a nervous look.

"... Easier?" Ukyou cocked her head curiously. "What, you mean because you can charm your way into someone winning you prizes by batting your baby blues at them?" She smirked and held up the bear.

"Ranma's face fell. "Well... I mean... yeah... yeah... I do that..." She sounded... ashamed, almost.

"Ranchan?" Ukyou's eyes widened.

"I'm... kinda strugglin', Ucchan," she said. She smoothed out her shorts unconsciously then glanced at the hand that had done it as if she hadn't really seen it before. With a sigh she leaned against Ukyou a little more as though she were tired and let her hand drop back to her lap. "I feel... like all of the stuff I used to rely on is kinda fallin' out from under me. I used to be so sure of what direction I needed to go most of the time."

Ukyou hugged the girl closer. She reached over with her other hand and ran her fingers lightly through Ranma's hair. "Feeling lost because of your parents?"

"That's part of it, I guess," she said. "But... most of it... Is... is this okay?" She looked up at Ukyou.

"Is what okay?"

"Me," Ranma said. She gestured at herself. "This. Being... being... unsure. I mean... is this all it takes? A year of a stupid curse? Or... Is... is this why Mom sent me away? Because I was always like this?"

Ukyou reached over and cupped Ranma's cheek. "Ranchan... I don't know, honestly. But I do know there's nothing wrong with you... or with the way you are... or with the way you were. And it certainly isn't your fault your Mom let your idiot father cart you off across Asia. Your parents are cracked."
"Yeah…" Ranma said. She closed her eyes and leaned into Ukyou's hand. "Are you okay with this, though?"

"That's a dumb question Ranchan, and you know it," Ukyou said with a smirk. She leaned in and kissed her on the lips gently. She slowly drew the smaller girl closer, sliding her arms around the redhead as she deepened the kiss.

Ukyou broke the kiss and smiled. "I am happy to be with you Ranchan. And I am going to marry you someday. It doesn't matter to me if I'm wearing a wedding dress or a tuxedo."

"Mnnn…" Ranma mumbled dreamily, opening her eyes slowly. "... you'd look sexy in a tux…"

"Damn right I would," Ukyou replied. "You be whatever you want to be whenever you want to be it, Ranchan. Anyone who really loves you will accept that."

Ranma slipped her arms around Ukyou's neck. "Thank you," she said softly. She looked into Ukyou's eyes as her fingers lightly caressed the nape of the chef's neck. "I love you too, Ucchan. Heh… I used to be so afraid of saying that to anyone."

"Gets easier with practise," Ukyou replied. "So… where should we go next?"

"Hmmm… Maybe peek in the tents? As long as there aren't any c-c-c-c… you know," Ranma said. "Oh… if we run into any old gypsy fortune tellers… or incense peddlers… or some joker selling ancient artifacts or love charms… or anything like that, we bail, okay?"

"Deal."

They stood, though Ranma kept close with an arm around Ukyou's waist and her head against her shoulder. Ukyou decided that she could definitely get used to that.

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Rin peeked around the edge of the large circus tent, looking about to make sure there was no one to get mad at her.

She had found out quickly that most of the attendants working the ticket booths were local temps and most of the carnies at the games or rides were too busy to talk or didn't want to deal with her unless she was going to spend money at their game. She didn't have much money to waste so she wanted to leave that as a last resort.

She hoped that maybe she could catch a carnival worker on break who'd be willing to talk. It was usually the back stage folk who knew everything, right? Perhaps even a performer, or someone from one of the booths if she could catch them when they weren't busy.

Just as long as it wasn't a clown.

There was a section behind the tents where the trailers for the performers were parked, as well as equipment that she assumed wasn't in use. She stayed clear of the animal cages and tried to look for something that looked like a break area instead.

"Hey little missy, what are you doing back here?"

She squeaked and froze. Slowly she turned and looked over her shoulder.

He was tall. Freakishly so. His pants were purple with yellow polka dots. His jacket was a
cacophony of color, stitched together almost randomly, and far too big for him. His face was pale greasepaint, with his eyes circled in dark brown, and his lips exaggerated in crimson. His hair was a veritable mop of multicolored curls.

"Eeeeeeeeeeeeee…!" Rin squeaked, eyes widening in fear as she shrank back.

The clown sighed. "Great. Another one. Those stupid American horror movies are ruinin' the profession, I tell ya. Look, kid… I'd take the stilts off and scrub the facepaint to show you I'm nothin' to be afraid of, but I gotta be in the ring in half an hour. You got parents around here or what?"

She shook her head frantically and backed up a bit further.

"Okay, okay…" He held out his hands placatingly. "How old are you? With an elementary school group or something?"

Rin swallowed. "I-I'm in high school…"

He blinked. "What, really?" He leaned over, earning another whimper as he looked her over appraisingly. "Geez kid, you need a sammich! You get lost or somethin'?"

Rin closed her eyes, reached into her pocket and gripped her worry stone. "I'm… I'm trying to find a circus!" she managed.

He laughed. "I think you found one, kid!"

"I-I mean… a different one," she stammered, shrinking back a little more.

He cocked his head. "Well… Not sure if I should be insulted by that…"

"Boffo! Stop pesterin' the payin' customers!" a gruff voice came from behind her. An older man, fat, balding and smoking a stubby cigar stepped out. He was wearing a stained T-shirt with a faded logo from the 'Barnum and Bailey Circus'. "You, uh… are a paying customer, yeah kid?"

"I-I paid my ticket!" she whimpered. She glanced back and forth between the two and took a deep breath. "I… I'm trying to find a circus for a friend. A specific circus. It… it used to be his home, but he has no idea where they are now."

The man blew a smoke ring. "An' you thought another carnie might know? Geez kid, the internet's a thing, y'know?"

"Awww go easy on 'er. Poor kid's scared spitless," Boffo said, walking past her.

"Yeah? Well she also don't look like she's got no dosh, an' I ain't exactly in the 'free information' business," the man growled as the clown passed. He turned back to Rin. "Look kid, piss off, okay? It's dangerous back here, an' we get enough grief from the safety inspectors."

"Th-the ringmaster is a Korean man, named Byungchul!" she blurted.

He paused, raising an eyebrow. "Where'd you get that name from? Feh, don't matter none. Sorry kid, can't help you."

"I-I can pay!"

He paused again, sighed, dropping his cigar and stubbing it out under his thick leather workboot.
"Look, kid… I ain't averse to takin' a rube for a ride, but you seem like a good kid so I wouldn't feel right. So instead I'll give ya a little advice; Carnies protect their own. I don't know why you want to find this circus, but I can tell yas you ain't gonna find nothin' here but a lot o' piss in the wind. You ain't circus folk so we got no reason to tell you. We got enough creditors an' pissed off husbands, pregnant girls and snot-nosed brats lookin' afore their 'circus pappy'. Dunno which one you are, but…"

"Rin!"

Rin turned. Her eyes widened as Mousse landed lightly near the edge of the tent.

"Mu Tsu…?" she squeaked, starting to feel the panic rise.

"I almost didn't find you," Mousse said, walking towards her. "Luckily I heard your voice. Are you all right? You sounded afraid."

"Well… I'll be dipped," the man said, chuckling. "If it ain't the 'Dark Magician' hisself. Didn't think you'd have the balls to show yer mug around a place like this again, boy."

Mousse turned, homing in on the voice. He adjusted his glasses, squinting in the dim light. "Oh… uh, I'm sorry. Miss…?"

"It's Sadao, you blind git!" the man huffed.

"Sadao…?" Mousse cocked his head. Then, suddenly his eyes widened. "… Sadao!? Then this…?!"

"Yer not that lucky. Or that unlucky, I suppose," Sadao chuckled. "Different circus, though you should know that. Contracted out t'help this lot on their tour after their last Quartermaster got caught embezzlin'."

"You do know Mu Tsu's circus!" Rin said.

"Yeah, I know 'em. Been my family for twenty years," Sadao said. "And if I knew you were askin' on this twerp's behalf… I'da called security to come haul yer scrany ass out! An' I still might! So git!" He shooed her, glaring angrily at Mousse.

"You always were charming with the ladies, Sadao," Mousse said dryly. He glanced at Rin. "What were you looking for?"

Rin blushed. "I… I…" She started twiddling her fingers.

Sadao raised an eyebrow, then chuckled. "Ahhh… You sly bastard, you did it again, huh? She probably thinks she's doin' ya a favor tryin' to find old Byungchul's tent." He pulled out a fresh cigar, tearing off the end with his teeth and spitting it out. "Guess you didn't tell her, eh? She know about your Amazon, or are you plannin' to sell this one out for your purple haired bint too?"

Mousse's eyes narrowed. "Sadao…"

Sadao lit the cigar and took a few puffs, unimpressed by Mousse's warning tone. "Oi' Mu Tsu here was Byungchul's heir apparent. Set to take over as Ringmaster. Even had a uniform done up for 'im."

A knife embedded itself in the ground at Sadao's feet.

"Sadao, stop talking," Mousse growled.

The portly man raised an eyebrow. He snickered and casually kicked the knife loose. "Or what,
you'll skewer me? Go for it if you've got the certainly didn't have any when you walked out on Young Mi."

Mousse clenched his fists and looked away. "I didn't…! That was a misunderstanding!"

"Oh yeah?" Sadao chuckled. "You have many 'misunderstandings' that end up with you gettin' engaged, kid?"

"... Engaged?" Rin said softly, eyes widening.

Sadao laughed. "He didn't tell you, did he?" He walked over to Rin and clapped a hand on her shoulder, pointing his cigar at Mousse. "Yer lookin' at what should have been Mr. Young Mi. She was Byungchul's daughter. Pretty as a picture and loved this sorry sack o' crap more'n life itself. Time was we all thought he deserved it, too."

Mousse's shoulders sagged in defeat.

"He left her at the altar though," Sadao growled. "An' the shame o' it put her pappy in the ground."

"What?!" Mousse spun, looking horrified.

"Don't acted shocked, kid," Sadao sneered. "You knew he was sick, same as the rest of us. The only thing keepin' him goin' was seeing his little girl in the center ring at last. Well… she did that much at least, an' she did it alone thanks to you."

Mousse looked stricken. He finally looked away, then turned and started to slowly walk off.

"I hope yer side girl was worth it, kid," Sadao said. "Though, I'm guessing if she was, you wouldn't a gone and charmed another one, wouldja? Get lost… you ain't welcome here, an' you never will be."

"Mu Tsu…" Rin stepped forward to follow him as he walked around the edge of the big top, but the hand on her shoulder tightened.

"Listen kid," Sadao said. "Last piece of advice… Forget about him. He ain't never, ever gonna let that Amazon of his go. To his credit, I think he tried… he really did, but he couldn't do it for a family that took him in and the love of the best girl in showbusiness. He ain't gonna do it now."

Rin paused then pulled her shoulder away. "He needs to do it for himself, then," she said quietly, and ran after Mousse.

The portly man shook his head. "Well… We'll see. In the meantime…" He pulled a phone out of his pocket, flipped it open and dialled a familiar number. "Hey sweetheart… yeah, things are goin' good in Shinjuku… listen, you're not gonna believe who I ran into…"

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Ranma and Ukyou quickly ruled out the big top. The acrobatics going on inside honestly seemed a little tame by their standards, and there was a good chance the big cats they had heard before would make an appearance. However, the smaller satellite tents all had their own shows going on. After passing a few, they found one sign proclaiming the 'Jim Darkmagic Experience'.

"Hey, a magic show sounds fun. What do you think, Ranchan?" Ukyou asked.

Ranma peered at the placard. There was a lot of English on it, more than she could comfortably make
out. "Sure, I guess?" At least magic sounded potentially interesting.

They went inside, finding seats near the front of the little stage that had been set up. After a few more minutes as the rest of the guests were settled, the lights were lowered. Colored spotlights began to play across the stage and slow, dramatic music started to play.

"Ooooh… atmospheric," Ukyou said appreciatively.

"The world is full of magic, my friends..." A voice came over the speakers positioned all around the room, seeming to change position as it spoke. "Dark, dangerous powers from a forgotten age that endure into the modern world in secret, long-forgotten places. Cursed, abandoned places not meant for mortals, and exacting a heavy price on those that meddle."

"Uhhh…” Ranma started to feel nervous. The narration reminded her entirely too much of Jusenkyo. "You… don't think this guy is for real, do you?"

"Fearlessly I have plumbed the depths of these strange places to draw forth wondrous secrets. Today, I will share but a fraction of these wonders with you. Allow me to be your guide to the world of the arcane."

There was a puff of smoke from the stage and a tall man stepped forth. He had dark hair that fell to shoulder length, slicked back to expose a high forehead and a chin strip beard, cropped close. His costume featured a dark purple cloak with a high collar. He held out his hands with a smile.

"I am James Christopher Darkmagic the Third, and I will be your guide. Tell me, Tokyo, are you ready to see some magic?"

The crowd roared its approval from the stands. Ukyou was getting into it as well but Ranma kept herself somewhat more reserved, deciding to wait and see what the guy was all about.

A pretty assistant wheeled out a cart in the background. Jim's smile broadened as he soaked in the attention, then he turned and reached for the first of the items on the cart. He selected a red-backed deck of cards.

"First… a simple card trick, perhaps. Or perhaps not so simple?" He flipped the cards deftly in his gloved fingers, shuffling the deck one-handed with flashy panache. "Cards may seem innocent enough but long have they been used as windows into the future. Even simple playing cards such as these are not without power. Come! A volunteer from the audience?" His eyes scanned the sea of faces and finally landed squarely on Ranma. A smile curled his lip.

Of course, Ranma thought sourly.

He reached out one hand towards her. "You, I think. I sense something very mystical about you, my dear. A touch of the fae, perhaps? Come, there's no need to be afraid."

Ranma blinked, wondering again if there might be something to this 'magician'. He couldn't be able to sense the curse, could he?

Ukyou elbowed her gently in the ribs. "Go on, Ranchan! Live a little!"

Ranma decided the best way to find out would be to play along. She took the magician's extended hand, rose from her seat and let him guide her up onto the stage.

"No worries, my friend," Jim gave Ukyou a wink. "I shall return your lady fair in but a moment." He turned his attention to Ranma. "Yes… something very potent in the aether surrounding you. Shall we
part the veil together and peer into destiny?" He fanned out the deck of cards, offering them to her. "Pick one. Examine it, remember it. Keep it close."

Ranma nodded. She reached out and plucked a card from the ones offered. She looked at it, a skeptical expression crossing her face, but she hid it quickly and held the card close to her chest as instructed.

"Now, these may seem like ordinary cards…" Jim closed up the deck, flipping it over in his hands… and then suddenly was holding nothing. "… But they are special. Each card has a meaning, just as they do in a Tarot deck. *Your* card was drawn to you by destiny, dear, and by peering into that destiny, I shall name your card!" He turned, held out a hand towards Ranma and closed his eyes.

"Yes… yes… I see it… Great love… a new beginning…" His eyes opened. "*Your* card is the *Ace of hearts!*"

Ranma blinked, then slowly shook her head.

The magician looked shocked. "Wait… are you sure?"

"Pretty sure, yeah," Ranma said dryly.

Jim glanced at the audience then chuckled weakly. "Aheh… I-I apologize… the aether around you… it is more potent and chaotic than I had anticipated! It clouds the vision somewhat. But… it *is* there… yes… I see it now… You are a passionate girl. Enthusiastic. *Fun!* The card that was drawn to you is obvious now! *The Queen of Clubs!*"

"Nope," Ranma shook her head.

"I-I meant *Eight* of Clubs!"

"Uh uh."

"Is it Clubs, at least?"

Ranma sighed. She flipped over her card, showing it to the magician and to the audience.

Jim frowned, leaned forward and examined the card. "*Funco Games Incorporated, thank you for purchasing this deck of playing cards. Here are the rules for several popular classic card games…*?"

He snatched the card out of Ranma's hand. "*Branwen!* he shouted off stage. "*Branwen, I told you to take the rule card out of the decks before the show!*"

A wave of chuckling and snickers rolled through the audience.

Jim turned, smiling weakly. "Aheh… minor technical difficulty, folks. All part of the show… heh… But card games are kids stuff, am I right?" He gestured with his hand and a puff of flame flared in the dim light, silencing the giggling audience.

He turned to Ranma. "Might I entreat your assistance once more, my dear?"

Ranma shrugged. "Sure. Why not?"

Jim snapped his fingers and his pretty assistant walked back onto the stage, wheeling a large box covered in what looked like arcane runes. It appeared to be just large enough to hold a person. "This is an artifact I acquired on my many travels. *The Box of Angri'kah!*"

His assistant turned the box, showing it to be on a wheeled platform and solid all the way around.
"As you can see, there is no trap door. There are no mirrors. No tricks." He opened the box to show the dark interior. He reached in and pulled out several long, sharp swords. "This box was used to entrap angry spirits and bend them to the archmagus' will. But… it has several other properties… for those who dare step inside." He reached out for his assistant's hand and helped her step into the cabinet. "For Death itself has no dominion within this box!" He took cuffs attached to the inside of the box and secured the girl's arms and legs.

"If my lovely volunteer would care to verify that these bonds are real and secure?" He stepped back, gesturing for Ranma to step forth and check the cuffs.

Ranma raised an eyebrow. She was curious about where this was going, so she did as she was asked. The cuffs appeared to be secure, bolted to the inside walls of the (admittedly painted plywood) 'Box of Angri'kah'. She tugged each one to be sure, then nodded they were at least not obviously rigged.

Jim smiled theatrically, swept in and closed the door of the cabinet. There was a head-sized cutout in the top of the door that framed the assistant's face so the audience could see her clearly.

Jim picked up one of the swords. He took a piece of paper from the cart and sliced it along the edge several times, demonstrating its sharpness. "As you can see, each of these swords is razor sharp. A single one of these could end my lovely assistant's young life. Yet I, and my gracious volunteer, will drive all seven of these swords through her body. By the magic of the Box of Angri'kah, the spirit of Death itself shall be held at bay and she shall exist in the space between this world and the next - between Life and Death - and emerge unscathed. Behold!" He took the sword, placed the tip in one of the slots cut into the box for this purpose and drove it home with a resounding *thunk*.

The assistant screamed, an expression of surprise and pain on her face.

"OH! WHOA, OH NO!" Jim pulled the sword out immediately. It was covered in blood.
"WOW! Yeah, that's a lot of blood…"

"Jim, you idiot!" the assistant screeched from inside the box. Her restraints rattled as she struggled to free herself. "You stabbed me, you hack! You're supposed to swap out the swords before you do that!"

"Aheh… J-just a little technical difficulty ladies and gentlemen…” Jim said nervously. "Branwen shut up!" he hissed.

"Or what!? You'll stab me again!?" Branwen screeched. "Get me… get me out of this box so I can wring your lousy neck!"

"Aheh… she's fine ladies and gentlemen… all part of the show…” Jim stammered again, as he gestured for some stagehands to come out and wheel the cabinet away.

"Jim… I don't feel so good…" Branwen's struggles were getting weaker. The stagehands moved faster, wheeling her offstage where a white-coated medic was waiting for them.

"Aheh… all part of the show…” Jim said, but his smile seemed increasingly forced. He slipped a little in the puddle of blood left where the box had been. "Aheh… just a short intermission before our next trick, ladies and gentlemen…"

"You gonna actually kill someone this time?" Ranma asked, crossing her arms and raising an eyebrow at him.

Jim glared at her and hissed. "Like you could do better!"
Ranma smirked. "Is that a challenge, Mr. Darkmagic?" she asked sweetly.

"Oh no…" Ukyou's groan could be heard from the audience.

Jim glared at her. "You know what? You know what!? YES! Yes, it's a challenge, you amateur! Let's see you come up here and do better!"

Ranma's grin widened. "Give me five minutes, a change room with costumes, and a kettle of hot water."

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Thankfully the magician was well stocked with props and costumes. Everything Ranma needed was there. She quickly went over the plan with Ukyou as they changed into appropriate outfits.

Ukyou adjusted the tie of the 3 piece suit she had selected. "Are you sure this is a good idea? I mean…"

"It's a magic show. Let's show 'em some real magic for once," Ranma winked at her. She had taken one of Jim's spare cloaks, tunics and pants, all obviously oversized on her. She wrapped the cloak around her and swished out onto stage, her head held high. Ukyou grabbed a curtain on wheels and followed.

Jim was seated in the front row of the audience, arms and legs crossed, looking quite angry at the whole proceeding. "That was six minutes! Boo! False advertising!" he called out. Ranma paused and gave the man a look. She held up her free hand and summoned a tiny glowing ball of ki. She gave the audience a moment for it to register and then casually tossed the luminous mote to the ground in front of the surly magician. It detonated with a flash and a bang that kicked up dust and forced Jim to draw back with a yelp.

Ranma turned to face the crowd with a flourish. "So you folks want some real magic? Well, I've been around a bit myself, and one of the most mystical places I've been in my travels is called Jusenkyo. Deep in the heart of Mainland China, hidden in the depths of the Bayankala mountain range, the name means 'Pools of Sorrow'," Ranma told the crowd. "The waters of this mountain are laced with dark magic and where those waters pool... powerful transformations can occur." She held up the kettle. "I have here, in this simple kettle, some of the mysterious water from this forbidden place!"

"That's just tap water!" Jim jeered, having recovered from the minor scare.

Ranma smirked. "This water will have a powerful effect on me and on my handsome assistant." She walked over to Ukyou, who bowed and let Ranma pour a little of the water over her head then straightened and stepped behind the curtain.

"Now watch this terrible magic from darkest China do its work!" Ranma stepped in front of the curtain, closed her eyes and dumped the contents of the kettle over her head.

Her form immediately blurred and grew in dramatic fashion. Ranma's male form was much more imposing and nearly a head taller. Hair shifted from bright crimson to jet black as curves flattened and muscles swelled to fill out Jim's spare outfit until it looked like a seam might burst. Now fully and obviously male, Ranma tossed the kettle aside and grinned at the audience.

There were gasps of surprise. There hadn't been any smoke or curtain for Ranma to hide behind - he had just changed - like a special effect from a movie but in real life. There were murmurs and hushed whispers from the crowd. Then, slowly, the applause started.
"What?!" Jim yelped and jumped on stage. He stormed over to Ranma. "This is ridiculous! This is... padding! Stilts!" He poked Ranma's chest. "Computer generated effects!"

Ranma smirked. "Oh, and as I have transformed, so has my lovely assistant." He reached over and tugged the cord that caused the curtain to drop from its rack.

Ukyou had concealed a second outfit under the baggy, oversized suit, which she had discarded as soon as Ranma's routine had begun. Now she was dressed in a rather revealing bunny suit, complete with ears, fishnet stockings and high heels. With her hair unbound, the transformation was complete and just as dramatic as Ranma's had been. She spun on one foot and adopted a classic cheesecake pose, one that accentuated her cleavage, and blew a kiss into the crowd.

The crowd roared in approval, the applause becoming thunderous.

Jim's eyes widened, his face flushing with rage. "Y-you... you cross-dressing fraud! Y-you... you made all that up! Magic water from Jusenkyo, phah!"

"Sure I did," Ranma smirked, crossing his arms.

"You know what, pal?" Jim stepped forward and poked Ranma's chest. "I'm gonna prove it. I'm gonna go to China and look up this Jusenkyo place! And then I'm gonna prove there's nothing special about that water, and show the whole world how you REALLY did your trick!"

"Go for it," Ranma's grin widened.

"I'll do it!"

"Uh huh."

"I'll go to China!"

"You should book your flight soon before the Christmas season rush," Ukyou added helpfully.

Jim's mouth worked furiously and silently for a few more seconds then snapped shut. He turned, swishing his cloak behind him and stalked off stage.

"You don't really think he'd actually go to Jusenkyo, do you?" Ukyou asked, whispering in Ranma's ear.

Ranma's smile didn't waver. "If he does, it'll certainly make his act more interesting."

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"Mu Tsu, wait!"

Mousse slowed his pace reluctantly. Part of him wanted to keep going but Rin had done nothing to deserve that. He could also feel the reminder of why he had come out here in the first place tucked away.

He stopped, turned and waited for her to catch up to him, and then catch her breath.

"I... was worried... you'd jump away...!" she gasped.

"Here." He took her hand and pressed the phone into it. "You left this at Ucchan's. I came to return it to you. That's all."
Rin blinked and looked at the phone. Her eyes widened in recognition. "Oh! This is Senpai’s phone! She must have forgotten to pick it up after I put it there for her…”

"Senpai... it was RANMA’S phone all along?" Mousse gaped. Slowly he closed his eyes and chuckled. The sound was bitter and dry, born of disbelief and fatigue. "Of course…” he said after a moment. "... Saotome, you bring me misfortune even when you're not here."

"I-it's not Senpai's fault!" Rin said quickly. "I-it's mine… I'm sorry, I shouldn't have pried into your affairs…”

"No, you shouldn't have," Mousse replied coldly.

He immediately regretted it, seeing her stricken look even with his poor vision.

"I'm sorry. I'm sure you were trying to help," he said finally. "It's my fault for telling you only part of the story." He turned. "If you're done here, I can escort you home. It's the least I can do after all this."

"I still want to help."

He stopped and turned back to look at her. Her eyes were downcast and her fists clenched.

"I want to know the rest of it," she continued. "A-and if you won't tell me, I'll just come back here to get it. Every single day if I have to!" She gave him a stubborn glare.

"I thought you agreed you shouldn't have pried?" Mousse said dryly.

"I sh-shouldn't have!" she agreed. "B-but I did… and… and know I know too much to not do anything, but not enough to actually do anything!"

Mousse sighed and nodded. "Fair enough. But you must promise me that not one word of any of this will get back to Shampoo or Saotome or any of his entourage. Clear?"

She nodded and relaxed a little.

"I'll explain on the train ride back," Mousse said, resuming his walk.

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After the disgruntled magician stalked off, Ranma and Ukyou checked to make sure that his assistant was going to be okay. She was recovering - apparently this was not the first such incident to take place at one of Jim's shows and the circus kept a trained paramedic on site just in case. Then they headed back to the dressing room to change. Ranma complained the whole time about how female undergarments just weren't a good idea for form changes, muttering darkly about 'wedgies'.

"We should probably look into something custom for you, sugar," Ukyou said. "Something like a stretchy sports bra that will lie flat if you change to a guy and a pair of stretchy briefs maybe?"

"Not a bad idea," Ranma agreed as she brushed out her hair. "Won't do me much good if I'm wearing an outfit like this, though"

"Save the cute underwear for dates, then?" Ukyou winked.

Ranma blushed a little. "Y-yeah…"

Ukyou's eyes widened. "Wait… are you really…?"
"You didn't see when we were changing for the show?" Ranma asked, flustered.

"Hey, a real man doesn't peek on his girlfriend without permission," Ukyou said, deepening her voice and thumping her chest with her fist.

"Kodachi took me shopping. Spent a mint on getting me properly fitted for the bras and everything. Seemed a shame to waste 'em…" Ranma squirmed.

"Hold on, is that why you suddenly jumped a cup size?" Ukyou leaned over and poked Ranma's chest. "I thought you were padding or something to hide the fact that Akane's catching up to you!"

Ranma squeaked and hunched over, crossing her arms over her chest. "H-hey! Perv!"

Ukyou smirked and leaned over, breathing in Ranma's ear. "May I peek?"

Ranma blushed cherry red and squirmed a little more, remembering what had happened with Akane the last time she had given a 'fashion show'. "L-later maybe. After we get home."

Ukyou decided not to tease too hard and stood, stretching, her stance and the way she carried herself shifting as she got back into the 'male' headspace for the trip home. She picked up the oversized bear and a shopping bag and motioned Ranma to come with her as she left the changing room.

"What's in the bag?" Ranma asked, peering at it.

"Swiped the bunny suit." Ukyou said nonchalantly.

"What?!" Ranma guffawed. "You gonna wear that for the customers or something?"

"Absolutely not!" Ukyou shot her an annoyed glare which immediately softened into a conspiratorial wink. "Akane is."

Ranma raised a skeptical eyebrow. "Never gonna happen."

"Never underestimate me. I can be very persuasive where Akane is concerned," Ukyou said smugly. Ranma gave her a mock annoyed look, her hands on her hips. "Now I know you're being perverted!"

Ukyou folded her hands behind her head, grinning. "Well, when a guy is constantly surrounded by visions of loveliness like you and Akane, it's only natural he have the odd naughty thought or two."

Ranma gave her a narrow-eyed look. "Okay, Kuno, sure."

They broke into giggles and continued walking.

After a few moments of silence Ranma spoke up, her tone uncharacteristically timid. "Is… is it that noticeable?"

Ukyou gave her a confused look. "Is what that noticeable?"

"The bra," Ranma fidgeted. "I-I mean… I'm not trying to look bigger. I don't wanna look freakish or anything…"

Ukyou sighed and stopped, took Ranma by her by the shoulders and lifted her chin. "Ranma, you're gorgeous. You're just not all hunched over cramped into something that doesn't fit anymore." She cocked her head. "I actually like the change. Seeing you dress up nicely both ways, I mean. You don't need to be overly girly or provocative to look good."
Ranma considered, looking down at herself. "I guess it wasn't something I paid much attention to either way before now. I just wore whatever got the job done. Only just starting to think about it now."

"Well, don't be afraid to ask for help," Ukyou said. "I bet Akane or Nabiki would loan you some stuff until you padded out your closet some."

Ranma chuckled and resumed walking. "Actually, Akane is the clothes horse. Nabiki is always swiping her outfits."

"You know, now that you mention it, she does always seem to have something new to wear," Ukyou said thoughtfully. "She's definitely more fashionable than the rest of us. How did she get pegged as a tomboy again? Was it just the martial arts?"

"Probably the jerks at school. She didn't wanna date any of them, so obviously she's either a tomboy or a lesbian, and they were probably too scared to call her the latter," Ranma muttered. "Couldn't possibly be because they're assaulting her every morning because Kuno told them it'd get them a date. There are, like, five decent guys in that whole stupid school, and two of 'em are me and you!"

Ukyou laughed. "Well… not sure I'm all that good…" She waggled her eyebrows suggestively.

"Pervert," Ranma said, though her tone was affectionate. She slipped an arm around Ukyou's waist and leaned against her.

"I kind of am," Ukyou admitted.

"Why, because you cross-dress?" Ranma asked. She actually felt a twinge of feeling offended.

Ukyou snorted. "No, because… well…" She blushed a little. "... Akane."

Ranma looked confused a moment, then her eyes widened. "Oh, you mean…" She blushed as she remembered the kiss. She was quiet a moment, then leaned in against Ukyou's side a little harder. "... You're not a pervert. If you were, maybe it wouldn't have hit me so hard when i saw the two of you together."

"What do you mean?" Ukyou asked.

"You really feel something for Akane… don't you?" Ranma looked up at her. "It's not just being 'playful', like Shampoo. Right? That kiss meant something."

"I…" Ukyou was struck silent. She felt a pang of guilt. "I'm sorry, Ranchan, I didn't mean to…"

"No, it's okay!" Ranma smiled at her. "It's… I'm still kinda processing what it is, I guess, but… I was being a hypocrite. I was assuming I was the only person around who could love more than one person like that."

Ukyou blushed. "R-Ranchan."

Ranma smirked and poked her nose. "God you're cute when you blush. So… when did all this start with you and Akane?"

Ukyou scowled. "You're picking up some bad habits from Nabiki, Ranchan," she muttered. She took a breath and looked thoughtful for a moment, then chuckled. "It all started when I hit my head…"
"You too?" Ranma quipped.

Ukyou smirked. "Well, technically it was a little before that. We kinda had a moment on the roof, after you and me kissed." She smiled a little, remembering. "Sun setting next to us, roof of the school, wind in our hair, me cupping her cheek and wiping away a tear... It coulda been on the cover of a cheap harlequin novel it was so romantic." She was quiet a moment. "I think I was about to kiss her, actually. I don't remember clearly, because Kuno showed up and flipped out, and I got a concussion. But I remember that impulse."

"Akane has a way of doing that to you," Ranma agreed. "I was always too scared to follow through, though."

"Yeah... Did I ever tell you about my first kiss, Ranma?" She looked up at the stars as they walked. The park was big enough that even with the lights of the carnival, they weren't as washed out as they were in the city.

"No... Bad memory?" Ranma asked. She had some experience with bad firsts.

"Her name was Akiko. We went to the same junior high... before I went to that all boys school." She smiled a little. "She was sweet... bit of a tomboy... actually a lot like Akane in some ways. She was socially awkward, clumsy, but always bright and happy. I was... drawn to her. I tried to be that 'guy friend' to her, help her get her confidence. I put on an act for her, being playful and flirting, but never crossing that line, so... so I could be practise, I guess. Seemed so obvious that I didn't pay attention to that little pang of jealousy I felt whenever I saw her talking to another boy."

"You fell for her. As a boy." Ranma said, her eyes widening.

"Yeah..." Ukyou chuckled bitterly. "Took me three years to have the courage to actually admit it... but yeah. But the worst part was... she fell for me, too."

Ranma blinked. "But..."

"One day, while we were waiting for the bus... she confessed to me. And then she kissed me." Ukyou looked down. "And... it was... it was like simultaneously winning the lottery, and having it taken away. Because she felt the same way I did... but only because I was lying to her. I had gotten something I never realized I wanted, then realized I wanted it more than anything... and realized I could never have it, all in the same moment. So... I froze up. And she took it to mean I didn't want her and it broke her heart."

"Did you tell her?" Ranma asked quietly. "That you were a girl?"

"Yeah. She... didn't take it well," Ukyou said softly. "I should have told her sooner. But I know why I didn't. I didn't want to. I liked how she looked at me. I liked how it felt. I didn't want to do anything to make her stop. And if I had known what nannichuan was back then, I'd probably have run away to China to dunk myself in it so she'd keep looking at me that way."

"Wow..." Ranma said softly.

"I was a dramatic 14 year old, don't read too much into it," Ukyou said, though from the faraway look in her eyes, Ranma was pretty sure she was lying. "I promised myself if I ever felt that again... if anyone looked at me like that again, I'd grab hold and never let go, no matter what."

"And Akane looked at you that way?" Ranma asked.

Ukyou looked down at her. Her hand came up and she trailed her fingers through Ranma's soft hair.
"You did first," she said softly. "In the hallway… something in your eyes reminded me of her. It was the same kind of moment. So I grabbed hold. And it was… incredible."

"Hey, how did this become about me?" Ranma asked, murmuring a little as she leaned a bit into Ukyou's hand.

"It's part of the story, silly. Trying to explain how I got into the mindset that would lead me to kiss Akane."

"Was I that bad?" Ranma teased.

"I think I just got done saying you were incredible? I can only stroke your ego so much, sugar," Ukyou smirked. "So the kiss… It was a rush. I had gotten past my fear. I had 'won', I guess. Then… Akane and I end up on that rooftop together and winning suddenly didn't feel so great."

"That had to be awkward." Ranma said nervously.

"It was at first, but…" Ukyou swallowed. "Do you know the worst thing Akane could do to me in a moment like that? It wasn't yell at me, or pick a fight or even cry… It's what she did. She trusted me." A smile flickered across Ukyou's face. "I had just taken you away from her. I had just called her out on all of the chances she could have had. I leapt when she didn't - when she'd had so many chances to. And… That was me and Akiko right there."

"Wait… so Akane is you in this?" Ranma said, confused.

"Not literally, jackass," Ukyou said, thwacking her lightly on the head. "But we suddenly had that in common. Plus she had that look in her eyes… the one that makes you want to jump off a rooftop to catch her?"

"Mnnn," Ranma replied, knowing that impulse all too well.

"Anyway, everything after that is a mess. Loud crash, thunderbolts and lightning, then waking up with a really bad headache the next day. So I didn't know what had actually happened until Akane told me much later. So… I thought I might have. It planted the idea, anyway, and that… kinda shaped how I looked at Akane from then on."

"So… you're saying that because you thought you kissed Akane… you kissed Akane?" Ranma gave Ukyou an impish grin.

"No… but it meant when she kissed me later on… I grabbed hold again." Ukyou ducked her head a bit. "I almost froze up but when she started to apologize…"

"Mnnn," Ranma replied again. She was quiet for a few more moments before she spoke again. "Did you two… I mean, me'n Ryouga bailed as soon as we saw we were intruding on something, b-but… I know she spent the night."

Ukyou moistened her lips. "Yeah. We should have waited for you, Ranchan. For some reason I had it in my head that you were with Nabiki, and… and… I should have waited. I'm sorry."

Ranma shook her head. "You and Akane didn't do anything wrong. I was just… I got all twisted up in my own head." She burrowed into Ukyou's side a bit.

"We all do that," Ukyou replied. "You're not indestructible, after all."

"Mnnn," Ranma replied noncommittally. Rationally she knew that was true, but it still stung her
pride a little. Even after admitting that she needed other people, it still grated against 17 years of upbringing. She chewed on that a bit; she owed her life to most of the girls at one point or another, but there was a difference between getting a clutch assist in a fight and emotional reliance.

"You know, if you ever catch us again…" Ukyou said softly. "... Walk in."

"I dunno," Ranma smirked a little. "You two were so cute, though. I would have hated to interrupt…"

"... And now I can't help thinking about what we would have done if you had walked in," Ukyou muttered, blushing. "That's it! Next date we go on is gonna be you, me and Akane."

"Perv," Ranma giggled. "So which one of us will be the guy for that?"

Ukyou considered a moment. "Akane." she said with a smirk.

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"I wasn't entirely truthful about my time with the circus," Mousse said.

Rin was sitting across from him in the otherwise empty train car, leaning forward and listening carefully.

"I was taken in by the circus, true, and trained by masters there, but my time, particularly how I left, was a little more complicated." He adjusted his glasses. "The Circus is a family, whether you are born into it or find yourself adopted into it. Young Mi was the former, the daughter of the Ringmaster Byungchul and his late wife, who had once run the circus together. She was always destined to take her place in the center ring and it showed. She's a beautiful girl, even to my poor eyes… stunning, really. But more than just her physical appearance, she had a… poise. A confidence and grace that elevated her even further. She belonged in that ring and she knew it and loved it, and that joy made her absolutely radiant. She was the first girl who ever rivalled Shampoo's brilliance for me."

"I was an awkward, clumsy boy when I joined the circus - I was still all of the things Shampoo scorned me for. I expected the same from her… that was her right, after all. She was as strong and as proud as any Joketsuzoku. But… no matter how many times I fumbled or failed she had a smile for me and a word of encouragement. Her laughter was bright rather than scornful or mocking. My struggle to be stronger - to be better - had always been an act of defiance before, but Young Mi… she believed in me more than I ever did. And she made me believe it too, after a while."

"It sounds like you really did love her," Rin said softly.

"... Maybe." He shook his head. "I was definitely taken with her. Enough that… for the first time… I began to question my purpose and my devotion to Shampoo. Of course at first I had no idea she felt anything at all for me - I thought that I was just indulging in pleasant fantasy. Until… one night she confessed her feelings to me."

He closed his eyes. The memory was itself a happy moment, twisted and made unbearable by the knowledge of what had come after. "I… didn't know what to say. I didn't know what to feel. I couldn't understand why someone like her would want me when everyone else I had known saw me as so worthless. I knew in my heart if I said yes I would just be proving Shampoo and all the others right - that I was weak and cowardly and that I would be accepting her because she was there, rather than risk being alone for the sake of the one I truly loved. But… my resolve was weak. I made myself believe I truly wanted to be with Young Mi and that I could put aside my feelings for
"Her father found out, of course. Everyone did. There are no secrets among carnies. He had noticed her feelings for me and as soon as it came out we were a couple he insisted we make arrangements to be married. He was ill and wanted to see his daughter find a partner to share the ring with as he had. He had always been kind to me but now he began to see me as a son."

"As time went on I realized that I was a fraud. I was just imagining Shampoo in Young Mi's place - hearing her voice speaking Young Mi's words. I hadn't moved on at all. So when I received word from my mother that Shampoo had been disgraced by an Outsider, that she had returned from Japan and been punished for her dishonor, I knew it was time to make a choice. But… even then I was a coward."

He slumped, feeling the weight of the memories pressing down on him. "I tried to sneak out to go see Shampoo. I thought… 'Surely now that she's been humbled… that she knows disgrace… surely if I show her it doesn't matter, that I still care…'" he chuckled weakly. "Young Mi caught me. I had my chance to come clean - to tell her the truth - but I was afraid. I lied. I told her I needed to say goodbye to Shampoo. She believed me and let me go - with the promise that I'd return."

"By the time I returned to Jusendo, of course, Shampoo had already returned to Japan to chase after the man who had already disgraced her once. I had missed my chance. I knew I was being punished for my weakness, for being unfaithful and for letting my resolve waver. Now my love was going to throw herself at one who had scorned her as I had been scorned and… I wanted… needed to spare her that pain. When I fell into the Yazunichuan, I thought I had found my weapon to do just that. It wasn't until later that I learned he was already cursed."

"I… used my contacts to find another circus travelling to Japan and signed on with them temporarily. I had stopped thinking about Young Mi or her father. All I could think of was saving Shampoo. By the time I reached Japan… the planned date for my wedding to Young Mi had come and gone. I knew by chasing after Shampoo I was destroying any chance I had of finding happiness elsewhere. I knew I was doing something unforgivable to someone who truly cared for me." He looked down at his hands, clasped in front of him. "I convinced myself that Young Mi would move on; that I was a momentary infatuation - no more serious than the vulgar 'conquests' some of the cruder members of the circus would brag about in each town we visited. I made myself believe that she would forget my name just as easily. I guess that made it easier to live with myself. I had managed to avoid the truth until now."

He looked up. Rin's face wasn't distinct enough to his vision to make out her expression well, but he imagined whatever charitable notions she had about him were gone.

_Good._

"So… what are you going to do now?" she asked.

"What do you mean?" He raised an eyebrow.

"Are… are you going to try and get in touch with Young Mi?" Rin asked. "You said you knew you had no hope with Shampoo, so…"

Mousse's eyes narrowed. "I _never_ said I had no hope!" he growled. He immediately paused, reigning in his angry response. "... Just… very little."

"S-sorry…" she said sheepishly, shrinking back in her seat.
They sat in silence a few more minutes.

"What would I even say?" Mousse asked finally.

Rin tentatively moved forward again. "Say you're sorry? Tell her why you did it? Tell her how you felt?"

"What would that do but cause her more pain?" Mousse asked miserably.

Rin frowned. "Haven't you said how you don't understand why you weren't good enough for Shampoo? Wouldn't you want to know? Even if it hurt?"

Mousse considered. "And what if she doesn't want to know?"

"Then... I-I guess she doesn't?" Rin said. "B-but at least you'd have offered, right?"

"And then where does that leave me?" Mousse scoffed.

"W-well, you'd have a chance to make things right?" Rin said. "You said you feel bad about what you did... that you know you hurt her and disappointed your mentor. Th-they were your family... maybe you could find a way to make amends..."

"Haven't I suffered enough?" Mousse asked coldly. "Hasn't karma paid me back for my transgressions a thousandfold? If you knew what I listen to nightly... the humiliating reminders I get every day that I am a failure? Watching my dear Shampoo debase herself..."

Rin lowered her gaze, her eyes shadowed by her bangs. Her fingers curled around the phone, knuckles going white as she clutched it tighter.

"This is my stop," she said suddenly, interrupting him.

"Oh!" Mousse looked up, "I can walk you to..."

"That's fine, thank you. I can make it on my own from here." Rin stood suddenly. She walked towards the doors as he watched, perplexed.

She paused before walking out. "Mr. Mu Tsu..." she asked over her shoulder. "Is Xian Pu happy?"

"... What?"

She didn't say anything further, walking out the doors as they slid closed behind her.

000

The walk back from the train station was relaxed enough, but Ranma felt a certain tension as they approached Ucchan's. She swallowed nervously, knowing where this was going.

Ukyou must have felt it. She fumbled for her keys, opening the door. "We... don't have to, you know." she said softly. She smiled over her shoulder at Ranma.

Ranma stepped in after and closed the door behind her. She leaned back against it and took a deep breath. "No... I-I want to Ucchan. I'm just..." she squirmed a bit. "Shampoo and Nabiki didn't really give me a chance to think about it before it happened, and this time I've had all night, a-and..."

"And now you're nervous?" Ukyou turned and walked back over, reaching out to cup Ranma's cheek.
Ranma blushed and nodded. "I shouldn't be... I-I just..." She swallowed. "Should I go get the hot water?"

Ukyou didn't answer right away. Ranma swallowed again, feeling even more nervous. She wasn't even exactly sure why.

A sly smile spread across Ukyou's face. "Do you want to get the hot water?"

"I... I already said I wanted to... to..." Ranma shivered. What is wrong with me?

"I know," Ukyou said softly, leaning closer. "I know you do. That's not what I'm asking. I'm asking if you want hot water too."

Ranma squeaked and blushed a bright red. She suddenly realized why she was so nervous. This was something she hadn't done with Nabiki and Shampoo. It was a line she hadn't been ready to cross. "I... I...!"

Ukyou leaned in, lips brushing her cheek as she moved close and whispered. "Let me help you decide: Tonight I think we don't need the hot water, Ranchan..."

Ranma let out a shuddering breath. On the surface this seemed like a no brainer male fantasy, but it was different being one of the two girls. Ranma had always defined clear lines in her struggle to maintain her male identity against the erosion that the curse had caused. Over time she had crossed a few - some unintentionally, others willingly. Lately she had simply walked away from many of them as not worth defending. If there was a point of no return she was probably already well past it as her own identity and self-image shifted and changed. But now she could feel something brittle within her, straining until it was ready to snap - and if it did - she would change and not come back. If she said 'yes' now, it wouldn't be a guy in a girl's body that went up those stairs with Ukyou.

Ranma's breathing calmed. She slid her arms around Ukyou's neck and smiled. "We don't need the hot water."

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Well, I'm curious to see what the reaction to THIS chapter will be!

I'm using a pic as my inspiration for Young Mi. This one right here: .

I claim no ownership of it.

Yes, I AM still updating this story. I am currently four chapters AHEAD of this, the bottleneck is proofreading, editing, and polishing, and my proofreader has this pesky thing called a LIFE that keeps getting in the way of him doing hours of work for free for me. So... the lemons are over there, go talk to Life's Manager.

Please don't kill me Gabe and Tycho.
Ryouga's dreams had been a bit... *strange* as of late. A disproportionate number of them had involved a certain redhead. His recollection of them typically faded quickly, so he was spared any more than a faint disquiet about their actual content by the time he had to deal with the redhead in question in real life, but it wasn't unusual for him to wake up and need a moment to remember where he was and why she wasn't there.

So it was forgivable that when he was shaken awake one morning and he opened his eyes, it didn't seem at all odd that Ranma was there smiling down at him.

"Morning, Ryo!" she said. She seemed excited about something. "Time to get up!"

"Mnnn..." he groaned. "...thought it was...your turn to feed Sachiko...Didja go back in time an' forget again?"

Ranma cocked her head. "Sachiko? Who's Sachiko?"

Ryouga turned over onto his side. "Tell the... mnnnn... the guy who turns into a bear... to go to hell..."

Ranma shook him harder. "Ryouga, come *on*. Even *I* can't wake up!"

Ryouga snorted. "Wha...? Your violin is in the hall, sweetie..." he mumbled, smiling at her.

"Sweetie!?" Ranma raised an eyebrow. "Ryouga, I dunno who you're dreaming about, but you'd better wake up *now* before I tell Akari about 'Sachiko'!"

Ryouga rolled back over, blinked, and then finally gained enough awareness to separate reality from the dream he had admittedly been enjoying rather thoroughly. His eyes widened and he scrambled backwards in the bed and immediately struck his skull against the headboard. "*What are you doing in my room?!*

"Waking you up, dumbass." She had been on her hands and knees on his bed, and now she straightened up and smoothed out her skirt. She was dressed in her school uniform, as usual, though her hair was unbound and brushed out.

Ryouga grabbed the sheet and pulled it up, mindful he was only wearing boxers at the moment.

"Why!? And what did you tell my Mom to get her to let you up here while I was sleeping?!!"

"I didn't." Ranma thumbed towards the open window. "She was busy outside so I let myself in."

Ryouga clapped a hand over his eyes and slowly counted to thirty. *Yelling or murdering the redhead would make noise that Mom would hear. Calm... slow... deep breaths... Kill Ranma AFTER.* "Do you have *any* idea of how awkward it would be if she came in now and caught you in here like this?" he asked in a low, tight growl. He let his hand drop so he could glare at her. "She thinks you're a girl! *And* that I like you!"

Ranma shrugged. "We'll just tell her I already have a boyfriend. Say it's Ukyou. She's dressed as a boy when we come by every morning and I don't think she'd mind posing as one for your Mom to take some of the heat off."

"Yeah, great plan. Except I've been home for a couple of weeks now and I actually *talk* to my
mother and I've already told her about Ukyou! And that she's a girl that dresses up as a boy out of habit," Ryouga said, frustrated.

Ranma smirked and waggled her eyebrows. "Then we tell her Ucchan is my boyfriend anyway and let her draw her own conclusions. Ucchan won't mind. It's pretty much the truth, after all."

"Or you could go back out the window quietly and without being seen and you can tell me why you had to wake me up so urgently on the way to school," Ryouga countered.

"I can't wait that long!" Ranma bounced on her toes. "I gotta talk to someone or I'll explode!"

"Or I could just let that happen and take a bit of extra time this morning cleaning up your bits," Ryouga said darkly.

"Come on, Ryo! Please?" She gave him an imploring look.

"Ranma, you have four fiancées. Any one of whom would be happy to sit rapt while you talk about pretty much anything," Ryouga rubbed the sleep from his eyes and glanced at the alarm clock. "... Oh holy crap, are you serious...? Do you even sleep Ranma?"

"I can't talk to them! It's about them!" Ranma sat back down on the side of his bed and leaned towards him. "C'mon, Ryo, I'm begging you!"

The pose, combined with the imploring look, combined with the phrasing edged way too close to recent dream territory for him and he inched back again a bit. "Okay, okay! Can I at least get dressed first?"

She rolled her eyes. "Ugh, fine!" She leaned back away and crossed her arms, pouting.

"Ummm… get out?" Ryouga said, motioning towards the window.

"Why? You ain't got anything I haven't seen before," She said, then added in a more thoughtful tone, "... literally, actually - and with me girl-side too. I'm surprised we haven't gotten into more trouble with that..."

Ryouga groaned. If having Ranma in his room was a dangerous situation, actually changing clothes would be a temptation the Fates would not be able to resist. Not that he'd entertain the idea regardless, not with that dream still fresh in his mind. "Okay, alright, you win! Tell me what you're so worked up about, then you can take a hike and let me get up in peace!" He paused, cocking his head. "Did something bad happen?"

Ranma grinned and turned back to face him. "No, no! It's all been good! Really good! I just... I needed someone to gush to about it, y'know? Normally I'd go to Ucchan, but part of it is about Ucchan, and I'm not sure I'm comfortable talking to Sayuri and the girls about this stuff yet, and I obviously can't talk to Hiroshi or Daisuke about it because... hello? They're Hiroshi and Daisuke..."

"Holy cow, did you eat a whole bag of coffee beans this morning?" Ryouga shook his head.

"Nope! Haven't actually had breakfast yet. Think I could get some here? Ukyou was still doing morning prep when I went out the door. I'll go back out and come in through the front door properly, promise!" Ranma was babbling a mile a minute. It would have been almost endearing at a more humane hour.

"Fine, fine..." Ryouga said, just wanting her to spit it out. "Gush already."
Ranma immediately flopped back on the bed, her arms spread out as she sighed. "I don't even know where to start…!"

"... Right. Plan B it is, I'll hide the body for now and dig the grave after school." Ryouga cocked his fist back.

Ranma squealed and crossed her arms over her face. "Okay, okay! I'll talk!" She giggled and peeked past her arms at him.

"Geez you're girly today!" Ryouga huffed and sat back against the headboard, crossing his arms.

"Am I?" She looked thoughtful for a moment, then shrugged. "Who cares, I'm in a good mood!" She sat up.

"So the dates are going well?" Ryouga asked, raising an eyebrow at how easily she shrugged off what once would have guaranteed a fight.

"It's gonna work, Ryo," she beamed. "For the first time, I can really see it working! I went on a date with Shampoo and… and we talked… I met her Greek grandparents…"

"Hold on, Greek Grandparents?" Ryouga held up a hand.

"Nice people - they lost their kids so they kinda adopted Shampoo, unofficially, and apparently she's got this whole life I know nuthin' about except now I do, and… and…” She blushed, "She and Nabiki…"

Ryouga shook his head frantically. "I don't need details, Ra…” He trailed off, his eyes widening. "She and Nabiki?!

"Yup." Ranma waggled her eyebrows, grinning.

"Gah!" Ryouga covered his eyes. "Please… please don't make that expression while talking about your fiancees ever again. Especially while you're a girl!" He sighed. "... Congratulations, I guess? You're now guilty of at least one of the things Kuno hates and envies you for."

Ranma deflated a little. "C'mon, Ryo, don't be like that… This is… I didn't think this was ever gonna happen!"

Ryouga lowered his hand to peer at the girl. "... Seriously?!

"Not without it blowing something else up so bad that it completely ruined it, or… or I'd screw up somehow, or…!" She flopped back on the bed again. "It's like… it was this big, looming thing that I was all twisted up and terrified of, and then when it finally happened…” She closed her eyes and sighed. "It was nice… it was wonderful, but that's just because it was with Nabiki and Shampoo. It wasn't anything like what I was expecting or afraid of."

Ryouga sighed and folded his arms again. "Well… good, I guess. I… uhh… hope the rest of the dates go as well?" He peered at her curiously. "I'm… I'm guessing you and Ukyou…"

"Yeah…” Ranma said softly, her expression getting more thoughtful. "I… that kind of altered my universe…"

"Better not let Nabiki or Shampoo hear you say that," Ryouga snorted.

Ranma closed her eyes. "Not like that, jerk." She took a deep breath. "When we… I was…” she
paused, unsure how to explain. "I've been a girl since yesterday."

"What has that got to do with..." Ryouga started then trailed off. "Oh... Oh." Ryouga swallowed, mustering all of his willpower to avoid visualizing that. There was a good chance he wouldn't survive the blood loss the resultant imagery could cause. "W-well... I mean, if... if Ukyou is okay with it that way..."

"That's not it, Ryo..." Ranma rolled onto her side. Her hair fell about her face, framing her blue eyes as she looked at him. "I've been a girl. Up here." She tapped her head.

"Is... that bad?" Ryouga asked. "I mean... that happens sometimes anyway, right?"

She sat up, scooted closer and shook her head. Ryouga felt a slight twinge of panic as he realised how close she was to him on his bed.

"Here," she held out her hand. "That's part of why I wanted to see you. I was thinking you might be able to help me figure out what's going on in my own head?"

"I'm not your therapist, Ranma," Ryouga said, though he reluctantly took her hand. "Is it that bad?"

She shook her head again. "No! I mean..." She smiled. "I feel better than I have in a long time. I don't feel like I'm fighting myself anymore. I- I like this. I just feel... different."

Ryouga nodded, closed his eyes and tried to focus on the swirl of her emotions. There were definitely brighter colors now, currents and eddies mixing in cascading ripples of pastel. The sense of being comfortable with herself was no longer buried, but was nearer the surface, and the dark streaks of shame and fear he had sensed before were mostly gone. There were still a few, of course. Also the emotions he associated with her male side seemed less pronounced, though those he could see were generally much calmer and brighter as well. He opened his eyes and glanced at her.

"Well?" she asked. She chewed on her lower lip in a way that was unexpectedly adorable. It occurred to him that her lips seemed shinier. Lip gloss? THAT'S a step!

"Well... you got laid. What do you expect?" Ryouga tried to tug his hand away. "You're all happy-float-glowing from it. Pretty sure that's normal. You're definitely not as stressed out."

She smiled, but she held onto his hand. "Hey, hey, hey... Lemme listen a bit, okay?"

Ryouga looked away and blushed. "Ranma, I would really rather not be sitting here in my underwear in my bed and holding hands with you when my mother is liable to come in to wake me up for school any minute!"

"You've been grumpy and I wanna make sure you're okay," Ranma said back. "You never tell me anything so at least let me make sure it's not all darkness and despair in there again, okay?" She closed her eyes and leaned back against the headboard.

Ryouga sighed in tired exasperation. "Ranma..." he said, but he didn't protest further. This is torture...

"Wow, this is actually a lot brighter than I thought," Ranma said. "It's not the muck anymore at least, but... wow... it's all churning. Chaotic. Dark mixed with lighter colors though... Oh... It's Akari, isn't it?" She opened her eyes and looked at him. "Or... someone else? You didn't meet another girl at school, did you? Is that who 'Sachiko' is?"

Ryouga groaned and let his head thunk back against the wall. "No, there's no girl. Sachiko is..." He
sighed. "I was having a dream and Sachiko is… well in the *dream* anyway… She was my daughter."

"*Your daughter?*" Ranma's eyes widened. "What, you were dreaming about future domestic bliss?"

Ryouga sighed. "I guess? It's kind of muddled and there was this jackass who turned into a bear who kept on attacking us and we couldn't find this violin… I don't know why there was a violin… and my wife kept on swapping places with her past self and…" He shrugged. The imagery had already faded. "It's kinda gone now."

She grinned. "That actually sounds kinda cool. Weird, but cool. 'Sachiko', huh? That's a pretty name." She stretched before leaning back against the headboard. "So who was Mrs. Hibiki?"

"I don't remember," Ryouga lied. "It's kinda hazy."

"Does Akari play violin?"

Ryouga snorted. "*Nobody* I know plays violin. I honestly have no clue where the violin came from - just that it was very important and she was going to be upset if we didn't find it."

Ranma chuckled. "Geez, even in your dreams you can't help but get in trouble with girls." She closed her eyes and considered a moment. "Getting lost in time though… that would suck."

"There were alternate timelines too, I think? She tried to explain it to me but it sounded like gibberish. It probably *was* gibberish." He realised that she was leaning against his shoulder and her head was nodding. "Hey… *hey!* Don't fall asleep in here!"

"Why not? You don't hafta be up for 'nother hour…" She yawned and gestured lazily at the alarm clock. "Because you're in my bed!" "Because… you'll be all groggy at school if you nap now." He took a breath. "Okay, *just get her to change back to a guy and that'll fix this.* "Tell you what, I'll loan you some clothes, we can get you some hot water and then we'll spar a bit. Mebbe clear up the curse thing with Mom once and for all."

"No can do," Ranma mumbled. "Used th' waterproof soap this morning. Gotta game... need to be ready in case the Pineapple-head tries anything again. Gonna be a girl 'till Friday." Her head dropped against his shoulder.

"If you fall asleep, I swear, I'll tell Ukyou you slept in my bed," Ryouga bluffed. "She'd kill you, not me." Ranma cracked an eye open and grinned. "You're right," Ryouga said. "She'd just *maim* you, so she could nurse you back to health after you'd learned your lesson."

Ranma made a face but she was awake now. "Don't make my fiancee sound like such a yandere!"

"Then get *out* of my bed!" Ryouga growled. He rolled his eyes as she continued to hesitate. "Fine! Give me fifteen minutes to get dressed and cleaned up and then ring the doorbell and I'll get you breakfast."

"Deal!"

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"Well, Tatewaki, I think we are all rather astounded by your physical recovery. Physiologically speaking, we have no further reason to keep you here." The Psychiatrist sighed and put aside her clipboard. "That being said, I still have reservations about releasing you to your family, given their… resistance to the treatment of your imbalance."

*Imbalance*, Tatewaki thought. It was the word Dr. Kamiya had chosen to use for it, referring to the chemical imbalance in his brain, but it was just a timid way of saying *Madness*. "I am aware, doctor. But unlike previous times, decisions regarding treatment are now my own and not my father's. I… feel I must see if I can reconcile that with my family or not now, before any plans for my future are made."

She looked doubtful for a moment but nodded. "I understand. Understand, though, that normally this would not even be an option. Your father has already proven himself to be disruptive to your treatment, and interfered with countless other psychiatric professionals who have attempted to treat you. I must stress that limiting your contact with him is vital to your recovery. And it is recovery, Tatewaki. Please know that. Your condition is, and always has been, entirely treatable."

Tatewaki held up the bottle of small white pills, examining them through the clear orange plastic. "So long as I hold tight to my 'sanity', yes?" He chuckled softly. "I do not think the bard who first penned that turn of phrase could have envisioned such a corporeal manifestation of it."

"If he interferes with your medication or attempts to co-opt your treatment again… even once…" The psychiatrist began.

Tatewaki closed his hand around the bottle. "No fear, doctor. I have been asleep for far too long." He closed his eyes for a moment and when he opened them he smiled at her. "I intend to hold tight this time. I am no longer the boy he can bully or oppress into compliance. If there is strife, I will call you and I will find other arrangements."

"I'll need you to check in at least once a week," she said. "More if you feel you need it. That's in addition to your support group meetings. I also recommend that you find a new family doctor. I'm afraid your current physician has a somewhat… questionable reputation. I believe that's why your father chose him."

"I will," Tatewaki nodded, tucking the bottle into his pocket. He stood smoothly.

"And don't wait until the last minute to refill your prescription!" She stood and held out her hand to him. "I want you to be one of my success stories, Tatewaki."

He took the hand and shook it warmly. "I will endeavor to make you proud, Doctor."

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Pride was perhaps the furthest thing from Tatewaki's mind when he said those words, of course. The doctor had cautioned him that depression could be a side-effect of the medication. That thought was almost amusing. A side effect! Like it would be abnormal somehow to come out of a years-long haze to discover you had become a raving madman.

*Like father, like son*, he thought bitterly. The doctor had told him that such things were often hereditary and that his father's problems were likely similar and could be similarly treated. As if the prideful buffoon would ever tolerate the indignity of the notion that his sanity came from a tiny white pill.

"You look tired, brother dear," Kodachi said as she led him from the hospital to the car. She was
quite obviously annoyed by the chore of having to pick him up. Their father had refused, of course, reiterating his objections to Tatewaki’s treatment. Tatewaki strongly suspected his father may have been hoping to just leave him there permanently.

"It's been a long few weeks," Tatewaki said. He looked her over, trying to reconcile the young, seemingly normal girl who walked next to him with the twisted, bizarre recollections of his sister from his time of confusion. "You look well. How are things with you?"

She looked up at him, surprised. Evidently this was not something he typically asked her. "W-well, if you must know… I am now engaged to marry my darling Ranma!" She played with her ponytail as a demure blush graced her cheeks. "His mother approves of me and I believe the rest of the omiai is merely a formality."

Ranma Saotome. That was a name that was prominent in his mind, drawing forth dim recollections of rage, frustration and maniacal glee. He shuddered, loathe to think about what injustices he had visited upon his junior in his delusion. "Congratulations. I… fear that my recollections of Ranma are suspect at the moment, but I do recall he was a tremendously talented martial artist."

He tried to imagine Kodachi in a wedding dress and failed. Instead, all that would come to him were his clearest memories of her; of the young girl who always came to dinner filthy from playing in her garden, or talking excitedly about some exotic flower or plant that she had coaxed into blooming for her. Sometimes she would even bring a blossom to show him.

"You don't seem excited, dear brother. You don't approve? This would clear the way for you to woo your beloved Akane Tendo, after all," she said sourly.

Tatewaki sighed. "No, I… no…" He shook his head. "I am happy for you sister. I just… I am having trouble imagining you being a woman already. I have missed so much of your growing up already."

Her expression softened, her confusion evident. "But… you have been there, brother."

He shook his head again. "No, I haven't, Dachi. I have languished indulgently in fevered fantasy." His hand went into his pocket, closing around the bottle. "As for Akane Tendo… I have wronged her and her sisters grievously. If half of what I remember doing is fact and not just the hallucinations of a mad waking dream then… I scarcely know how to make amends to her, much less court her."

Kodachi scowled. She stopped and turned to face him. "You are many things, dear brother, and many of them have been detestable, but I will not have you be this! I will not have you devalue and deny all you have done with your head down and your eyes on the dirt!" She made an effort to let the surge of anger pass. "Yes, you have been a mad fool. But you have always been there when I needed you - even when father wouldn't or couldn't. And one thing you always taught me, no matter how we clashed, was to keep my head up, my back straight, and my eyes forward. You are a Kuno, not some mewling sycophant!"

He blinked in surprise at the fierceness in her voice and straightened his posture almost reflexively. "Yes… of course," he said. "I am sorry, Dachi."

"You haven't called me 'Dachi' in…" she said softly, then shook her head. "No, nevermind. It is time to get you home, brother." She walked to the limo where one of the many servants whose name he had never bothered to learn opened the door for them.

He glanced back at the hospital one last time. I do not wish to return here. He scowled. I do not wish to live my life huddled in sanctuaries or addled by my own demons. I WILL find my way this
time. He stepped into the car and let the closing door block it from view.

Nabiki stretched, working out the kinks in her muscles. She didn't know if Cologne had started going easier on her or if she was somehow getting accustomed to her training or if it was the massage Shampoo had given her, but her usual crippled morning gait had been replaced with just a few aches and a little soreness.

She glanced back to see Shampoo walking beside Akane, whispering something in her ear that caused them both to giggle. She smiled, glad to see them getting along without needing some crisis or Ranma to drag them together. She could also see Shampoo was getting more artful with putting Akane at ease with physical contact. The Amazon had been on remarkably good behaviour that night. Nabiki's chat with her about her sister's hangups had helped, though she suspected Shampoo was just easing into seducing her as more of a soft sell.

You should probably just give up, little sister, Nabiki thought, bemused as she noticed a slight blush color Akane's cheeks when Shampoo leaned close. Shampoo had gotten more skillful with 'innocent' or 'accidental' touches that managed to skirt the line and slip under Akane's radar. A brush of the fingertips here, an accidental bump there, letting her weight rest against Akane, little touches that lasted just a second too long. It was all starting to have an effect as Akane's complexes and hang ups about physical intimacy gradually crumbled under Shampoo's careful stoking of Akane's long-repressed passions. Nabiki had a little internal wager on whether Shampoo was going to get her way or end up unleashing something even the hedonistic Amazon wasn't prepared for. Her money was on the latter and she planned to be a safe distance when it happened. Perhaps America…

She felt her phone buzz in her pocket. Just once, a text message. She fished it out and tapped the screen.

Your request is being considered. We will be in further contact during your free period. Be alone once it starts and we can continue our conversation.

Alibaba

There was no sending number or any other information, which should have been impossible as her phone was set not to accept messages or calls from unknown numbers. Nabiki blinked then thumbed the screen off and pocketed the phone.

It wasn't that she didn't want to know more but she knew that staring at her phone was pointless and would draw attention. She sighed, not liking how often she was getting pulled aside for these secret meetings with shadowy figures.

At least it's not some big guy in a nondescript sedan, she thought. But it did remind her that she had several things in the air that she needed to attend to, as pleasant as recent distractions had been. Her eyes fell on Rin, who had been uncharacteristically subdued, walking at the edge of the cluster formed by the volleyball team. She quickened her pace to draw even with her.

"Hey Rin? Everything okay?" she asked. It wasn't entirely an empty gesture as anything that brought the normally chipper girl down was a cause for concern even if she wasn't part of the inner circle of emotional train wrecks Nabiki was trying to keep from bursting into flames.

"Hmmm?" Rin looked up then blinked and rubbed her eyes as if she were just waking up. "Oh! No, no… I'm just tired. I didn't sleep so well."
Nabiki raised an eyebrow. "Nervous about the game today?"

Rin shook her head. "Mnnn. Not really. It's just... I suppose I'm still a little upset at someone. I don't think he understands or cares, though, so it's silly. I'll be fine by game time." She smiled up at her. "Thank you for asking, though. We don't get to talk much! Are you doing okay? I know you have a lot going on with... with..." she ducked her head, blushing a little. "... things."

It was tough to not like Rin though she was hardly the sort Nabiki would have socialized with normally. "Surprisingly well for the moment," she replied with a smile. "We're starting to learn to balance things." She shrugged. "I... guess it must seem strange to the rest of you."

Rin cocked her head and tapped her chin thoughtfully, as if seriously considering the question. "Well... It's different, I guess? I never had a boyfriend so I'm learning a lot from watching you guys and... um, others." She blushed again. Nabiki could tell there was a story there. "But... It feels like you're all happy? You all smile a lot more, especially you. So... strange doesn't really matter, does it?" she continued thoughtfully. "Dad used to tell me there were all sorts of families that he met at the Olympics. He kept in touch with some of them, like my Uncle Otto. He's was an Olympic runner. He and his husband come and visit us at Christmastime. He and my Dad cheered each other on during the Olympics. Uncle Otto had a lot of problems because back then, marriages between men weren't recognized, so Uncle Stefan... that's Uncle Otto's husband... couldn't stay with him in the Olympic village and there were a lot of people who were mean to Otto because they didn't understand, or thought who he loved was a bad thing just because. Dad said he didn't find out about Uncle Stefan until he and Otto were already friends so he had to decide if he wanted to keep his friend or keep thinking what his friend was doing was bad. He decided that it made Otto happy and it made Stefan happy and it didn't hurt anyone and they were better, stronger people together, so he decided to stop thinking it was a bad thing. He taught me that's how I should decide whether something is good or bad. It's not about whether it's something I want." She looked at Nabiki. "So... no. It's not strange. You're just a family. Your family is different than mine and it's different from the one I'll maybe have someday. But your family feels like it's a good one, so I like it."

Nabiki regarded the girl evenly, surprised. "Your Dad sounds like a pretty remarkable guy."

Rin beamed. "I think so! But I'm probably biased? Still..." She glanced at Ranma, who was walking ahead of them having an animated conversation with Ryouga. "... I guess I like to think I'm biased because he's awesome. He manages to have time for me even with me having so many siblings."

"Two sisters, two brothers, right?" Nabiki said, plucking the detail from the file she had browsed about the girl at the start of this whole mess.

"R-right! I didn't think anyone outside of the team knew about that," Rin said sheepishly.

"I have my ways," Nabiki said with a smirk. "But you don't talk about yourself much. I hope I'm not prying?"

"Oh n-no!" Rin shook her head emphatically. "I just... I prefer listening, you know? Most of you have stories that are so much more interesting than mine!"

Nabiki raised an eyebrow. "Your Father is an Olympic gold medalist, you're a prodigy at volleyball on practically the same level as Ranma is at Martial Arts and you have a Olympian German Uncle. You have me beat pretty handily. But it isn't exactly a competition, you know." She patted Rin's shoulder. "I'm guessing it's just easier to let others talk?"

Rin fidgeted a bit. "W-well..." She sighed. "I-I stammer, a-and, I say things that people think are
strange… and I have trouble putting words together with… with the things I know." She smiled weakly. "Senpai has actually helped me a lot with that. She and I have talked a few times. And now you!" Her smile brightened and Nabiki felt the Rin Headpat Urge rising.

Nabiki suddenly didn't feel so sanguine about her plan. At least, not in the original form. Rin was someone that even the Ice Queen of old wouldn't have felt right manipulating. *It's still a good idea - *I could just ASK, but… the more Rin knows, the more of a burden it is. "Rin, I have an idea for something sneaky."

"I-is it something really mean?" Rin asked nervously.

Nabiki shook her head with a reassuring smile. "No… actually it helps out some people who have kind of gotten a raw deal. It just so happens that helping them might also strip Himura of an unfair advantage. I was wondering… your Dad taught you to play, right? Has he ever coached before?"

"He used to, but he hasn't had much luck finding a coaching job since he was injured," Rin said.

"He was injured?"

"Mnn. He landed badly during a game and tore a tendon in his leg. He couldn't really play competitively after that." Rin got a sad, far-off look in her eyes. "Mom said he should get into coaching, but Dad always said that since she was earning enough to support us he thought that maybe it was a sign he should settle down and focus on raising us. I still think he'd like to, though."

"Well, then… maybe this can work out well for everyone," Nabiki said, her smirk widening as she felt the pieces click into place. *Everyone but Himura!*

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Nabiki followed the instructions from the odd text message and ducked out during her free period to make her way to the utility shed. She honestly doubted whoever it was would actually know for certain, but with all the surveillance Principal Kuno tended to favor, who could know for sure? Best to comply to the best of her ability until she knew more.

She slipped inside the shed and leaned back against the door, fishing out her phone. She didn't have to wait long - it started buzzing almost immediately.

"Nabiki Tendo," she answered.

"We've heard you're in a conflict with Himura Tanaka, granddaughter of Nobu Tanaka," said a voice, heavily filtered and distorted. "And that you're looking for assistance to compete with her technological edge."

Nabiki raised an eyebrow. "I'm assuming you're responding to the request put out by my associates?"

"We became aware of it, though we've not contacted them. We felt it better to deal directly with the source."

"Seems awfully high end for a conflict between a couple of high schoolers," Nabiki noted dryly. "So either you're a poser using a voice mod you downloaded online or you want something - or both, I suppose."

"We know Nobu's associate has contacted you already and that you're aware your contest with Himura has considerably higher stakes," the voice said. "But I respect your skepticism. Before we continue, allow us to present a demonstration to prove that we're capable of what we promise. If you
If you step outside of that shed, you should be able to see a large animated billboard if you look across the soccer field."

Nabiki shrugged, muted her phone, tucked it into her pocket and stepped out of the shed. She looked across the field and spotted the distant billboard. It was currently displaying an ad for toothpaste, with a smiling woman who was showing a lot of teeth.

Just for an instant, the image flickered to be replaced with another image. It didn't last more than a half second - a blink-and-you-miss-it flicker that depicted a black and white top hat and mask with the left eye alight in flame.

Nabiki ducked back into the shed, her eyes wide. She fished out her phone again. "That's who you are!! No one's heard anything about you since Masayoshi Shido's trial!"

"So you've heard of us. Good. That makes this easier. We've had to keep a much lower profile since then, so we would appreciate if you kept this knowledge to yourself. You may refer to us as 'Alibaba' if you must." The voice sounded somewhat amused, even through the filtering.

"All right… You've officially impressed me," Nabiki said. "And worried me. What do the likes of you need with someone like me?"

"You're uniquely positioned," the voice replied. "Tanaka Pharmaceuticals was a large backer of Masayoshi Shido and has been involved in a number of other dealings going back decades. All of our work exposing Shido will be pointless if the infrastructure that allowed him to rise to power remains intact. We need to gather information on this infrastructure and our usual methods won't suffice. But your 'contest' with Himura provides a unique opportunity."

Nabiki closed her eyes and let the back of her head thunk against the door. "This is exactly the direction I didn't want to go!" She lifted the phone to her ear. "You want me to win so that the 'conversation' I was promised happens."

"Exactly. It's impossible to tell what Nobu might be thinking as far as you are concerned but the potential is something we can't pass up. So we're willing to take a gamble on you, Ms. Tendo. Tell us what you need to win and we'll make it happen."

"And in exchange you want me to rat out the Yakuza," she scowled. "That doesn't sound like a very equitable deal to me. That's a lot of risk to put myself in just to win a few volleyball games that we can win easily without your help."

"You don't honestly believe this will end with the game, win or lose, do you?" The tone of amusement was still there. "Himura will be out for vengeance either way and Nobu's taken an interest in you. You're MARKED, no matter what you do. Getting the information to take down Tanaka Pharmaceuticals is in your best interests as well. Unless you really ARE intent on joining the Yakuza?"

"I'm not really interested in taking orders or following someone else's rules," Nabiki said, her eyes narrowing. "Including yours. And if you haven't noticed, I have some very powerful friends."

"We're aware of that. As are the Yakuza. They'd have no trouble sacrificing a few thugs to see how many bullets your friends can dodge. I don't think you'd be as eager to wager their lives. We're not interested in controlling you, Nabiki. Just a partnership. We have a common interest." Alibaba replied. "There's an app installed on your phone. If you want to talk, just open it and press 'Ok' and we'll be in touch shortly after. Take some time to think it over. We'll do everything we can to minimize the risk to you - you have our word."
Nabiki checked her phone. A new icon had appeared on the home screen. It looked like a cat face, somewhat cartoonish, really, and there was no name.

"I'll take your offer under advisement," Nabiki said curtly and ended the call. She sighed, stuffed the phone back into her pocket and leaned against the door. Another thing I'm probably going to keep from Ranma and the others to avoid worrying them. I used to LIKE having secrets… now they're starting to make me sick.

000

Mousse did not have good vision as a human - this much was true. However Jusenkyo had seen fit to grant him a curse that, in many ways, was more of a boon.

As a duck, his vision was perfect.

That, in addition to flight, made it a form Mousse found he regretted very little. Secreting a small thermos of hot water in his feathers was almost child's play with his hidden weapons technique, which allowed him far more freedom to change at will than most Jusenkyo sufferers. He found it liberating to be able to soar so far above his earthly travails.

But today his thoughts kept him tethered to the ground. He circled over Furinkan High, riding the thermal currents between the sun-warmed asphalt and the cool grassy fields in a lazy spiral that kept him aloft almost without effort. He could maintain this all day if he wished, and today he thought that he just might.

He watched the lavender-haired object of his obsession walk through the gates, accompanied by the rest of 'The Harem' as Nabiki Tendo had so flippantly dubbed it. Ranma Saotome himself (or herself, as was the case currently), was just behind them, talking to Ryouga Hibiki of all people, followed by the girls from the volleyball team and a couple of others. Mousse was startled to see Ryouga in the group and wondered what kind of madness had possessed Hibiki that would cause him to accept Ranma Saotome's mad arrangements without so much as a squawk of protest. The Lost Boy seemed remarkably calm, even compared to his best behavior, and what was stranger still, he seemed to be paying little or no attention to Akane Tendo. In fact, all of his attention was focussed squarely on…

Has Saotome's depravity extended that far? Mousse thought with disgust as he watched the redhead and the Lost Boy talking and laughing together in a way he had never observed them behaving before. Seducing his former rival, and in front of Shampoo no less! His gaze moved back to his lavender-haired goddess, expecting to see her seething with righteous rage at how her 'Airen' carried on.

But Shampoo seemed herself to be entirely preoccupied with Akane Tendo. The musical sound of her laughter, mixed with Akane's, drifted up to him even here.

Is Xian Pu happy?

His wingbeats faltered for a moment. He recovered quickly, using it as an excuse to tear his gaze from his beloved as he worked to regain his balance and a little altitude. Unfortunately, it was not enough to distract him from the question.

Is Xian Pu happy?

The answer was obvious. He had known Shampoo all his life. He had made her the focus of it, the very core of everything he was or did. For all that he feigned blindness to her contempt for him, he was painfully aware of it, just as he was aware of something beneath it - something kinder and more
forgiving. The Reversal Jewel had been proof enough of that. She cared for him more than she would admit. She must! That certainty had been all that had kept him going.

*Is Xian Pu happy?*

*She would never be happy as a slave!* his heart cried, the image of that wretched collar filling his mind. That's why he had refused to use the power of the egg of the Phoenix Tribe to enslave her, even if doing so would have given him everything he had ever wanted. That's how he knew this whole situation was depraved and that his precious Shampoo was being exploited!

*Is Xian Pu happy?*

But he already knew that for a lie. Shampoo would never submit to someone trying to force her. Even under the influence of the egg she had found small ways to resist. She would strain and claw and pull at any shackles placed upon her. But… he knew just as well that she would willingly give herself over just as utterly to someone she felt was worthy. That was what he had always aspired to be for her and yet never could be. How cruel was it that not only had Shampoo found such worthiness in an admittedly superior martial artist like Ranma Saotome, but also in an utterly ordinary, soft and weak girl?

*Is Xian Pu happy?*

Of course the answer was obvious. Shampoo had never smiled like she did now. She had never laughed as she did now. In the village, her eyes had been cold and her laugh scornful. She had always been on guard, careful never to show weakness to those around her. But here, no one knew or cared about her legacy and, in the company of the one who had already bested her, she could pursue her heart's desires away from the judging eyes of her peers.

*Of course she's happy,* he thought miserably. *She has never been happier in her life. And everything and everyone that makes her happy is HERE.*

He felt a mix of shame and envy; shame that he could not find any joy in her happiness, and envy of it. Not of Ranma Saotome or Nabiki Tendo, but envy of Shampoo and the happiness she had found.

It wasn't as if he had never laughed that way. The group below and their merry companionship reminded him of better days with the circus - easy camaraderie, mirth and joy even amidst all of the hard work and the sense of belonging to something bigger. He remembered a smiling face surrounded by curls the color of sakura blossoms and green eyes that seemed always to be on him.

*I was happy,* he thought. It was strange that he only recognized it as such now, when he was at his lowest. It was only with the perspective of misery that he could look back and say 'That's what it was. That's what happiness felt like'.

The smile on the lovely face in his memory faded, the emerald eyes growing cold and hard, tears leaving silver trails down her cheeks.

Had he stolen that happiness, not just from himself, but from her as well? All for the sake of a more familiar misery and a pointless devotion?

*Young Mi...* his head drooped. Had he just trodden on another's heart as his had been trodden on? If he knew his goal was unattainable - if he merely lingered through some vain hope of understanding why... what right did he have to deny that to another - especially someone he had once claimed to care about? What should he do?
He caught the glint of gold out of the corner of his eye. He banked, scanning, and caught sight of Rin, nearly invisible as she walked beside Nabiki. Her shy and unassuming demeanor usually let her fade into the background around others. She had only come to his attention because the sun had caught her hair, though he didn't know why he should have noticed it so keenly.

Still, he felt oddly better for having seen her. He flapped his wings and left the thermals for a moment to get a better vantage.

*Rin understands this*, he thought, remembering her insight. She *had* been right after all. *Maybe she would help guide me?* He considered, taking to the thermals once more to gain altitude. *She was mad at me last I saw her… frustrated. But… I have very little to lose. I'll ask her to forgive me. At the very least, I can tell her that now I understand what she was trying to say.*

For some reason that thought made him feel a little better too, and he found himself thinking about the sunset despite it being early morning.

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Rin took a deep breath closed her eyes and tried to clear her mind. She was leaning against the wall outside of the change room, still wearing her track suit. She knew the rest of the team was inside waiting for her but she wanted some solitude for once.

It usually wasn't this hard for her. Volleyball was *easy* after all. It was what she did to get her mind off of all the other stuff going on. But the talk that morning with Nabiki about relationships had just refreshed the problem that had kept her up half the night.

*I shouldn't think badly of Mu Tsu for it all*, she thought. *Relationships are complex, right? I-I'm sure it's all much more than it sounds.*

It didn't change the fact it had greatly altered her perception of the Chinese martial artist. Her sparkling image of him, mysterious and cool, was now tainted with selfishness and a frightening lack of empathy. He had seemed so *cold* to the idea of Young Mi's obvious suffering.

*Is that what you're really like, Mu Tsu?* she wondered.

She heard footsteps in the hall and raised her head. Her eyes widened as she spotted the white robe and long black hair.

Mousse was reading room numbers carefully, as he had to get close to make them out. He appeared to be looking for something but he was obviously unfamiliar with the school. It was fairly clear he hadn't seen her yet and it would be easy enough for her to duck into the girl's changeroom without him noticing. She could just put this off until there was a better time…

She sighed. *And that's what I'm mad at him for, isn't it?* She looked up and called out to him. "Hello, Mr. Mu Tsu."

He raised his head, turning to locate the source of her voice. "Ah! Rin!" He hurried toward her, adjusting his glasses. "I've been looking for you!"

Rin giggled in spite of herself at that. "Maybe you should have been listening instead?"

"Hmm?" he blinked. "Oh! Yes… that would make sense." He nodded to himself. "Do you have a few minutes before your game?"

Rin sighed. "A few." She turned to face him fully. "Mr. Mu Tsu, I want to apol…"
He immediately bent almost double in front of her; so abruptly, in fact, that it caused her to skip back half a step.

"Yiiiii?!"

"Please accept my humble apologies!" Mousse said, looking back up. "You were upset with me before. I was curt with you when you were only trying to help. I am sorry."

Rin searched his face for a moment, sighed and shook her head. "I… that wasn't why I was upset, Mr. Mu Tsu…” She turned to gaze at the change room door. "I-I should probably go…”

"She is happy."

Rin froze. Slowly, she turned her head to look at him.

"Your question. 'Is Xian Pu happy?' he said quietly. "She has been happy here. Happier than in the village. Ranma Saotome…” He clenched his fist. "... Is a part of that. Even if she never caught him, she was happier here chasing him. She found friends and adventure." He looked down. "I… did not. I have been… envious of her. Resentful, even."

Rin's eyes widened.

Mousse took a deep breath. "Single-mindedness is often quietly admired in my village, even if the common wisdom warns against it. Both Shampoo and I are guilty of it, but where Shampoo has learned to broaden her horizons, compromise, and find companionship and joy in her journey… I have not. And I am finding myself at a point where my destination is unreachable, and… I have little idea what to do. I am… in need of a guide.” He folded his hands into the sleeves of his robe and bowed again. "You are the only one I can think of to ask for help."

Rin hiccuped softly, otherwise continuing to stare silently.

Mousse reached out and took her hands. "Please!"

Rin hiccuped again, her face went red and her mouth worked soundlessly. Eventually she managed to babble a bit, but in the end she just let out one long, quiet squeak.

The change room door opened and Yuka poked her head out. "Hey, Rin? You coming in to get ready? Sayuri wants to go over the stra…” She noticed Mousse, currently still holding Rin's hands in what seemed like a very emotional moment. "... Oh!"

Rin's head jerked around to look at Yuka. She hiccuped a few more times, went even redder, and then her eyes rolled back into her head and she slumped to the floor. Mousse moved quickly and managed to catch her and keep her from hitting her head.

Sayuri poked her head out the door next to Yuka. She took in the scene, blinked, then scowled.

"God damnit! Would you people stop breaking the Rin!?"

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Mousse stood against the wall and fidgeted uncertainly and wished he had studied more of the tricks in the vanishing acts. Being able to disappear right now would certainly make him feel a lot less awkward.

Firstly, he was in the girl's changing room. Respecting women's spaces as practically sacred ground
was something that was drilled into him growing up, so just **being** here felt like near sacrilege. Secondly, he could feel Ranma Saotome's gaze burning into him and for once the mental gymnastics necessary to deny Ranma the moral high ground eluded him. And thirdly, he was keenly aware that the girl lying passed out on the bench was his fault, though he still wasn't entirely sure **how.** He had just come to ask a question!

"Is she going to be okay?" he asked. He knew it was a lame question - none of them were healers any more than he was.

"I think so," Sayuri said, putting a damp cloth on Rin's forehead.

Rin stirred and cracked her eyes open. "Did I miss the game?" she mumbled, looking suddenly concerned.

"You were only out a couple of minutes," Sayuri reassured her. "You okay to play?"

"Mnn!" Rin nodded then glanced over in Mousse's direction. She blushed hard and looked away. "M-Mr. Mu Tsu… I-I'm really s-sorry…"

"No, it's my fault," Mousse said quickly, mindful that Ranma's glare was getting intense enough to cause actual physical sensation. "I didn't mean to fluster you so. I… appreciate your hearing me out."

In the corner of his eye he noticed the other girls were exchanging glances.

"Should… we give you guys some time alone?" Riko asked sheepishly.

"Absolutely not," Ranma growled.

Mousse gave the redhead a surprised look.

"I-it's not like that!" Rin said quickly, waving her hands. "M-Mr. Mu Tsu w-was just… just asking for help with his… his…” she trailed off, eyes moving to him as she silently asked for help.

"With my fiancee," Mousse said finally.

Dead silence.

"Technically… my ex-fiancee," he clarified quietly.

Still silence.

Ranma recovered first. She folded her hands behind her back and sauntered out in front of him. The grin on her face was **infuriatingly** smug. "Sooooooo… Mousse… Eternally devoted Mousse… The guy who punctuates his sentences with 'My darling Shampoo' and/or various cracks at me for being a casanova, a two-timer or an 'enemy of women'..." She leaned in close to him. "... Who's yer side girl, then? Stumble upon some long-lost tribe of Norse-descended Chinese Vikings and catch the eye of some six foot tall blonde shieldmaiden named Hilda?"

Mousse narrowed his eyes. "Don't be ridiculous, Saotome! What kind of idiotic concept is a 'Chinese Viking'!?" He sighed, frustrated. "She… we met in the circus. She was the ringmaster's daughter. That's all you need to know. The rest is personal."

"I-I don't know how much help I *can* be with it…” Rin said timidly. "B-but I'm willing to try."

Sayuri looked up at there was a knock at the door leading to the gym. "Looks like we're on. Yuka, go tell them we need five minutes?" She looked at Mousse. "Got the answer you needed?"

"C'mon, duck boy," Ranma grabbed Mousse's elbow. Mousse started to protest but he felt a sudden warning pinch on a pressure point, so he kept his mouth shut and followed along.

The redhead led him outside and closed the door carefully behind her. She sighed, took a breath and then slammed him casually back against the far row of lockers.

"Saotome, what... !?" Mousse growled and snapped his claws out from his sleeves. He hadn't come for a fight, but if she wanted one…!

"I'm only going to say this once, Mousse," Ranma replied tightly. "Rin is like a little sister to me. She's a sweet girl and she's not got a thick skin like us. And for whatever reason, she's sweet on you." She gripped the handful of his robe more tightly. "Now, if you gotta break her heart? Do it. If you wanna try and make her happy? You got my blessing. But I swear, if you string her along, use her and then toss her aside? They will never find all of the pieces of you. Clear?"

"So in other words..." Mousse said coldly, jerking her hand away from his robe. "... Don't be you. I think that much I can manage." He brushed off the front of his robe and walked away, feeling Ranma's glare burning into his back the whole way.

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"*Point, Furinkan!*"

"Well, it seems the 'B' Team has hit their stride," Sanae noted sourly. She was seated with the rest of the 'main' Furinkan Volleyball team watching the so called 'Buster Corps' play. The teamwork issues from the previous game had all but evaporated. Ranma and Rin were both in rare form, making the opposing team practically dive for cover every time either of them got anywhere near the ball, and the rest of the team had stepped up their game impressively. Sayuri herself had scored four aces.

"If we have to play against them with them playing like that, it's gonna be ugly," Mineko said, crossing her arms.

"Don't think we can beat them, Mineko?" Himura asked. Unlike the rest of them, she was relaxed, and seemed almost amused by the display of skill.

"W-well..." Mineko said nervously. "N-no! Of course we'd win! It's just..." She glanced back at the court as The Buster Corp scored again. "It'd be a rough slog. Their offense is insane."

Himura chuckled. "I imagine it would be." She stood and walked over to the girl. "But you're looking at the situation too simply, my dear." She patted her cheek. "Only fools throw themselves at an opponent's full strength. Besides, the games are just a formality. Trust me, Mineko. Watch, learn and don't worry so much." She beamed at her. "Now, I have some business to attend to outside. Umeko? Omi? Would you come with me, please?"

"Not going to stay to watch the whole match?" Mineko asked, concerned.

Himura shrugged. "It seems all but over already. Be sure to congratulate Sayuri on my behalf, would you? I wouldn't want her to think that we're not interested in her adorable little accomplishments." She turned and walked towards the gym exit, flanked by Omi and Umeko.

Himura took a deep breath as they slipped out into the evening air. The gymnasium could get somewhat stifling with so many people crammed inside and *The Buster Corp* were certainly drawing attention and crowds. She spotted Hana waiting for her. The girl had sulked at every game since
Himura had ordered her to let Nabiki have the betting pools.

_Hana, perhaps it is time to give you an object lesson in how much worse things could be than a little lost gambling revenue, hmm?_ She beckoned for the girl to come over. "I hear our little troublemaker is wanting to talk with me again?"

Hana nodded. "I tried to tell her to make an appointment to see you like everyone else, but she's been threatening to run in there and tell the whole school 'everything'."

Himura sighed and nodded. "She's already had a chat with the Principal. I really had hoped to avoid this unpleasantness. Where is she, then?"

"I'm right here," Tomoko stepped out of the shadows where she had been standing. Her fists were clenched and she had an angry look in her eyes. She glanced at Umeko. "And don't even _think_ about siccing your bodyguards on me!"

Himura shook her head sadly and stepped forward. "Tomoko… Tomoko, Tomoko, Tomoko… You should know by now that I don't do that sort of thing."

"I know _exactly_ what sorts of things you do!" Tomoko growled. "I've already told the Principal everything! It's _over_ Himura! You should have let me back on the volleyball team when you had the chance!"

Himura sighed heavily. "Tomoko… If there is one thing I cannot abide, it's a _liar._" She gestured to Hana who handed her a small envelope. "You didn't tell the Principal _everything._" She tossed the envelope at Tomoko's feet.

Tomoko regarded it suspiciously but knelt to pick it up, her eyes never leaving Himura. She tore it open and withdrew a handful of pictures.

She nearly dropped them when she saw what they were.

_Ahh… THAT'S the moment._ Himura smiled, savoring that instant of realization. She walked up to the stunned girl. "I had a chat with the Principal too, Tomoko. And I gave him copies of these. Another set of copies was sent to your parents - they should have received them by now, I think."

"Y-you…" Tomoko trembled, eyes wide with disbelief.

"Fraternization of this sort is expressly forbidden by school rules, Tomoko," Himura clucked her tongue. "Dating middle-aged businessmen for money and gifts… I'm sure most of the people who knew you thought you were a higher class girl than that. I know the Principal was quite concerned and I imagine your parents will be too. Of course…" She grinned as she leaned in closer, dropping her voice to a whisper. "... We _both_ knew differently, didn't we?"

"You _told_ me to!" Tomoko snarled, her expression shifting to one of rage. "You _made_ me! You… you…!"

"I did no such thing," Himura said. "I merely said that due to continual school repairs, the budget for the team meant we had to do without a lot of the usual amenities and that any assistance the team members could render would be appreciated. I know that sometime later someone approached you and _suggested_ this as a way to make money. Had I known at the time… well, my players' personal lives are none of my business. It's interesting that you went on many more of these dates than were necessary to pay for your share. You actually have quite the reputation in Shinjuku I hear."

"That's a lie!" Tomoko said, crushing the pictures in her fist. "You _made_ me! You said I had to do that to stay on the team! You… you…!"
"But that's not the story you will tell," Himura purred softly. She snapped her fingers and Hana passed her another envelope. "The Principal will arrange a meeting with your parents and he will recommend suspending you, pending transfer to another school. You will accept this generous offer. Otherwise a second envelope will be sent to your parents and the School Board." She held up the envelope in front of her. "Can you guess what's in this one?"

Tomoko's eyes widened with horror. "No… no…” She whimpered. "You didn't… you couldn't…!"

"It's one of the services offered by those sorts of motels," Himura said, smiling. "There's also a video… the fidelity is quite good, I hear, though naturally I haven't seen it myself. Mr. Matsuda requested a copy himself. What did you think all those mirrors were there for, dear? They're all one-way."

Tomoko sank to her knees, staring sightlessly. "No… no… no…”

"I trust you understand the situation, Tomoko-chan?" Himura said brightly. She tossed the second envelope to the ground in front of her. "Speaking of which, Mr. Matsuda is interested in a second meeting. It might be a good opportunity for you to accommodate him."

That snapped Tomoko out of her reverie. She shuddered, staring in horrified disgust at Himura. "How… how?! How can you do this to people?!

Himura smiled gently and dropped to one knee in front of her. "My poor little Tomoko. Don't you understand? This was all you were meant for. You were already headed this way when I found you. I just gave you a chance to dream a little." She clucked her tongue. "You knew that… you knew you were never going to be a professional athlete or an Olympian. Your grades are average at best and your parents are nobodies. I was happy to let you dream a little, though." She reached out and gently grasped the girl's chin. "But you bit the hand that fed you and so now reality has to return. It's out of my hands."

Tears were running down Tomoko's cheeks. "N-no… I… I just wanted… I just wanted to play…"

"Shhhhh… shhhh…” Himura cooed. "I know. We all want things we can't have, sweetheart. It's best you learn this now. I'm doing you a favor with this; please remember that. In spite of all of this, I only want what's best for you." She stood smoothly and turned, pausing one last time. "Consider Mr. Matsuda's invitation, please? He is quite influential among my grandfather's associates. I'm sure that if he is pleased with your work, I can find you more pleasant venues for you to use your talents. Don't call, though… I'm sure he'll let me know."

She walked away without a backward glance.

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After the game, it was unilaterally agreed that the group would go to the Tendo Dojo to celebrate. Kasumi had already prepared a big meal and Riko and Hiroshi had teamed up to come up with a selection of the best 'so bad they're good' movies they could find.

"I'm just saying you should go sit by Rin for a change!" Yuka said. "Like… for the night."

"I thought you didn't want me hitting on her?" Daisuke said.

"I don't!" Yuka retorted. "But she needs some more confidence with boys! So…"

"... Besides, she's practically Ranma's little sister now! They don't have medical terminology to properly describe the damage Ranma'd do to me if I so much as touched her!" Daisuke protested.
"If you touch her you'll be dead before Ranma gets the chance!" Yuka growled, cracking her knuckles. "Don't touch her! Never touch her! Just… Do all the normal boy things without actually making her think you'll touch her."

"So… you want me to schmooze her without actually schmoozing her?" Daisuke shook his head, confused.

"Now you're just making it sound sleezy!"

"It is sleezy! You're trying to pimp me out to her Friend Zone!"

"They do realize we're here and can hear this whole conversation, right?" Akane asked, pillowing her cheek on her fist as she leaned on the table.

"Shhhhh… This is all we got until they get the TV set up," Ukyou replied, snagging a cracker to munch on.

"Is getting good, too." Shampoo added, taking a cracker for herself.

"I would like to die, please," Rin said, her face buried in her arms. The few visible parts of her face burned a bright red from embarrassment.

Nabiki stood up from the table and quietly walked out the doors and into the yard. As amusing as Yuka and Daisuke's relationship was, right now she had an excellent chance to satisfy some of her curiosity.

Ranma and Ryouga were out by the pond, talking quietly. It was odd how two Jusenkyo sufferers seemed to gravitate towards the only large source of cold water. She wondered if it was some subconscious defiance thing - an attempt to prove they didn't fear the water. That, or maybe they just really liked koi.

Still, she had been waiting for a chance to catch the two of them alone together.

"Hey, you two," she greeted them as she walked up.

"Oh, h-hey Nabiki," Ryouga said. "I'll get out of your way…"

She put her hand on his shoulder and pushed him back down and sat in the grass next to him, opposite Ranma. The positioning was intentional; She didn't want either of them skittering off on her. Ryouga was the skittish one so she'd keep him between her and Ranma, at least until she got them to hear her out.

Ranma gave her a confused look but shrugged. "You wanted to talk or something, Nabiki?" The redhead asked. There was a note if disappointment in her voice as she recognized Nabiki wasn't there for cuddles.

Nabiki smirked. "Yeah. Nothing bad," she reassured them. "I just wanted a chance to talk quietly. I was curious about your link."

"Uhhh…" Both of them suddenly looked wary, and unconsciously leaned away from her.

Nabiki chuckled. "And you immediately assume I plan something nefarious with it? I'm not sure if I should feel insulted or take that as a compliment." She winked. "No, I'm just… curious. Maybe a little envious? I wanted to know more about it."
"Hasn't Ranma told you about it already?" Ryouga asked, still sounding a little nervous.

"She's told me of it. Shapes that aren't shapes, colors that aren't colors. That sort of stuff," Nabiki said. "I'm guessing that the very nature of it is highly subjective. She pulled her knees up to her chest and cocked her head at them both. "But I know you guys. You're never content to just leave something to do with martial arts. You have to have figured out more about how it works? How it happened?" She looked away, feeling uncharacteristically shy. "How... maybe to reproduce it?"

"Reproduce it?!" Ryouga gaped at her. "You wanna be in someone else's head?"

"Not just anyone, Ryouga," Nabiki said. Her eyes flicked over to Ranma, who blushed a bit. "But... I'm curious... even if it was just a look," she sighed. "I'm honestly jealous of you two. You've come up with an entirely new way to communicate."

Ranma sighed. "Yeah... one that's uncomfortably intimate," she gave Ryouga an apologetic look, though she wasn't entirely sure why. "It's not like we can turn it off, either. Any time bare skin meets bare skin or we get in close proximity? Boom."

"I thought you could control it?" Nabiki asked. "Ranma says things like how she 'doesn't look too deep' or something?"

Ryouga blushed and stared intently at the pond.

"It's not quite like that," he mumbled. "It's more like... You know how when you're somewhere and people near you are having a conversation? You hear it all the same but you can choose whether you actually listen or not? Like that. It's all there."

"And... we've kinda had to figure out what we're perceiving from context," Ranma added. "Most of what we're sensing is still gibberish. Like... it's a language we don't speak yet, and we're picking up words and phrases and stuff through matching it up with what we observe."

"You're teaching each other your own Heart's Language - that no one else can hear but you," Nabiki murmured. "Have either of you got any idea how ridiculously romantic that concept is?"

Both of them got wide-eyed, looked at each other, then quickly looked away, blushing.

"Damnit Nabiki..." Ranma muttered.

"Sorry, sorry!" Nabiki said quickly. "I'm not here to tease you two, honest!" She couldn't help but smirk, however. You two are ADORABLE. She mentally adjusted the odds on the internal bet she was running with herself and continued. "But... you see why I might be curious about something like that?" She smiled at Ranma, who blushed deeper, but smiled back this time.

"A-actually..." Ranma started. "I have kinda been thinking about it. Y'know, based on all the gobbledygook the two Docs have been spouting at each other." She looked at Nabiki. "I guess I prolly ought to give you a crash course in how Ki works." She stood up, hopped over the pond and squatted down on Nabiki's right, taking her hand.

"Now, everything living has Ki. It's life energy," Ranma began. "High level martial artists learn to use it to make themselves lighter, stronger, faster, more durable..."

"... And toss big, gaudy balls of energy?" Nabiki added.

"... Yeah, in rare cases. But that's real power intensive and actually pretty wasteful. Unless you're part dragon like Herb, it's basically a last resort kinda thing. But anyway, you can use it less
dramatically for all kinds of stuff. You can even extend it into nonliving objects like Ryouga does for his Iron Cloth technique to make it sharp and durable like steel. But... you can't do it with another living thing. Well, you can, but... Here...

"Feel that?" Ranma asked. When Nabiki nodded, she let up. "That's my ki trying to enter your hand. But it can't because your ki repels it. If I pushed harder I could probably force through since your ki isn't very strong yet but it would hurt a lot. That's why ki healing is so tricky; you gotta either have someone with almost no ki or use some tricks to sneak past that resistance. Only specialists like Doc Tofu can get anywhere with that stuff."

"Okay?" Nabiki felt like this should make sense, but it didn't, quite.

"So, Ki is also fueled by emotions. Sorta... generated by 'em, I guess? That's why when you try to use Ki for something big, like a ki blast, you gotta focus on one strong emotion and put everything into it. So, the reason me'n Ryouga can sense each other's emotions is because our Ki doesn't repel."

Nabiki raised an eyebrow. "And Ryouga's family link did that?"

Ryouga nodded but at the same time Ranma shook her head.

"No?" Ryouga blinked. "What do you mean, 'no'?"

Ranma turned to look at him. "Doncha get it, Ryo? Your Mom never talked about anything like this. This is new! What I think is... is your link is a tether, like the kind you use when you throw your ki infused bandannas. It made a connection but if we'd been in sync like that our ki blasts woulda just gone right through each other." She grinned. "It was the Shi Shi Hokodan that did it. A huge amount of heavy ki, pressing down and forcing that link open. I think that pushed us into... a resonance of some kind. Brought our auras into alignment so that ki can pass between us more or less freely. And with it, emotions." Ranma's grin grew, visibly proud of her theory.

"So... we'd just need to find a different way to bring auras into alignment like that, without the link," Ryouga said thoughtfully.

"... Or the suicidal depression," Ranma added, leaning over Nabiki to poke at his shoulder.

"Don't know anything that does what the link does, though," Ryouga admitted after a minute of thought.

Ranma scratched her head. "Maybe... we could piggyback using the link? Like... if we held her hand between ours, close enough so the link effect happens between us through her hand, then exchange ki?"

Nabiki's eyes widened as she looked back and forth between them "You mean you could actually do it!?"

"Woah woah woah!" Ryouga held up a hand. "No way! If we did that she'd end up linked to both of us! And her ki would probably snap back to normal in a minute or two at most!"

"Yeah... maintaining it would be the trick..." Ranma considered. "It'd probably just last a minute or two."

"But... It would work, right?" Nabiki said, grinning. "Can we try?"
You seem awful fired up for this…” Ranma said skeptically.

"Do you have any idea how much I've always wanted to be able to read people's minds?!” Nabiki said, beaming. "It's my favourite superpower!"

Ranma sighed. "Okay, for one? It's not reading minds. It's sensing Ki and I'm not even sure it'll work for you if you're not trained enough. What you'll 'see' is ki that corresponds to emotions maybe. Second? It's not a superpower, it martial arts. And third…”

"Third, it isn't people you're reading. It's us," Ryouga said bluntly. "I have enough trouble with her in my head sometimes." He gestured towards Ranma.

"Only sometimes, 'Ryo?" Nabiki asked coyly, earning a blush and a sheepish look away from the lost boy. Gotcha! she thought. She scooted a little closer to him, put a hand on his shoulder and gave him her best puppy-dog-eyes pleading look. "Please, Ryouga? I just want to see what it's like. Just for a minute. I won't pry, even if I can."

Ryouga's eyes widened as his well-oiled chivalrous instincts kicked in. Or it might just have been a hormonal reaction to a pretty girl. Nabiki was never entirely sure though she found the latter to be somewhat more appealing as it meant she was pretty enough to turn the normally stoic Lost Boy's head. "I… uhh… Ranma?" he said in a slight panic.

Ranma sighed knelt closer as well. "Might as well just give it to her, Ryo. When she gets like this she doesn't take 'no' for an answer."

Ryouga deflated. He grumbled and held out his hand, palm up.

Nabiki grinned and put her hand in his. She noticed his hand was quite large, the palm rough and calloused. Casually she wove her fingers with his.

Ryouga's eyes widened and he blushed. "H-hey…!" he squeaked.

"Now why did I never play with Ryouga like this before?" Nabiki thought with a smirk. Boys are so much more fun when they get flustered! "We need to have a good connection, right, Ryo?" she asked innocently.

Ranma slapped her hand on top of Nabiki's. "Don't mess with him like that, Nabiki! He'll get all flustered and screw this up or something!" Ranma huffed. Nabiki could tell when Ranma was getting jealously possessive.

But jealously possessive of WHOM? she thought. Even if this didn't work, she was getting a lot of insight into the both of them. And she was finding she was enjoying being in the middle for once.

Akane gave up a good thing! "Boys, boys, no need to fight over little old me," she drawled.

She waited until Ryouga started to protest then very gently started stroking his hand with her thumb. Just a little, an almost imperceptible pressure, but it was enough to watch his protest die with a strangled whimper.

Ranma was a little more wise to her ways. "You're being evil, Nabiki. I can see it in your eyes. You've got that glint you normally only get when there's money involved."

She leaned back against the redhead a bit and gave her a winning smile. "You love Evil Nabiki."

"I have to. It's the only Nabiki there is!" Ranma replied with a smirk of her own. "Okay Ryo, we
should probably do this before she ends up swindling you out of your mother or something."

"She is pretty nice," Nabiki admitted. "Kasumi would be able to take a vacation from being the mother figure role around here…"

"Don't even joke about that," Ryouga muttered. "That just gives me the mental image of my Mom and your Dad…"

"Okay, okay, point taken!" Nabiki said quickly.

"Right then, just concentrate, Ryouga," Ranma said. "Like we did for the Doc… just a little bit extra, though. Don't wanna drill a hole in her hand."

"... That can happen?" Nabiki asked, suddenly nervous.

Ranma smirked and murmured in her ear. "Well, we don't know yet, Ms. Guinea Pig, but thanks for helping us find out before the Doc had to resort to a paid volunteer or somethin'."

"Now you're just being cruel!" Nabiki sniffed.

Ryouga sighed heavily. "Will you two hush? I'm trying to concentrate here!"

Nabiki shut her mouth and closed her eyes. She wasn't exactly sure what she was supposed to be concentrating on, or even if she was supposed to be concentrating, but she tried regardless.

"Okay… I'm starting to get something…” Ranma said. At the same time, Nabiki started to feel an ache in her hand. Almost like a sharp pain but somehow not localized to one spot, which made absolutely zero sense.

"Yeah… Almost…” Ryouga said, and she felt the sensation increase.

Nabiki chewed her lower lip, not sure if she should speak up, or say 'Ow', or something, until she felt a hot rush as something tore. Her fingers twitched as her hand went numb, then throbbed, and then the pins and needles started.

"Woah, there you are!" Ranma said. "Okay, Nabiki, are you get… oh!"

The exclamation was because it - whatever it was - had started to work. Nabiki gasped as she suddenly became dimly aware of shapes and colors… though not any she had names for. She wasn't seeing them, exactly, but she was aware of them. She sucked in another breath and opened her eyes.

"I see it. Sense it. Whatever!" She broke out into a wide smile as she felt the colors brighten a little and the shapes became just a touch more distinct. Perceiving them was almost like remembering a shape or a color; a picture in her mind, yet not. There were two distinct sources. One was reserved and withdrawn but the other was reaching out towards her.

"I can feel that…” she said, looking over her shoulder at the redhead. Ranma smiled at her, and she felt those slender fingers curl over her hand. There was something like red gold flowing through and around her. Nabiki leaned against her a little more. She could bathe in that feeling all day. That… that's love, isn't it? she thought. It was amazing how much there was!

She could feel a few tendrils going past her, though, to the other presence. Reassurance? She followed them, curious. Ryouga's emotions weren't as dark or has heavy as she had anticipated, though there was a deep, swirling core to it all. Not as black as she had thought it would be. There
were even a few much brighter emotions there. Particularly nearest Ranma's.

You naughty boy, Ryouga! I see that! she smirked. Still, there was a fascinating deep stillness in him. "You're a lot less depressed that I thought, Ryo," she said softly, giving him a smile.

There was a surge of color from him. Embarrassment? Self-consciousness? Were emotions supposed to be cute? It was certainly incongruous to the growling, 'Ranma, Prepare to Die!' image Ryouga tried so hard to maintain. She giggled and curiously reached out for them.

Ryouga gasped softly.

Nabiki cocked her head. "You felt that?"

"A… A little." Ryouga admitted. "I… I just wasn't expecting… I mean… You said you weren't going to look…"

"I won't look deep," Nabiki amended. "But… Not like I get many chances to see someone else's feelings, right?" She closed her eyes. She could definitely see what they had been saying, though, about how intimate the whole situation was. She was suddenly conscious that they were likely able to see just as much of her, and swallowed. "Mnnn… Everything is just kinda… out there, isn't it?"

"Toldja," Ranma replied.

Nabiki's brow furrowed as the ache in her hand deepened and the sensation of their emotions began to fade. "Hey, what gives?"

"Your ki is starting to reassert itself," Ryouga said. She could feel him withdraw as the link started to fade out. "Can't keep it up much more than that without risking hurting you."

"But… I wasn't done…" Nabiki whined, slumping a little. She could feel the absence of that red-gold warmth behind her keenly and she shivered. Who'd have thought being inside my own head would feel so… lonely?

Ranma wrapped an arm around her in a hug. "Kinda intense, isn't it?" she said sympathetically. At the same time Ryouga released her hand.

Nabiki sighed and leaned back into the embrace, closing her eyes. Her hand tingled like she had been sitting on it, her fingers thick and numb. She shook it to try and restore circulation.

Ryouga coughed awkwardly and rubbed the back of his head. "Well… I guess you got your wish now, huh?"

"Yeah… I guess so," Nabiki said, a little sadly. She took a deep breath and relaxed, rubbing her hand. Finally, she cracked open an eye. "Now… next wish. Make it last longer."

"What?" Ryouga squeaked.

"You heard me. You can't just cut someone off after just one of something like that!" She folded her arms.

"Nabiki, be reasonable…" Ranma sighed. "Think about what you're asking! Ryo's going to have enough trouble managing to find a normal stable relationship with a girl just being linked to me. What happens if he ends up linked to you too?"

Nabiki glanced over her shoulder at Ranma, quirking an eyebrow. "My god, you
are dense sometimes, Ranma," she huffed. Fine... FINE. Don't push. Don't PUSH. "All right, all right. Just… let me know if you figure out anything else, okay?"

"Err… yeah…" Ryoga wore a dubious expression.

She felt a mischievous urge. "Thank you Ryo!" she said, leaned in and pecked him on the cheek.

She didn't wait for the explosion but shifted her weight and stood smoothly while Ryoga was frozen and Ranma was spluttering. "I'm gonna go see how they're coming along with the movie. Come be sociable at some point you two, hmmm?" She started walking towards the dojo.

Ranma recovered faster than she had anticipated. She felt a hand grasp her upper arm, the grip gentle but firm and as unbreakable as iron manacles. She had to move faster as Ranma started dragging her past the Dojo to the far side of the building.

Once they were out of sight, Ranma released her. "Okay, what the hell was that!?" Ranma hissed. Her blue eyes stood out like glowing gems in the gathering darkness, from the light reflected in them.

"Thanking Ryoga," Nabiki said nonchalantly. She leaned back against the wall and crossed her arms.

"Yeah, but why did you kiss him!?" Ranma demanded.

"Because he's cute when he's flustered," Nabiki said, then her expression grew more serious as she fixed the redhead with a firm stare of her own. "... And you think so too."

Ranma's eyes widened and she took a reflexive step back. "W-what…?! No I… Nabiki, where would you get…!?"

Nabiki narrowed her eyes at the redhead. "We were just linked, and you're going to lie to me, Saotome?" she said, a note of tired exasperation entering her voice.

"I've been linked to Ryouga for a coupla weeks now, and even I don't know what most of it means. Don't try and tell me you've figured me all out from a coupla minutes," Ranma shot back.

"I didn't need the link, Ranma! I…" she stopped herself. "... No, I'm not going to fight about this. I'm sorry, I stepped over a line to provoke you because I'm frustrated." She sighed heavily, closed her eyes and folded her arms more tightly across her chest.

"Frustrated?" Ranma cocked her head.

"I'm good at reading other people's feelings, Ranma. Not so good at my own, admittedly. But for doing what I do - have done most of my life - being able to see the divide between what people say they're feeling and what everything else they do says they're feeling has always been a huge part of it. I always used to look out for the ones where what they said they felt often didn't match with my read on them." She shook her head. "You almost never matched up. That's why you were my favorite mark. The thing is… you always believed what you said, too. You were never lying about your feelings, you just honestly didn't know. You're better now… a lot better, but… there are still things where I see that disconnect. Your parents were one of those things, and you scared me really bad over that. Ryouga is another."

Ranma stepped forward, putting a hand on her shoulder. "Nabiki, I'm not… are you worried that…?"

Nabiki smiled and shook her head. "No, I'm not afraid it'll be bad like that. I like Ryouga. Getting
this glimpse into his head was actually reassuring. It's part of why I wanted to do it so badly." She slipped her arms around the redhead's waist and pulled her in close for a hug, cuddling her for comfort, something Ranma didn't resist. "I just… well, I consider a lot of possibilities. Akane was in denial a long time and it hurt her - and it nearly cost her you - the one perfect person who was the solution to… well, all of her problems. She wouldn't pull, you wouldn't push, and nothing we could do short of outing Akane would have made you see you were each the solution the other was searching for. I just don't want to go through all that again."

Ranma sighed and slipped her arms around Nabiki's neck. "You're smart, Nabiki… but you don't know everything. Akane wasn't the solution to all my problems. You were." She smiled. "And Akane… as much as I love her and as much as I know she loves me… she's getting more from being with Ucchan and bein' rivals with Ryo than she ever got from me. I was in the way. And even Shampoo… she needed something more than just me. We were all kinda in our own ways before you straightened us out."

"That's… kinda terrifying…" Nabiki admitted. The concept put her a little too close to the center of her mental corkboard of The Madness.

Ranma rested her head on Nabiki's shoulders. "As for Ryo…"

"… I notice you're not even correcting yourself on the pet name," Nabiki noted wryly.

Ranma scowled. "It's a nickname. Guys give each other nicknames! Geez…" She huffed and was quiet for a moment. More timidly, she started speaking again. "My feelings around Ryo are… kinda complex, an' they're all snarled up with… with whatever it is going on in my head now. I'm not…" Ranma's arms tightened around her neck. "... I'm not ready to sort them out yet. There's too much other stuff weighing on me."

"But you still rely on him. Anytime you're not with one of us or your team you're with him," Nabiki said gently. "... Or you're in trouble. Honestly given the choice and recent events, I'd rather you be with him."

Ranma winced. "That… I…" she sighed. "I think this 'anchor' stuff works both ways. Or… maybe it's different on my side, but… That's what he is. And… I'm aware of all this stuff between him an' me. An' I know it could go in a direction I'm really not ready for. And that's why it would really make me feel better if he'd just patch stuff up with Akari an' stop… stop… Y'know…"

"Ranma… saying you're 'not ready' raises a question," Nabiki said, gently running fingers through her hair. "Is there a point you think you would be ready?"

Ranma was silent. Nabiki didn't push, getting the feeling Ranma had reached the limit of what she was comfortable discussing.

"... You serious about the link stuff?" Ranma finally asked. "Or was that just to see if you were right about things between me an' Ryo?"

"I'm deadly serious, Ranma," Nabiki said firmly. "If you can find a way to make that last longer, or even make it stick…" She hugged the redhead a little tighter. "It would have made all of this stuff we've gone through so far so much easier."

"Just gotta figure out how to make it work without Ryo, then," Ranma murmured.

"Mnnn," Nabiki replied noncommittally.

"Nabiki," Ranma raised her head.
"Mnnn."

"Nabiki," Ranma said again. "Don't scheme."

"I mean… I can imagine worse things than being emotionally bonded to a cute, brooding, lonely guy…" Nabiki said off-handedly.

"Aren't you the one who has been complaining about how hard this harem business is to make work as it is!?!"

"Shush, dear, I'm fantasizing about your boyfriend."

"That's it, I'm telling Akane," Ranma suddenly released her and danced back a step or two. "Don't you dare!"

"Nabiki made a swipe for the redhead, which she dodged easily. "She'd kill me if she found out about any of this! And you!"

"Nope. She'd just maim me," the redhead said cheerfully. "But you're right, she'd definitely kill you. Hey Akane…!"

"Come back here!" Nabiki lunged for Ranma agan which became a chase around the yard. By the time Nabiki actually caught up with the giggling redhead, they had both forgotten what the chase was about.

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The next morning found a surprise waiting for them at the gates of Furinkan, in the person of one Kodachi Kuno. The self-styled Black Rose was standing squarely in the middle of the entryway, arms crossed and eyes closed as she waited for them.

Ranma could feel the girls behind her bristle but she held a hand up. "Mebbe I can defuse this without a fight?" She stepped forward tentatively. "Umm… hey, Kodachi? What's up?"

Kodachi cracked an eye open and smiled. "Ah, Ran, a pleasure to see you this morning. You have been quite busy as of late! I've noticed your time has been rather monopolized by…" she shot a nasty glance at the group of girls behind Ranma, "Peasant concerns. I do so abhor such dramatics as this but I require your presence after school for dinner and I felt it necessary to be properly positioned to address any…" another nasty look… "Objections."

Akane glared right back and cracked her knuckles. "Oh! Uh…" Ranma looked behind her sheepishly. She knew that Thursday night was supposed to be her date with Akane. "I… uhh… I'd love to, Kodachi…"

"Wonderful!" Kodachi clapped her hands. "I'll have the limo swing by to pick us up after class, then!"

"... but I have a date!" Ranma said quickly, before realizing the rabbit hole she had just dug for herself. It occurred to her suddenly that she had set herself up to have to answer the next logical question and she seriously doubted that Kodachi would be so understanding about the situation. "Ooops?"

Kodachi raised an eyebrow and opened her mouth to ask that very question… but then her eyes fell on Ryouga, standing near the periphery of the group. "... Ah. Of course, your Fiance. Ryouga, wasn't it?" She cocked her head as if trying to place his face. "Well then, there isn't a problem! You shall
have your date at the Kuno Manor! Allow me to entertain you! As your betrothed, what I want to
discuss involves him as well, of course."

Ryouga's eyes widened and he gave Ranma a terrified look.

\textit{Crap crap crap!} "I'd… uh… we'd love to, but… uhh…" Ranma laughed nervously. \textit{Damage
control! Damage control!} "... We… uh… we have reservations?"

Kodachi chuckled. "Nonsense. The chefs at the Kuno estate are far superior to any working
at any restaurant in the Tokyo area. If there's a deposit I'll happily reimburse you. Would 50,000 yen
cover it?"

"Wou… \textit{buh}…" Ranma's brain briefly slipped out of gear at the figure casually tossed out. "I-I'm…
that's not necessary, really, we just…"

"Oh think nothing of it!" Kodachi said brightly. "Then it's a date! I'll see you both after school. Don't
worry about dressing up, we'll keep this casual." She turned to leave then added over her shoulder.
"Oh, and you may wish to take that Tendo girl to a vet. She's showing all the signs of being quite
rabid."

Ranma nodded, then reached out an arm to catch the collar of Akane's blouse before the youngest
Tendo could rush her.

"\textit{Let me go, Ranma!}" Akane growled.

"Calm down, little sister," Nabiki put a hand on Akane's shoulder. "As… \textit{satisfying} as letting you
beat Kodachi into paste would be, it's a bad idea with the \textit{omiai} still up in the air."

"But tonight was \textit{my} night!" Akane struggled a bit then slumped, frustrated tears forming in her eyes.
"This isn't fair…"

Nabiki took Akane by the shoulders and turned her sister to look at her. "You can have your date on
Friday night, okay?"

Akanes eyes widened. "But Nabiki… that's \textit{your} date night!"

"It's like Kasumi said - to make this work needs flexibility more than rigid rules, right?" Nabiki said
with a reassuring smile. "It's okay, I already got a couple of dates in."

"Wait… you want me and Ranma to \textit{actually go}?!" Ryouga came up beside them, looking aghast.
"To the \textit{Kuno Estate}?!"

"I get that the Kunos are bad news…" Sayuri said, coming up even with them along with the rest.
"But is there some reason why going to their Estate is so much worse than, say, dinner in a
restaurant?"

Ryouga got a haunted look on his face. "It's a maze of madness, pain and humiliation," he said in a
tormented whisper.

"A long, straight hallway is that for you, Ryouga," Yuka quipped.

"No, no… he's pretty much on the ball with this one," Ranma said, swallowing.

"The Kuno's idea of 'home security' is to make their home a maze full of deathtraps," Akane
explained.
"Like… electrified fences, armed guards…?" Sayuri asked, seeking clarification.

"Like a Bond villain," Akane supplied. "Giant washing machines, giant electrified rat traps…"

"Minefields, poison dart traps…" Shampoo added helpfully, coming up beside them.

"... And a giant man-eating alligator named 'Mr Green Turtle,'" Ranma finished.

"Last I heard Kuno was talking about getting some sharks to add to the mix," Nabiki said. "He was grumbling about how the laser beams were on back order, though."

"Okay so, in other words, more crazy martial artist nonsense and never ever go there. Got it." Yuka said.

"That's actually a pretty good rule for martial artists, too!" Ryouga said. "Why are we going there again? Why would she even invite Ranma? I thought she hated Ranma's girl side?"

"Long story. Basically I kinda convinced her brother than I was male Ranma's sister. Kodachi got the story from him, and since I wasn't a rival for her 'Darling Ranma' anymore, she decided to kiss up to me to try and get some advantage in the omiai. She sighed. "Then the cover story got… complicated."

"Complicated how?" Ryouga asked, a worried note in his voice.

Ranma took a deep breath. "I'm currently the illegitimate child of Genma Saotome and some Irish woman he met while on the road, whom Nodoka Saotome refuses to acknowledge. My parents won't even allow me to have my own name, forcing me to use Ranma's, so Kodachi named me 'Ran' using the character for 'Orchid' rather than 'Wild'. She feels bad for me and wants to make me a part of the Kuno family, and thinks I'm engaged to you. She thinks I'm abused and deprived at home and that's why I don't know most of the girl-side stuff and so she's decided once she and Ranma are married she's gonna teach me how to be ladylike."

Ryouga blinked.

"To be fair, that's cooler than your actual backstory, Ranma," Yuka said. "And more believable."

"Maybe Senpai could cultivate an Irish accent!" Rin piped in.

"Not a good idea," Yuka shook her head. "Red hair, blue eyes, short, busty, athletic, tsundere personality, tomboy and an Irish accent? She'd overrun her fetish checklist allowance."

"What happens if you do that?" Rin asked in a hushed tone.


"Ewwwwwwwwww!" Rin hid behind Sayuri. "S-seriously?!"

Ranma massaged the bridge of her nose. "Why am I friends with you guys again?"

"Okay…” Ryouga scratched the back of his head. "So why am I going?"

"Because it's a good way to keep tabs on Kodachi and find out her side of the omiai so we don't end up getting blindsided by a shotgun wedding. Again," Nabiki said.

"None of that sounds like anything that is even remotely my problem," Ryouga said, folding his
"Don't be a jackass, Ryouga," Ukyou growled.

"Pig boy should help out! Mess is partly Pig boy's fault, after all!" Shampoo added, standing next to Ukyou.

Ryouga scowled. "Hey, helping is one thing, but that place is full of water traps. And it's also full of things that a little black piglet is less than a mouthful for! This is Ranma's thing, there's no reason I need to…"

Ranma felt a touch on her shoulder. She turned slightly as Nabiki came up beside her and whispered in her ear.

"Ask him nicely," Nabiki said, then straightened and winked.

Ranma gave her a skeptical look, then shrugged.

"Hey, Ryo… I know it's a lot to ask, but I'd really feel better not going into that place alone," Ranma said sheepishly. "I can loan you the waterproof soap bar before gym so you can shower with it - that way you don't gotta worry about the water traps."

Ryouga ground to a halt. He looked away, suddenly seeming uncertain. "Uhh… well… I mean…"

"Please?" Ranma pleaded. She didn't even need to fake it this time; the Kuno Manor was an eleven out of ten on the creep factor for her and she truly and honestly did not want to be there alone and at the mercy of Kodachi or any other Kunos who happened to be at home.

"Okay, okay…” Ryouga held up his hands. "I'll come, just…” he looked away from her awkwardly. "I'll come."

Ranma sighed in relief and smiled at him. "Thank you, Ryouga! This means a lot. I owe you for this!"

"You owe me several," he muttered, glancing at her before looking away again. "We… uh… we should get to class." He started off walking towards the school building.

"Huh. That never used to work with him," Ranma said. She honestly did feel relieved he had agreed to come. "I guess I just needed to be more honest?"

"Yes, I'm sure that's why," Nabiki said cryptically.

Ranma gave Nabiki a skeptical look then shrugged and took off after Ryouga to ensure that he didn't get lost.

Akane came up beside Nabiki as the others passed them. "You're plotting."

"I am not. I am as innocent and pure as the newly driven snow," Nabiki replied.

"Don't plot." Akane growled. Her expression softened. "Look, about the date…"

"Akane, it's fine," Nabiki waved her off.

"No, it's not," Akane insisted. "And… I've got an idea… umm… a compromise, I guess?"

Nabiki raised an eyebrow. "I'm listening…"
When lunch time rolled around, Akane surprisingly co-opted both Ranma and Ryouga, citing a need to blow off some steam from the frustration at Kodachi's messing up her plans.

"I hope you're not planning to use me as a Kodachi-proxy, Tendo," Ryouga said. Akane had wanted a spar so Ranma could evaluate her form and train her better.

"Oh no. I have more than enough reasons to hit you as it is, Hibiki." She grinned, settling into her stance. "But today I'm more interested in getting better so when I do fight Kodachi, she'll need someone to explain what hit her after the fight!"

Ryouga shrugged, keeping his arms crossed. "I won't go so easy on you, then," he said, and simply waited.

Akane glared. She flexed her legs to lower her center of gravity then darted forward, putting on a burst of speed in hopes of catching him off-guard. She went low and to the left, hoping that either he'd fail to dodge or that she could dart past and get a side kick in at his back.

He did neither. Instead, he reached out, snagged her wrist and yanked, using her momentum to pull her off balance and then tossed her to the side almost casually.

She landed heavily, rolled and bounced back up onto her feet.

"Don't telegraph your moves so much," Ryouga said, crossing his arms again.

"You're trying too hard for a one-hit KO, Akane," Ranma added. "That's never gonna work on a guy like Ryouga. This is an endurance fight; you gotta wear him down and focus on taking as few hits as possible."

Akane grit her teeth but closed her eyes, took a deep breath and centered herself before nodding. *Cooking is just Martial Arts. Martial Arts is just Cooking. Be patient, pay attention to the steps like Ukyou taught you.* She realized there was some irony in being mindful of her instruction with Ukyou on cooking while training in martial arts, as it was Ukyou that had originally referenced martial arts training when teaching her to cook. But cooking had been where those lessons had been most recently reinforced, and to the most dramatic effect. *Watch what they're doing. Analyze... He's watching my eyes to see where I'm going to strike. Linger too long on a spot and that's where he will expect an attack.*

She opened her eyes again. She locked eyes with Ryouga and waited until he gave a subtle nod. This was a *spar* after all, not just an opportunity for her to vent her frustrations.

She darted in again. It looked very much like she was trying the same move but she shifted her weight and the instant he went for the intercept and throw again, she pivoted away, feinting into an elbow to the face. Ryouga blocked that with a hand, but it got her close enough to drop down for a leg sweep that forced him to hop back and away.

Ryouga dropped into a proper stance this time as he did so, with a grin on his face. "Good," he nodded slightly. "Nice feint."

Akane grinned back. She was starting to feel more charitable towards Ryouga ever since she figured out he was subtly guiding her. He was still being chivalrous but he was treating her as a person and fellow martial artist rather than a porcelain doll on a pedestal. *Still being deferential to a girl despite your protests, Ryouga?* She smirked. *I wonder... let's see if a page from Ranma's playbook works?* "You know, I think I like you a lot better like this than being the lovestruck dope, Ryouga,"
she said with a smile. "You're actually kinda noble when you get down to it."

Ryouga blinked. "I… am?" His stance slipped as a slight blush colored his cheeks.

Wide open! Akane thought with triumph as she darted in, keeping low and driving an uppercut into his chin that lifted him off his feet and sent him sprawling onto his back. She put all her force into it, feeling her knuckles actually pop from the impact.

The blow would have KO'd just about anyone else Akane had ever fought, but he flipped casually back onto his feet and rubbed his chin with a scowl.

"That was dirty," Ryouga said, glowering at her.

"Seriously?" Akane rubbed her fist, her hand sore from the blow. "I put everything I had into that one!"

"Toldja one-hit KO's don't work on him," Ranma said with a smirk.

"And don't think that trick'll work again, Tendo," Ryouga sneered.

"Oh please, Ryouga," Ranma scoffed. "You and I both know she could bat her eyes at you right now while your jaw still stings and you'd step right into it again. I should know, I did it to you myself enough times."

Ryouga blushed and glared at the redhead. "Th-that was different!"

"Unlike Ranma though, I don't like winning that way," Akane said. "I'd rather do it through skill and strength."

"Hey, deception is a skill!" Ranma protested. "But… you got a point. Don't think it'd work on anyone but Ryo here." She grinned. "He's got a definite weak spot when it comes to Tendo females."

"Ranma, don't help," Ryouga said tightly.

Akane straightened, raised an eyebrow and crossed her arms. "Oh?"

"Yeah, apparently Nabiki can do it to him too," Ranma said. "One 'Please, Ryouga?' and he melts like an ice cube in the oven."

"Ranma, I swear to god…" Ryouga growled threateningly.

Akane put her hands on her hips. "Ryouga! Don't you dare develop a 'thing' for my sister!"

"I'm not…! Auuugh!" Ryouga threw up his hands. "Fine. Fine. I'm done!" He walked over to the bench near where they had been sparring and grabbed one of the towels they had laid out.

"Awww… C'mon Ryo, we didn't mean it like that!" Ranma trotted over to him quickly. "Look, we're not serious… Akane and I go back and forth like this all the time." She put a hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry…"

Akanen raised an eyebrow. An apology? Just like that, huh, Ranma? She felt a surge of jealousy again but wrestled it down. Watch what they're doing. Analyze… she thought.

Ryouga sighed and the tension drained out of his shoulders. "... No, it's okay," Ryouga replied, then resumed toweling off his face. "I'm being oversensitive."
Akane raised an eyebrow. *Since when could Ranma just… DEFUSE him like that!?* She walked up quietly. "Ummm… Ryouga? I'm sorry too. I didn't mean anything by it. I mean…” she chuckled. "It's not like you'd *actually* be interested in someone like Nabiki…"

Ryouga got a nasty smirk. "Hmm? Oh… actually, I think I *totally* could go for Nabiki."

"*What!?*" Ranma and Akane yelped in unison.

Ryouga slung the towel over his shoulder nonchalantly. "Oh, definitely. Sexiest Tendo sister by *far*. I just don't like it being implied I'm *soft* or anything."

"*HOW DARE Y-*" Akane roared, then stopped as she noticed something in his eyes. Her own eyes widened and her glare redoubled. "*You're trying* to make me mad!"

"See? I can do it too," Ryouga said, tossing the towel aside. "What's the matter? You can dish it out but you can't take it? I thought you and Ranma went back and forth like this 'all the time'?” He dropped into a ready stance. "Besides… It kinda irks me that after *everything* you think you have *any* say in who I develop an interest in!"

Akane's vision filled with red. "I get a say because she's my *sister*!" She charged him, throwing a brutal combo of punches and kicks that actually successfully forced him to step back a pace.

He blocked a strike and bound her arm a moment. "You know, Kasumi is really pretty too…”

"*RRRRRAAAAUGH!*" She kneed him in the gut hard enough to double even *him* over, freed her arm then brought her hands down in a two-fisted hammerblow to his back. He didn't drop like expected, so she danced back before he could counter.

"*Better,*" Ryouga said. "Gotta get you good and mad before I even feel those hits. Now… you wanna make me eat my words? You better learn to control it!"

"*I'll show you control!*"

Ranma backed away as both of them started to glow, their auras flickering into the visible spectrum. "*Uh oh*…”

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…*In other news, practise for the soccer team has been cancelled until the soccer field can be re-turfed. Students are requested to avoid the area until the broken water main has been repaired. Additionally, the Facilities Maintenance department has decided to shift their fundraising bake sale from bi-monthly to monthly, and will be kicking it off this Saturday…*

"I guess that's one way to get an excuse to use the showers," Ranma muttered. She was drenched, her school uniform dripping and her hair bedraggled. She had a cross-looking P-chan in her arms sitting on top of a pile of Ryouga's clothes.

"How was I supposed to know the pipe was that close to the surface?" Akane huffed, also soaking wet.

"Maybe *not* create giant craters in the soccer field either way?" Ranma suggested.

"*You're* one to talk!*" Akane groused. She glanced at P-chan and scowled. "You know… *now* I get why you found me carrying him around like that so infuriating."
"Be nice. If we made him walk he'd take forever to get there on his stubby little legs and he'd just get lost along the way anyway," Ranma said. "Besides, as far as the rest of the school knows he's still your pet piglet. You don't wanna look like you're abusin' a helpless animal, do you?"

"I'm weighing my options," Akane growled. "Depends if he keeps looking so insufferably smug."

"I think that's just how pigs look," Ranma said.

"Bwee," P-chan commented.

"You don't get to say anything right now," Akane said. "Keep quiet or I'll tell Nabiki what you said!"

"Don't bother, Akane. Nabiki'd take it as a compliment and probably get all flirty with him just to mess with you," Ranma said sagely.

Akane scowled. "... I'm tempted to do it anyway, just to see her kill him through blood loss."

"Could you not complicate this relationship situation any more than it already is?" Ranma grumbled.

"Me?!" Akane laughed in disbelief. "Ranma, have you seen yourself lately?!"

"What?" Ranma frowned at her in confusion. "What'd I do now?"

"You seriously expect me to believe you somehow haven't noticed how much your relationship with Ryoga has changed?" Akane put her hands on her hips.

"Not this again..." Ranma sighed, sparing a hand to rub her temples. "Akane..."

"Don't try and tell me everything is normal, Ranma!" Akane continued. "I'm not stupid!"

"I know, okay?!" Ranma shouted back, exasperated. Akane shrank back a bit, eyes wide. Even Ryoga reared back a bit, eyeing the redhead nervously.

Ranma closed her eyes and took a steadying breath. "I haven't talked about it because you keep blowing up over it! Yeah, stuff between me and Ryoga is different. We nearly died together. That changes stuff. You of all people should know that." She opened her eyes and gave Akane a stern look.

Akane's gaze dropped guiltily.

"Ryo and I useta be friends in middle school. I know it didn't sound like it, but we were." She resumed walking. "Yeah, we'd fight over the bread, but... me an' pops did that all the time. I thought it was just something friends did. I didn't know any better. But he was also the only guy I could relate to in the whole school. Useta walk him home every day because he'd get lost. I know we talked a lot... don't remember what about. Pointless stuff, mostly. I always thought our banter was just that. I didn't know I was hurting him with all the things I said. I always liked him... I mean, him'n Ucchan were the only real friends I had ever had."

Akane's expression softened. "Ranma... You never said anything about this before..."

P-chan bwee'd softly, looking up at the redhead.

"I didn't remember most of it," Ranma said. "It's like with Ucchan; Once we moved on I just kinda blotted it out because Pops said a 'man amongst men' didn't need friends and remembering just... made it harder. I did that with a lot of stuff - anything Pops said wasn't 'manly' or was a 'distraction from the Art'.' She glanced down at herself. "I guess now that I'm... I'm embracing this side of
myself, it's opened me up to remembering more of it."

They reached the change rooms. Ranma opened the men's side door, depositing P-chan and the pile of clothes inside. She put Ryoga's school bag down next to them. "Hope you gotta change of clothes in there, buddy." She reached into her own bag and pulled out a small plastic case that contained the precious bar of waterproofing soap. "Here's the soap. Don't forget to use it." She stepped back out and closed the door behind her then headed for the girl's side.

"It's kinda weird not feeling like I can go in there anymore," Ranma admitted as they walked into the locker area. "Guess I've sorta normalized being a girl at school." She started stripping off her clothes in a businesslike fashion, hanging her uniform on one of the hooks along the wall in the hope that it would dry.

"Are you… okay with that?" Akane asked tentatively.

Ranma paused, ironically in the middle of unhooking her bra. "I… think so. I mean… the earth didn't open up and swallow me when I stopped fighting it." She finished taking off her underthings and walked to the shower. "I'm still kinda all over the place on being comfortable with it… What I wanna be at any given moment doesn't always line up so good with what I have to be. I think it'll be easier when this stupid challenge is done and I can just… come to school as whatever I feel like."

Akane followed her into the shower. "You mean you might still come to school as a girl sometimes?"

Ranma shrugged. "Yeah? I mean, everyone here already knows about it, so why not?" She turned on the hot water, adjusting the temperature before stepping into the stream.

Akane noticed she didn't change, despite the water being plenty warm. "Ranma…!"

"Used the soap yesterday before the game, just in case Principal Coco-Nuts tried to get me with hot water again. I won't be able to change back until tomorrow sometime." She sighed, loosing her hair from the pigtail and running her fingers through it.

Akane swallowed. Female Ranma showering was one of her guilty fantasies and something she hadn't really expected to get to see without the water being so cold as to put the kibosh on any sort of romantic overtures.

I shouldn't… I shouldn't… it's perverted and we're at school and someone could walk in and Ryoga is right across the hall and… and she's being open and vulnerable with me… She closed her eyes, realizing that was a big part of what was turning her on about the situation.

Ranma hummed softly as she rolled her head back, eyes closed, almost purring. "You know… it's weird how hot water feels different as a girl. I guess my skin is more sensitive like this?" Her back was arched, water running in rivulets down her body, following her curves and drawing the eye to them. She glanced over her shoulder at Akane. "You gonna shower too?"

Akane's eyes widened a bit. The part of her brain that was worried about propriety, about getting caught and about being perceived as a pervert was quickly dogpiled, bound, gagged and stuffed in a box to be mailed off to Tunisia. She stepped into the stall behind Ranma and slipped her arms around her, pressing up behind.

"Eeep?!" Ranma froze as she felt Akane come up behind her. "Akane what are you doing!?" she hissed. "Someone might see!"

"So they'll see," Akane murmured and kissed the spot between the redhead's neck and shoulder.
"We're saving hot water this way. It's the responsible thing to do, right?" She felt a small thrill at the soft moan this elicited from the redhead.

"Y-you want to do this here? Now?" Ranma asked nervously, though she didn't resist as Akane's hand dipped lower. "W-we're only supposed to rinse off… Ryouga will be waiting outside…"

"Let him wait."

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Ryouga was waiting for them outside, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed and eyes closed. He was wearing his usual yellow shirt and black pants, which seemed to have benefitted from his mother's mending and laundry skills.

"Uh… hey Ryo." Ranma said sheepishly. She had left her hair unbound and switched to jeans, t-shirt and sweatshirt (sized for her girl side) which she had stashed away for after games. Akane was behind her, wearing a spare volleyball team tracksuit they had found.

Ryouga held up a hand in nonchalant greeting.

"Uhm… sorry we took so long…” Ranma added.

"We missed the start of last period," Ryouga said. "By a lot."

Ranma hung her head. "... I know."

"Sorry Ryo?" Akane said, looking somewhat embarrassed.

Ryouga cracked an eye open to regard her coolly. He closed it again and turned his head away a bit. "No one came through here, if you were wondering."

Ranma cocked her head curiously. "Why would we…?"

Ryouga sighed. "You… weren't quiet."

Both girls flushed a deep, deep crimson. "Oh," they said in unison.

"I would have left, but… I can't afford to get lost right now," he muttered. He sighed again and pushed off the wall. "We… should probably just go. School's almost over."

The two girls flanked him, subdued, as they started walking.

"I'm… uhh… impressed, actually," Ranma said timidly. "I woulda… expected you to be passed out on the floor in a puddle of blood if we were that… ummm… obvious…”

Ryouga hung his head a bit. "I've started carrying a couple of boxes of tissue in my bag. I managed to keep it under control. Used up most of a box, though. Tossed it before you got out."

"I thought you looked a little pale. Whichever class cleans out the wastebaskets around here is probably going to get a bit of a shock," Ranma said wryly.

"I'm really sorry, Ryouga!" Akane said. "I… It was a spur of the moment thing!"

He held up a hand, waving her off. "It's… it's fine. I… well, by this point it's pretty obvious that… uhh… That *that* happens…” He blushed. "I was just worried that someone would come along and catch you."
"That would have been awkward…” Akane huddled down a bit more, jamming her hands into her pockets. "Not that this isn't."

They continued walking in silence. The hallways were oppressively empty and quiet, most active classes at this time of day on other floors.

"That was cruel of me, wasn't it?" Akane said softly. "Even if you're over me and you and Ranma are just friends… rubbing your face in it like that…"

"Akane… Nobody ever really 'gets over' someone like you," Ryouga said, giving her a sad smile. "Maybe my feelings for you have matured a little but I'll always have them. And… right now you're happy and in love. As long as that's true, I don't need any apologies."

Akane's eyes widened. "R-Ryouga…"

"Maybe I'll head home on my own today," he said, walking to the door and pushing it open. He turned back, framed by the bright light of the afternoon outside, saluted them with two fingers, then slipped outside.

Akane watched the door close, hands clasped over her heart, eyes wide as the wind from outside ruffled her hair.

Next to her, Ranma stood, arms crossed, foot tapping the floor and an annoyed expression on her face. She grit her teeth as the door finally clicked shut.

"OI! WHERE THE HELL DO YOU THINK YOU'RE GOING, RYOUGA?! WE'VE GOT A DINNER DATE TONIGHT!!"

"You did not need to shout that loud enough for the entire school to hear, Ranma," Ryouga grumbled, sitting on the steps, flanked by a sulking redhead and a bemused Tendo.

"Shut up," Ranma growled. "If you hadn't tried to be all cool and dramatic I wouldn't have had to yell after you!"

"You could have phrased it better, Ranma," Akane chided. "You're just going to make it harder to dispel the rumor that you and Ryouga are an item."

Ranma hunched her shoulders. "You also shut up, Akane. I don't need you an' Ryo ganging up on me."

"We're not ganging up on you, Ranma," Akane said, still bemused. She got up and sat down between Ranma and Ryouga, putting an arm around her shoulders.

Ranma blushed and slouched a little more, but started to relax.

"This is better, though…” Akane said. "I kinda missed the three of us together, you know? I mean, I know it's my fault and everything, and… I honestly do like being your rival, Ryouga, even if you're not really taking it seriously, but… I liked the times when the three of us got along, even if they were short." She put her other arm around Ryouga's waist and gave both of them a grin. "I missed having my boys."

Ranma scoffed. "We're not your 'boys', Akane."
Ryouga gave the redhead a skeptical look. "Yeah, we are."

Ranma looked up at him, opened her mouth to protest then sighed and slumped further. "... Yeah, we are."

Akane giggled lightly. "That's better." She kissed Ranma on the cheek. "I know I've been crazy jealous lately. I'm sorry. I promise to try and keep my temper under control."

"Just promise to try and listen to us before you make a judgement?" Ranma said. "I mean… Sometimes we do screw up, but we're not trying to hurt you, honest."

"There usually is a good explanation." Ryouga said.

Akane looked at him, smiled and nodded. Then she cocked her head. "So… Why is my sister teasing you, Ryouga? That usually means she wants something. What was she trying to get from you?"

Ryouga's eyes widened. "Uhhhh… There's a good explanation…" he said nervously, giving Ranma a panicked look.

"Y-yeah! A really good explanation!" Ranma echoed as she desperately tried to think of one that didn't involve telling Akane about the link. *If Akane finds out… she'll think it's another Koi Rod thing and freak out!*

"Yesssss…” Akane frowned. "And I'd like to hear it…"

"So would I!"

Ranma and Ryouga both jumped and squeaked in unison, turning to see Nabiki there, leaning against the side of the building. She had that smirk on her face that typically accompanied a hefty bill.

"Nabiki! I… uhh… we were just… Umm…” Ryouga stammered. "Akane wanted to know…"

"Oh, I heard." Nabiki grinned. She sauntered up and in one smooth motion plopped herself down in the Lost Boy's lap.

Ryouga immediately locked up like he had turned to stone. Ranma and Akane gaped at her.

"Truth is, I was just looking into seeing if Amazon law will let me keep a male concubine or two." Nabiki wrapped her arms around Ryouga's neck and hugged him, grinning at her sister. "If it does, do you think I should keep him? I mean, you already trained him so well…"

Akane's eyes were wide with astonishment, which quickly became rage. She stood up, clenching her fists. "I don't believe you, Nabiki! How can you be so shameless!? You shouldn't torment poor Ryouga like that!"

Nabiki raised an eyebrow. "Oh? Are we back to 'Poor Ryouga' now? I thought you didn't want your little P-chan anymore?"

"Ugh! You're so unbelievable!" Akane stomped. "Fine. I'm walking home with Shampoo and Ukyou before Kodachi shows up. You can walk home alone for all I care!" She huffed, lifted her nose into the air, turned and marched away.

Nabiki watched her go. "Well… That's going to make things a bit awkward for a while," she said nonchalantly.
Ranma sighed in relief. "Thanks Nabiki, you really saved us."

"I know. Telling little sister about the Link will need to be done carefully, and probably with lots of chocolate and apology gifts. Depends on what we find out about it. Plus, I'm not entirely sure I'm ready to share your little trick just yet." She turned a bit on Ryouga's lap, grinning at Ranma. "You two still owe me, though."

Ranma sighed. This was liable to be expensive.

"C-Could you get off my lap, Nabiki?" Ryugah whimpered. He was holding one of his bandanas to his nose. "Please?"

Nabiki smirked. "Awww… A nosebleed for me, Ryo?" She wriggled just a bit. "I'll get up, but first let me make something clear: You two are my boys now. Akane dumped you both. She gets you back on loan, but you belong to me." She poked Ryugah's nose.

"Nabiki, you can't claim Ryugah, he's got a girlfriend!" Ranma protested.

"I'm… sure she just means as a minion, like Hiroshi or Daisuke… right?" Ryugah said nervously.

Nabiki raised an eyebrow. "I haven't decided yet. Like I said, I've still gotta check Amazon law." "Nabiki!" Ranma protested.

Nabiki hopped up off Ryugah's lap and giggled. "Oh don't worry, Ranma. I'll be good. At least… as good as the situation calls for." She winked. "Now, I'd better get lost before a certain crazed gymnast takes my head off with a ribbon and see what I can do to defuse my sister. Have fun tonight!" She waved and turned, trotting off towards the gate.

Ryugah seemed to slump as his previously tense muscles all went slack. He looked almost like he had been drained by Ms. Hinako.

Ranma sighed and leaned back against the steps. "I think we're in trouble, Ryo…"

"Your girlfriends are going to kill me, Ranma…"

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Thankfully, Kodachi was in one of her less manic moods and seemed content on the limo ride to the estate to just chatter about minor things without requiring Ranma or Ryugah to input much more than the occasional noise to indicate they were listening.

The two of them kept close together, looking nervously around the grounds as they walked towards the imposing main doors of the estate.

"Ummm… So… is this… y'know… safe?" Ranma asked, trying to remember where she had run into traps before. The grounds looked totally different. Apparently they had been completely re-landscaped since she had been there last.

"Hmmm? Why of course!" Kodachi gave her a confused look. "Why wouldn't it be?"

"W-well… Your… uh… 'security system' is kinda infamous…” Ranma said sheepishly.

Kodachi laughed in her disturbing way. "Oh, that? Those are only for intruders. The staff all know that you're guests and are welcome, and the trapdoors and tripwires have been disarmed. Just be sure to not go wandering off."
Ryouga swallowed _hard_.

Ranma noticed. "Ryouga… If there was _ever_ a time I could totally understand you wanting to hold my hand…" She murmured to him.

He didn't let her finish, grasping her hand tightly.

_Good. Now I get to deal with Kodachi's craziness AND the general madness of the House of Kuno, PLUS have Ryouga and me in each other's heads. This can't POSSIBLY end in disaster._ Ranma thought sourly. _I can't think of a single thing that could make this situation worse._

"Oh, that reminds me!" Kodachi said. "My dear brother is home from the hospital. I told him you and your fiancee were coming and he seemed quite eager to congratulate you both on your impending nuptials!"

Ranma and Ryouga both stopped dead in their tracks.

"You were thinking 'This can't possibly get any worse', weren't you?" Ryouga murmured under his breath at her.

"Yeah, yeah actually I was. This one is on me," Ranma admitted.

"No, I did it too," Ryouga replied. He swallowed hard again.

Ranma glanced at his shirt. _Oh no…_

"Ryouga, is that the shirt…" Ryouga confirmed. He tapped the spot over his heart with a finger and there was a slight _'clink'_! "And I used the waterproofing soap, so… no escaping as P-chan this time."

Ranma blanched. She remembered Kuno's nearly uncontrollable lightning attack and how the kendoist had very nearly stopped Ryouga's heart with it. She felt a surge of fear and protectiveness she normally only associated with Akane or Nabiki, and gripped his hand tighter. "Stay close to me. I'm not going to let him hurt you."

Ryouga shook his head. "Ranma, you don't want to be touching me if he pulls out the lightning again…"

"Stay close to me," she growled. "I'll put him _back_ in the hospital if I have to, but he's _not_ hurting you!"

She felt a surge of what felt like surprise from him and… something else? Not quite embarrassment. He studied her a moment, then his own grip tightened reassuringly. "I'll stay close."

She relaxed a little, feeling a bit better. She still had to think of a way to deal with Kuno, though.

Kodachi noticed them not following and turned. "Well, are you coming?"

_We'll just have to wing it and see how it goes. Maybe if he tries to use it indoors it'll mess up like it did at the school and we'll get a chance to run for it._ She took a deep breath and started walking, leading Ryouga along with her.

Kodachi led them inside. The halls were high and wide. The upper floors of the manor were classical Edo Castle style, though Ranma knew down below were twisted labyrinths, modern deathtraps and European medieval-style stone dungeons. Servants were actually visible this time around, gliding about silently as they made preparations for dinner. They passed a large hall, where what looked like
a veritable feast was being laid out. The smells of roasted meats, grilled seafood and vegetables and other delicacies wafted to her nose, momentarily soothing her disquiet as her hunger made itself known with a loud grumble from her tummy.

Kodachi smiled. "Well… someone apparently has an appetite! Though that is another thing I suppose we shall have to work on. Such noises are hardly ladylike."

"It's not like I can help it," Ranma protested, putting her free hand on her belly.

"More regular mealtimes and a better diet will subdue such things," Kodachi lectured wisely. "I have had mine tailored by dieticians especially for my metabolism, and we will see about doing the same for you, though…” She glanced at them and sighed. "I suppose we will have to make it a budget plan. But for now, while we wait for them to prepare, my brother would like to speak to you."

Ranma stopped again. "Ummm… Kodachi, are you sure that's a good idea?" She unconsciously moved closer to Ryouga's side. "Last time he saw Ryo they got in a fight, and… Y'know, I'd hate it if we wrecked your house… again…”

Koachi sighed. "While I can't make promises about my brother's behaviour, you are my guests, and if he decides to become rowdy, I shall deal with him personally." She looked thoughtful for a moment. "Truth be told, he has been… different since he returned from the hospital."

"Different how?" Ranma asked nervously.

Kodachi looked pensive. "Different… in a way he has not been in… in a very long time. Not since before…” She shook her head. "It is a family matter, no business of yours, and it would be unseemly for me to discuss my brother's… medical concerns behind his back. Ask him yourself if you wish. In fact…” She hesitated, then gave Ranma a genuine look of concern. "… In fact I would implore you do so. I… I wish… an objective viewpoint on the matter. It is part of why I asked you here today. Among… other concerns."

Ranma cocked her head. "Is everything okay, Kodachi?"

Kodachi sighed and shook her head. "We can discuss it at dinner. For now, I ask that you fulfill my brother's request to speak with you. I will be close by if you need me."

She led them to a large set of sliding doors. She opened them and stepped inside. The room was large and lit by a number of skylights to give it an open, airy feel without being exposed to the elements. Most of the room was taken up by a large indoor rock garden, the sand meticulously combed around a number of large boulders. At the end of a stone footpath through the middle was the largest, and atop it, sitting in a meditative pose, was Tatewaki Kuno. He was wearing a lighter-colored uwagi than was his norm, almost white.

"Brother, dear," Kodachi called out. "Your precious pig-tailed goddess is here."

Tatewaki opened his eyes and his gaze shifted towards the door until he spotted them. His eyes widened as he saw Ranma, then narrowed when he saw Ryouga, and an expression something like pain crossed his face. He stood smoothly and hopped down from his rock to walk towards them.

"Be ready, just in case," Ranma said quietly to Ryouga. "Don't let go of my hand - can't have you getting lost in a place like this!"

Tatewaki stopped a few feet from them. His expression was unreadable, but Ranma knew how quickly his demeanor could change. Surprisingly, however, he bowed.
"My memory of the last few... years is somewhat suspect but I am aware I have wronged you both grievously in the recent past. I have no excuse for my behaviour and I wish to make amends in whatever manner you deem appropriate."


Tatewaki straightened and took a deep breath. "Allow me a moment to explain myself. It is likely of no surprise to you that the Kuno family is... blighted." His jaw tightened. "We have been afflicted with madness of varying degrees going back generations. This has ranged from mere eccentricities to... well, you are acquainted with my father, yes?" He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small orange plastic pill bottle, the kind prescriptions came in. "This madness is wholly treatable by modern medicine, but for many years my family has eschewed such remedies as a shameful admission of our weakness. As a boy, I was the first Kuno to be properly diagnosed and treated and I was the first Kuno to have a choice." He held up the pills, looking at them. "At my father's urging, I chose madness. And others, like yourselves, have paid the price ever since."

"So... wait... you're medicated now?" Ranma asked skeptically. "And we're supposed to believe you're a totally different person?"

Tatewaki shook his head. "Medicated, yes. A totally different person? No, of course not. I am now merely willing to accept responsibility for my actions, past and future." He smiled weakly. "I imagine trusting me is difficult and I do not blame you. I know that I will need to prove much through my actions rather than my words, but... I was hoping you could at least help me to understand the scope of my wrongs. My recollections during my times of... imbalance are fanciful at best." His gaze moved to Ryouga. "For instance, in my fevered imaginings I had struck you down with a bolt of lightning that I wielded as if it were a sword and that you exploded into a cloud of steam, using magic to escape my righteous wrath. That I attacked you I do not doubt, but I imagine the circumstances were considerably less fanciful. I... understand you were found later and taken to the hospital." He bowed his head. "I beg your forgiveness and ask what reparations I might make?"

Ryouga blinked. "I... uhh..." He rubbed the back of his head. "It wasn't... a lot of stuff happened that day, actually. You're not the only guy who's flown off the handle and started a fight in Nerima..."

"What others do is irrelevant. A misdeed is a misdeed," Tatewaki said. "I will reflect on this for a proper apology. For now, I am relieved you are well." His eyes glanced down to their hands, still clasped. A small flicker of a smile crossed his face, sad, wistful. "And I see that the affection you have for each other that so enraged me remains unharmed by my rampage."

The both blushed and looked down at the ground, embarrassed, though they didn't let go.

"Which leads me to the greater part of my crimes," Tatewaki continued, his gaze shifting to Ranma. He regarded her for a moment, studying her as if fascinated. "I... am struck anew at your beauty, I must admit. I apologize for that, for I know now that my advances were unwelcome and unwanted, but..." his voice grew slightly hoarse... "I... had thought what I remembered of you was merely delusional embellishment - that someone such as you could not truly exist as I had remembered. To see you now... I can understand why I believed you a creature of fae and divinity." He trailed off a bit, his gaze intense before he shook his head. "I... apologize. I should not go on so in the presence of your beloved." He took a deep breath. "My sister has told me much. Far more than I had bothered to learn in my addled state, apparently. I understand that you go by the name of 'Ran', yes?"

Ranma nodded dumbly. She was entirely uncertain how to reconcile this Kuno who was talking with her now with the raving madman she had last seen casting lightning bolts around like a vengeful Greek god.
"She has told me you have some... difficulties with your family and that due to the circumstances of your birth they do not support or acknowledge you. She has offered you the support of House Kuno. I would like to second that support. Though I understand fully if you would prefer I not be involved in the matter." He closed his eyes for a moment. "I have also... secured the materials of a questionable nature that I had stockpiled of both you and Akane Tendo. I will destroy them at your request, or turn them over if you prefer to pursue this invasion of privacy legally."

"Legally...?!" Ranma boggled. "Uhh... no, no, that's alright. Just burn 'em or something. We don't wanna sue you or anything. You weren't that bad!"

He smiled weakly again. "That's reassuring to hear you say, though... I find the evidence against me distressing. This is not how the samurai I idealized would behave." He nodded. "I will have the servants destroy the material involving yourself at once. I will need to speak to Akane Tendo separately on her wishes. Though..." he swallowed, "That is a conversation I dread. I... had hoped that should my apology to you go well, you might be able to offer some insights on how..." He trailed off.

"How to not end up right back in the hospital?" Ranma asked.

"I would deserve no less, but such things do nothing to amend the damages I have wrought." Tatewaki admitted. "I would like to speak with her before returning to school. Is the... 'challenge' I issued still being observed?"

"No, she finally managed to shame it outta most of them and beat it outta the rest," Ranma said, feeling a twinge of pride at Akane's accomplishment.

Tatewaki sagged in relief. "Thank God. I had feared..." He closed his eyes. "For that alone I am unsure how to ever properly make amends. I am astonished it took her as long as she did to hospitalize me."

"Well... you're pretty tough," Ranma said, smiling a little. "She wasn't exactly holding back for your sake."

"There was another, a girl... or a boy?" He frowned. "My memory is replete with nonsense about magical transformations. But... Ukyou Kuonji. I remember striking them. Are they well?"

"She is, yeah," Ranma said.

"She," Tatewaki nodded. "I remember..." He blinked. "No, nevermind, it is no business of mine."

"They're a couple, yeah," Ranma said again. It was a bit of an omission but she wanted to flag Akane as unavailable as firmly as she could while Kuno was being so uncharacteristically reasonable. There was no telling how long it would last.

Tatewaki winced. "Then I have imposed where I am profoundly unwanted by my very nature. Thank you. This... gives me some idea of how to approach the problem." He gripped the pill bottle more tightly then slipped it back into his pocket. "One last inquiry... her sister, Nabiki."

Ranma cocked her head. "Nabiki? Why? I don't think you did anything bad to her..."

Tatewaki chuckled bitterly. "Oh yes I did," he said softly. "But I imagine that is an old wound for her. But... is she well?" He clasped his hands, fidgeting in a most Un-Kuno-like manner. "Is... is she happy? I know... at least I remember that she was engaged to your brother, but... well, had my sister not explained that situation to me I would have believed it madness as well."
Ranma paused. She considered a moment. "I think maybe you should ask her yourself…" Ranma said carefully. "... Tachi."

He looked surprised at that, then she saw the spark of understanding in his eyes. "I… will do that," he said finally. "Thank you. I would hope to speak to your brother as well. I have many fences to mend with him if he is soon to marry my sister, after all."

Ranma chuckled nervously. "Aheh… yeah… "

Tatewaki took a deep breath, looking like a weight had been lifted off his shoulders. "Again… thank you. I will leave you to your dinner, then."

"You're not eating with us?" Ranma asked, then mentally kicked herself for tempting fate.

He smiled wanly. "I would think it would be awkward. There will be time for socialization perhaps when I have proven my convictions to be more than words, at least unto myself. I will take a walk and think. You have given me sufficient food for thought that I feel little need to fill my belly as well." He nodded to them both in turn. "Enjoy your evening."

"Uh… thanks…" Ranma said. She and Ryouga stepped aside as Tatewaki walked past them and down the hallway the way they had come.

"That was… new," Ryouga said finally.

"The transformation is startling, I admit," Kodachi said, walking over to them where she had been waiting. She looked down the hallway, watching her brother's retreating form. "I am saddened to see his fire so dimmed with regret, but… It is good to have back the brother I had growing up."

"I always thought you hated his guts," Ranma admitted sheepishly.

"I hated what he had become - the ridiculous caricature that had taken his place - and that I still relied on him so dearly despite his obvious madness," She sighed. "Had I known the solution was so simple… Though I suppose this will give him the resolve to keep his sanity closer this time." She motioned for them to follow her as she walked back towards the banquet hall.

"Uhh… Out of curiosity you aren't… ummm…" Ranma asked timidly.

Kodachi shot her a glare, then her expression softened. "I am aware of how I am perceived, Ran. The solution to my problems is unfortunately not to be found in a little white pill." She sighed. "I am sure my therapist could show you a list of diagnoses the length of my arm about what is wrong with me, but it is nothing so simple or treatable as a chemical imbalance in the brain. Not that father would tolerate such a thing after fighting Tatewaki so long about his own."

"Yeah, well…” Ranma muttered. "I haven't exactly had good experiences with your Dad, either."

"Having been attending his school for a brief time, I better understand your dislike of him," Kodachi admitted. "He… was not always like this." She looked down.

Ranma felt a pang of sympathy. Something familiar in Kodachi's expression. "It… kinda sucks when family isn't there for you, huh?" She put a hand on Kodachi's shoulder.

Kodachi glanced at her and smiled. One of those rare, genuine smiles that had started appearing. "I think that's why I have grown to like you, Ran. That is something that you of all people would understand." She patted the hand on her shoulder and continued on. "It is actually concerns about your family I wanted to talk about. But… after the main course, at least."
Nabiki had to jog a bit to catch up to Akane and the others but, with all her training at the Nekohanten, such a run wasn't even leaving her out of breath anymore.

"Akane, wait up!"

Akane stopped. Nabiki could see her sister's back tense as she heard those words and winced. Ouch, she's still mad. I think I hit a nerve or two back there.

"You can stand to jog a little to catch up," Akane said, and resumed walking. Her chin was held high as Nabiki came even with her and fell into step beside her.

"Akane, come on. You honestly can't be jealous of me and Ryouga," Nabiki said.

"Why not?" Akane sniffed. "He's still my friend, and I know he's sensitive, and I don't like you teasing him like that any more than Ranma!" She folded her arms.

Nabiki rolled her eyes. "Oh come off it, sis! How many times did you run into his arms or gush on about how reliable he was or what a great guy he was? Specifically while Ranma was there? At least when I tease Ryouga I'm doing it to tease Ryouga."

Akane's haughty expression fell away and her gaze dropped. "I know I haven't been a good friend to him. I... I'm trying to do better." She glared at Nabiki. "And you should too! Don't taunt him like that!"

Nabiki smirked and folded her hands behind the back of her head as she walked. "It's only taunting if it's something he can't have..." she said off-handedly.

"Nabiki!" Akane yelped, aghast.

"What? This Tendo still likes boys, y'know," She waggled her eyebrows.

"You're engaged! To his best friend no less!" Akane said, eyes wide.

"What about our little situation says 'monogamy' to you, Akane?" Nabiki asked.

Akane blushed. "Th-that... That's 'Fiancée's Tea' stuff!" she sputtered. "Ryouga isn't part of any of that!"

"That's probably just a matter of formality," Nabiki noted dryly.

"Nabiki! You keep on getting on my case about accusing Ranma and Ryouga of doing something untoward... how can you turn around and..." Akane started, outraged.

"Because I wasn't on your case about accusing them, I was on your case about being irrationally jealous about it!" Nabiki shot back, glaring at her. "That's poison for this relationship, sis, even if it's directed at someone outside of the group! How long did it take you to figure out which way you swung, huh? How much longer after that were you in denial about it?"

Akane blinked, then blushed. "Y-you think that Ranma is...?"

"Let's see. A gender curse that hit just at the apex of puberty, overbearing parents obsessed with hyper-masculine behaviour while at the same time repressing and isolating him like they are absolutely terrified of him interacting with people in a normal way for any length of time, his best friend is a girl, his gender identity is increasingly fluid, and a near death experience with a male rival
with whom he has enough emotional tension to hang a bridge from? Yeah, I'd say the deck is pretty firmly stacked against him not even being curious." Nabiki held up a finger. "And if she's going to be curious, I'd rather it be with someone Ranma trusts. If I counted the number of guys on that list on one hand I wouldn't have enough to make a fist."

Akane looked down at the ground, twiddling her fingers. "Y-yeah, but... Wait, how do you know Ranma trusts Ryouga?"

Nabiki raised an eyebrow. "You really think Ranma would honor his promise to keep Ryouga's secret if he didn't trust you with him? You, the most important thing in the world to Ranma? You think he'd tolerate P-chan for a single second, no matter how mad it made you, if he thought there was any chance of Ryouga hurting you or taking advantage of you?"

"I..." Akane seemed stunned. "... I didn't think of that." She slumped a little more. "... Now I feel worse about the whole situation with P-chan..."

"Have a little faith, sis," Nabiki said. "Ranma loves you. Even when you fought or broke up. Even when you frustrated the hell out of him. You're the one he always dove off a cliff to catch, even if he had no idea how to land it. His relationships with other people don't change any of that."

"He loves you too, Nabiki," Akane said, straightening a little. "You keep talking like you're not the most important person in his life right now."

Nabiki blushed a little in spite of herself. She remembered the sea of red-gold emotion that had enfolded her during her too-brief experience in the link and smiled. "... Yeah, he does. I don't know if I'm the most important..."

Akane nudged her in the ribs. "Stop. False modesty isn't your thing." She sighed. "So... If that's true... why are you teasing Ryouga?"

"So if something does happen I can get in on it," Nabiki deadpanned.

"Nabiki!"

"What? He's cute," Nabiki said nonchalantly. "If he wasn't dirt poor and a pile of issues I probably would have nabbed him for myself when you and Ranma were dating."

"I don't believe you!" Akane said, though her expression was more bemused than outraged.

"I still might have if you hadn't claimed him so early on!" Nabiki gave her a sidelong glance.

Akane blinked. "Wha...? Claimed!?"

"Oh please. You knew he was completely head-over-heels in love with you. Any time he was at the table, you were sitting next to him. Any time you had a problem, you went to him. You like him, even if boys aren't really your thing. That much was obvious. I figured you were planning on keeping them both and were just wrestling with your own hangups." She smirked. "Or did I read you and your boys' all wrong?"

Akane scowled. "Not all of us are perverts like you, Nabiki!"

"I heard some interesting sounds coming from the girl's change room that say different," Nabiki wagged her eyebrows.

"Eep," Akane ducked her head and blushed. "Y-you... you..."
"Heard that? Yeah, it was kind of hard to miss!" Nabiki chortled. "I came looking for you three when you vanished after making the soccer field a disaster area. Poor Ryouga was standing watch outside the changeroom trying to stuff tissue in his ears and his nose at the same time. And you're on my case for taunting him? I put out some 'Wet floor' signs on the stairwells to get people to use the ones on the other side. You're welcome." She chuckled. "I'm pretty daring, but even I wouldn't dream of doing it in the girl's showers! I didn't even know you guys had gotten to that stage yet!"

Akane's blush deepened and she hunched her shoulders like she wanted to disappear.

Nabiki's eyes widened. ". Oh my. That was..." She covered her mouth, snorting. "Oh my god Akane, you seductress!"

"You're never going to let me live this down, are you," Akane whimpered and held her school bag over her head to hide her face.

"Oh no, no, no, I approve of this! I think I could learn from you!" Nabiki grinned.

Akane peeked out from her bag. "We really are perverts, aren't we?" she said, abashed.

"I think the deck was stacked against us in that regard," Nabiki said. "Given what we now know about Dad's younger years, I think it might be a family trait. Might as well have fun with it before we end up old and boring like him."

"If it's a family trait, what does that mean for Kasumi?" Akane put her bookbag down.

Nabiki shrugged. "Either she's got a secret life she's somehow kept from us where she blows off steam, or she's so repressed that unless her first time is with a literal superhuman she's going to kill them when she finally uncorks it all."

"Nabiki...! I'm sure when she finally gets together with Doc Tofu..." Akane began chiding her.

"Oh, not a chance, sugar," Ukyou sidled up beside Akane, startling her. "The Doc is a great guy, but... His blood pressure spikes if she's in the same room as him. There's just no way."

"Doctor Tofu not survive being with Tendo womans," Shampoo appeared suddenly on Nabiki's left. "Not have fort... fort... not have what needed to survive night."

"Trust us, we know from personal experience," Ukyou winked.

Akane and Nabiki both blushed and looked at the ground.

"I think our girlfriends are calling us out," Nabiki said in aside to Akane.

Riko popped up beside Shampoo. Apparently the entire conversation had been heard by most of the group. "So, just out of curiosity, when you say 'girlfriends', do you mean girlfriends, or girlfriends? Bec-"mnmmpf?!*

Yuka had snuck up beside Riko and put an arm around her head, put her hand over her mouth and dragged her away to the other side of the street in a headlock.

"Riko, we do not inquire about such things," Daisuke said sagely as he followed them. "To peer too deeply into the Nerima Relationship Hypercube is to invite madness."

"Just look at the Kunos." Hiroshi added, following behind. "They used to be normal, upstanding citizens who donated to charity and volunteered at soup kitchens. Then they met Ranma
Saotome. *Boom!* Bokkens and black roses everywhere."

"Really?" Rin asked, fascinated.

"No, not really. The Kunos were always nuts." Sayuri sighed, following up the rear. "... They're right about the rest of it, though."

Akane and Nabiki looked at each other.

"Mmmmmaaaaybe next time we should have these little 'heart to hearts' in a less public place?" Akane said sheepishly.

The meal was ridiculously lavish, with enough food for ten people. Naturally Ranma was starving, but she dipped into her Martial Arts Dining training to allow her to eat her fill without looking like she was stuffing her face. After all, Kodachi seemed to expect a certain decorum.

Kodachi, more used to such abundance, ate at a more sedate pace. "Do try the quail eggs, dear. They're quite good." She seemed to enjoy showing off for the two of them.

"You're actually a good cook yourself, right Kodachi?" Ranma said, remembering (barely) not to talk with her mouth full.

"It's a skill I have," Kodachi admitted demurely. "Though I prefer to reserve it for my family and… eventually… my darling Ranma. Cooking myself gives me an opportunity to ensure a quiet night."

"Ah… so that's why you keep putting sleeping powder in food - out of habit," Ranma said. "You're used to zonking out your Dad and Brother."

Kodachi laughed. "Hence my thought that having a more formal dinner would put your minds at ease." She leaned back in her chair, crossed her legs and swirled the wine in her glass. "But perhaps now I should bring up the topic I wished to discuss. You may be unaware but I have had my agents monitoring your family for some time…"

"You had Sasuke spying at the omiai. We know." Ranma said.

Kodachi frowned. "Yes… well… I shall have to have a chat with Sasuke about that later. Isn't that right, Sasuke?"

There was a puff of smoke and the diminutive ninja was next to her chair, bowing and scraping. "Yes, Mistress Kodachi! I'm sorry, Mistress Kodachi! It won't happen again, Mistress Kodachi!"

"Go easy on him," Ranma sighed. "We told him he could stay. I mean, he's your retainer - he's allowed to be there for these things."

Kodachi raised an eyebrow. "Hmmm… I will take that under consideration then. Sasuke? Redeem yourself. Repeat for me what you overheard."

"Yes, Mistress Kodachi," Sasuke bowed again then pushed himself up into a kneeling position. "Young Master Ranma had a conversation with his mother before the omiai began and you had arrived, Mistress. Lady Nodoka explained to the young Master what would be expected of him after the wedding. It was… very specific and comprehensive, covering…” He swallowed. "... Well, covering most of his life, in fact. It seems Master Ranma's mother has thought out his future in considerable detail."
"That isn't the information I wished, Sasuke," Kodachi growled warningly.

"Y-yes Mistress!" He bowed again. "Please forgive me, I was getting to that! There were two things of particular note. Firstly, Lady Nodoka was of the expectation that Ranma would… would surrender any children he had with his future bride - Which shall undoubtably be Mistress Kodachi - to his mother and father to raise while… while he and his wife would embark upon a perpetual training journey. There was some concern on Master Ranma's part that… his mother intended to raise them as her own and that he would not be allowed any part in their lives until they were in their teens."

Ryouga shot Ranma a startled look.

"Which is utterly unacceptable!" Kodachi said sharply. "I would not have my future children deprived of my darling Ranma's guidance and love! Certainly not to be raised by that idiot father of his!" She took a breath and steadied herself. "But there was another matter that concerned me far more. Sasuke?"

"Y-yes… When… when the young Master balked… his mother mentioned seppuku… and a contract… Something that seemed to greatly unnerve Master Ranma."

"Yes. This," Kodachi said. She turned to Ranma. "Can you explain this for me?"

Ranma closed her eyes and sighed. "Yeah… yeah I can," she said quietly. "When Pops wanted to take m-Ranma on a training journey when he was only two years old, Ma objected. So… he made it a point of honor. He made a contract with her that if, after 14 years, he returned and he had not succeeded in making Ranma a 'man amongst men', he and Ranma would commit seppuku."

Kodachi blinked. "I can see this for her husband, but how can she hold this binding to Ranma if he was just a child and could not agree?"

Ranma slumped a little more. "He… He pretended it was fingerpainting, and got Ranma to put his handprint on it."

Kodachi raised an eyebrow. "And… she holds this as valid? And given how truly manly my darling Ranma is… does she not hold the contract as fulfilled?"

Ranma shook her head. "No. She has declared that he must always uphold the contract to her standards. Which means… following her plan for his life."

Kodachi narrowed her eyes. "And… do you believe her capable of demanding the contract be fulfilled, should she not be satisfied?"

Ranma swallowed. She remembered that awful moment when she had seen something dark and hateful flicker behind her mother's eyes, how the mask had slipped when her mother's plans for the future were in any way questioned. "... Yes. Yes, I think that she is."

She felt a hand on hers and a sense of overriding concern, and turned to see Ryouga staring at her, wearing a horrified expression.

"... Unacceptable," Kodachi said finally. She stared at her wine glass, her brow furrowed, then finally flung it across the room in a fury. "Unacceptable!"

Ranma winced as the sound of breaking glass echoed through the chamber.

"I will not have my future life… or that of the progeny of House Kuno dictated to me!" Kodachi
said. "And I will not stand by as my darling Ranma's life is held hostage to do it!" She closed her eyes and took a few deep breaths. She clenched her hand into a fist, then relaxed it as she slowly regained control. "I apologize for my outburst. I... had hoped Nodoka Saotome was different. She has such charmingly traditional views. But... it seems she is no different from my own mother in regards to her children." She turned her gaze to Ran. "Thank you... If you had not reached out to me, I might not have known of this. I will need to take measures to ensure that contract is never ever called in."

"Kodachi..." Ranma's eyes widened. "... Please tell me you won't do anything drastic to Mom!"

Kodachi raised an eyebrow. "I will do what is necessary to protect my darling Ranma. What form that takes will depend on her, and is none of your concern."

"Ranma is very protective of his mother," Ryoga interjected. "If you hurt her, he'll hate you for it..." he glanced at Ranma, "... no matter what she's threatened to do to him."

Kodachi considered a moment, a sad expression crossing her face. "Then let him hate me," she said softly. "Better to remain true to my own heart and fearless then allow fear of possible consequences control me." She chuckled softly, uncharacteristically quiet. "Listen to me... I am sounding more like my brother every day..."

"Perhaps, instead, you should listen to your dear Brother?" a voice said from the doorway. "For he would tell you such extreme measures are unnecessary."

They all looked over to the large double doors of the banquet hall to see Tatewaki standing there with his arms folded.

Kodachi's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean, Brother, dear?" she asked, a warning tone in her voice.

Tatewaki walked forward with his eyes closed, a contemplative look on his face. "Tell me... this 'contract' that Ranma Saotome is bound to... how has he agreed to its precepts?"

"Heh... Pops got him to put his handprint on it when he was two," Ranma said, watching Tatewaki warily.

"This was explained to Ranma? He understood the matter at such a young age?" Tatewaki opened an eye and regarded her curiously.

Ranma blushed and looked away, feeling oddly like a student who's teacher had just called her out. "I... n-no, he... he thought it was fingerpainting. He had no idea the contract even existed until he came to Nerima and Pops told him."

"I see," Tatewaki said, closing his eyes again and resuming his walk. "And at any point has Ranma given his oath to this pledge, either by word or pen? Or has it been merely assumed he is bound by it?"

Ranma blinked. "I... he's never... I mean, I didn't think it was a choice..."

"A debt of honor cannot be compelled, not even by a parent. Honor is and must be a matter of personal choice. It must be accepted," Tatewaki said sternly. "A child not even out of swaddling clothes cannot make such a choice."

"It's... it's considered a matter of family honor," Ranma said quietly.
"Oh?" Tatewaki opened an eye again. "And the Saotome Clan is honorable, is it? With its multitude of conflicting marriage agreements and its sham of an omiai?" he huffed. "Addled though I may have been, what I have learned in the last two days is more than enough to doubt that."

"H-hey!" Ranma pushed her chair back and got up, glaring at the kendoist. "As the heir to the Saotome School of Anything Goes..."

Tatewaki waved his hand, cutting her off. "This is no challenge. These are not matters in question, these are matters which directly affect the honor of my household. At the very least, would you claim that Genma Saotome has acted honorably? In his abuse of pledges of honor; in his acts of thievery; in his treatment of you, his own child?"

"I..." Ranma stepped back a bit, taken aback by Kuno's argument. "W-well... no, maybe not..."

"There is no reason to defend the honor of one who will not uphold it," Tatewaki said. "It is a man's obligation to teach his children moral standards through the model of his own behavior. Has Genma Saotome done this consistently?"

"I..." Ranma trailed off again. She backed into the chair and stopped.

"Then he has not upheld Bushido. The agreement he made with his wife is his own and it was on his own honor that he staked Ranma's participation in committing seppuku. Ranma's personal honor is not bound to the agreement, because he has not agreed to it. The only way Ranma is bound is to uphold his father's honor, as a dutiful son. But... with his father's honor in such a state, one doubts there is anything left to uphold."

Ranma simply stared at him.

Tatewaki saw her expression, a momentary flicker of pain across his features again, then looked away. "I... apologize. I fear I am applying my own insights into my conflict with my father over my own medical care to your situation and I may be unfairly judging your family as a result."

"Your own conflict...?" Ryouga asked, moving up beside Ranma, unconsciously putting a hand on her shoulder.

"My father does not simply disapprove of my... reliance on contrivances such as these to maintain my sanity." Tatewaki fished out the bottle of pills. "He has forbidden it. As the head of the House Kuno this would normally be entirely within his right but the consequences of accepting his doctrine have already proven to be dire and the source of much shame for me. I have... spent much of my time in the hospital exploring the complexities of Bushido to find a solution." He gripped the bottle then put it back in his pocket. "Fortunately, my father's own abdication of his responsibilities has made my struggle easier. He no longer is the head of the House, as that title and responsibility fell to me when he was declared unfit and was sent to America to recover. It is merely as my father that I must deal with him and his unreasonable demands. Admittedly, Ranma does not have such an advantage."

"So... what would be the honorable thing?" Ranma asked nervously. Part of her didn't want the answer. Part of her couldn't believe she was asking Kuno for it.

Tatewaki considered. "Their authority over Ranma remains that of his parents and nothing more. Writing up a document stating otherwise does not arbitrarily enhance that authority. They cannot compel Ranma to commit seppuku, nor would it stain his honor to refuse. Loyalty is but one precept of Bushido. Rectitude overrides it. Justice must be supreme for honor to be served and from how this agreement has been imposed and manipulated, to say nothing of the costs..."
Ranma's death would incur on those to whom he has been obligated…” He shook his head. "The decision must ultimately be Ranma's, based on what his soul tells him of right and wrong. But I fear he would be forced to disown his family and end the Saotome line. Though I believe it would be the honorable choice in this matter, it would require he live as a Ronin."

"That's… a hard choice," Ranma said quietly. While being a Ronin hardly had the same meaning today as it had in feudal times, it was still a personal mark. "So… the choice is which dishonor does he want to live with then?"

Tatewaki bowed his head sadly. "I fear his family would leave him little choice should they decide to enforce the contract. To use a matter of honor to compel and control both Ranma's future wife and his unborn children crosses the line into injustice and cannot be borne either way."

Ranma shuddered. "They're not taking away my kids…"

Tatewaki blinked. "Am I to understand they wish to compel you to surrender your own children as well?"

"Absolutely not," Kodachi interrupted. She stood and walked over to Ranma, gripping her by the shoulders. "Ran…"

Ranma shook her head. "No, I mean…" She sighed. "No, I won't let that happen. I won't… I won't…" She felt something bubble up from deep within her, something from that dark place in her own mind she didn't dare look.

"I won't let them do this to anyone else!"

After some cajoling, Tatewaki was convinced to stay for dessert. The transformation in him remained startling; He was thoughtful, well-mannered and even charming, his usual overblown posturing and bluster modulated into a kind of self-aware confidence and self-assuredness. Ranma noticed that Kodachi was still a little uncertain about him as well.

Amazing how much of a difference a small thing makes, she thought. He remembers being 'Tachi' though… I wonder how Nabiki will react to that?

She yawned unconsciously, blinking a bit as she realized she had been asked a question, but hadn't actually been able to make sense of it.

"Oh! My apologies, I seem to have been prattling on," Tatewaki said, looking up at a large grandfather clock at the edge of the room. "I lost track of the time."

"It has been a while since I have enjoyed a meal this much, Brother. I think this once you can be forgiven." Kodachi smiled. It was a warmer smile that Ranma remembered Kodachi having. Both of the Kuno siblings had been surprising her all night.

"Yeah, though… I feel I finally get what you're talking about when you call me 'peasant','" Ryoga admitted. "I couldn't follow half of that conversation."

"Nonsense. I was actually pleasantly surprised that your French was as good as it is," Kodachi said.

"Where did you pick that up?" Ranma asked, curious. It had been bizarre to see Kodachi slip into a few phrases in a foreign language and then watch as Ryoga went right along with it without skipping a beat in the same language.
"I… Didn't even realize it was French to be honest. I just ended up in this small town somewhere while I was wandering and I stuck around a few months to work enough to try and save up some travel money. That was the language they spoke and I just picked it up after a while." Ryoga rubbed the back of his head sheepishly.

"There is no way I'm believing you ended up in France on your way to the Tendo Dojo," Ranma said skeptically.

"Actually, from the inflection he's using, I'd say the dialect is more Quebecois," Kodachi replied. Seeing Ranma's look she amended. "... French Canadian."

"Okay, that's worse!" Ranma poked him in the chest. "There is no way… Wait, didn't your Mom say something about you and an American girl?"

"Anna? No, I'm pretty sure she's from Hokkaido. They all speak english in Hokkaido, right?" Ryoga replied, confused.

"... No?"

"Oh… ummm… Maybe it wasn't Hokkaido then…"

Ranma laughed and smacked her forehead with the hell of her hand. "How do you end up on the wrong continent?!

"I don't know!" Ryoga threw his hands up in the air then sighed and leaned back in his chair.

"Perhaps to avoid a lengthy journey home, the two of you should stay the night here then?" Tatewaki said. "I can have guest quarters prepared. I believe it's been some time since we used them…"

Ranma and Ryoga blanched.

"You're… not referring to the dungeon, are you?" Ranma asked in a worried tone.

Tatewaki blinked. "Dungeon? There…" His eyes widened, then he covered them with his hand. "Sister, please tell me I didn't…?"

"Almost two years ago, brother dear," Kodachi said off handedly. "You spent quite a lot of time getting them properly atmospheric."

Tatewaki groaned. "I… apologize if any of that was inflicted on you. I thought that was… nevermind. Proper guest quarters, I mean. The ones for visiting dignitaries."

"Ah yes. They haven't been used in some time, but I know the staff has been keeping them up regardless," Kodachi nodded.

"You don't need to go to any trouble…" Ranma said hurriedly. The idea of spending the night at the Kuno Manor was perhaps a little less terrifying with these new, less-crazy Kunos around, but it was still not somewhere she felt exactly safe.

"Nonsense!" Kodachi said. "We haven't had guests in… I don't remember how long! This will be a nice change. Plus, it will be nice to have someone to talk to on the ride to school."

"Uh… quick question… does your Dad…?" Ranma asked nervously. They hadn't seen the Principal, thankfully, but it was a large castle.
"Father lives at the school," Kodachi said dryly.

"He visits occasionally but I believe he prefers to be somewhere over which he has uncontested control," Tatewaki added, unable to keep a sneer out of his voice.

"You are quite safe from him here," Kodachi finished, giving Ranma a reassuring pat on the shoulder. "I am well aware of how he has been treating you and my darling Ranma and he is very aware of my displeasure with him over it."

Ranma giggled in spite of herself. "Yes, I kinda caught the tail end of your conversation with him."

"Is that the one where she tossed him out of a third story window?" Ryouga asked.

"And landed on him, yes," Ranma nodded.

Tatewaki looked back and forth between them, as if uncertain if they were serious. "It… seems I have missed a considerable amount."

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The room was in an older wing of the Kuno Estate, far removed from the current 'security measures', and harkening back to grander days for the family. The style was a bit dated but it certainly seemed comfortable enough, with a large attached private bathroom with furo and a balcony overlooking the grounds. There was only one flaw Ryouga could find with the room and it was a rather glaring one.

"Ummm… Kodachi, there's only one bed…" Ryouga said, glancing around the room.

Kodachi had a knowing smirk on her face. "Yes, imagine that? Well… I'm sure you and your fiancee will behave. Not that anyone would know, I'm told the soundproofing in this wing is quite good. Just leave your clothes outside of the door and the staff will see they are laundered and returned by morning." She gave Ranma a wink and turned, walking away before either of them could raise any further objections.

"I… think she thinks she's doing us a favor…" Ranma said self consciously as she stepped inside the room.

Ryouga sighed and looked around. There were a couple of chairs, but no couch. Still, it looked like he could scrounge up some cushions and some pillows from the bed. "I'll take the floor."

Ranma rolled her eyes. "Ryouga, please don't pull that chivalrous bullcrap with me?"

"What you want the floor?" Ryouga raised an eyebrow.

Ranma shook her head. "Nah. We just share the bed."

Ryouga's eyes widened as she walked over to the admittedly enormous bed. "Wait, what!?"

"Oh come on, we've shared a tent before, right? This thing is literally twice the size of your tent." She sat down on the corner of it. "This is… what, King size plus?"

"The situation was different then!" Ryouga protested.

Ranma crossed her arms and gave him a bemused look. "What, the one where I was zonked out of my brain on love magic from that stupid fishing rod and trying to be your ideal wife?"

"I… "Ryouga blushed, remembering waking up to find her in his tent. His current opinion of the
redhead was coloring that memory somewhat differently than it had been before. "Yes. That was a stupid magic rod!"

"Yeah, and you didn't do anything then, and I'm not magically in love with you now, so what's the problem?" Ranma smirked.

The problem isn't YOU, Ranma! Ryouga thought. "It's... it's not proper?"

"Proper' is a line I kinda crossed over a long time ago," Ranma said. "Look, I went through this with Nabiki when we were on vacation together, so I'll tell you what she told me when we had to share a room; 'You'll sleep in a bed like a normal person. I trust you.'" She gave him a lopsided grin.

Ryouga winced. "Are you sure using an example involving you and Nabiki is the best choice?"

"What?! No!" Ryouga felt a rising surge of panic.

"Then don't!" She shot him an annoyed glare. "There, crisis averted. Now I'm tired. Can you do whatever else you need to do to get this out of your system quickly so I can get some sleep?"

Ryouga ducked his head, ashamed, and walked over to the bed. He walked around to the other side of the huge bed and found a neatly folded pile of clothes. "Oh, hey... I guess they set out pajamas for us." He picked up the top bundle, finding it to be a set of men's pajamas. The fabric was fine silk and it was probably the softest thing he had ever touched.

"Oh, cool!" Ranma scrambled over to her side. She raised a skeptical eyebrow as she unfolded a silk nightgown. It wasn't exactly revealing or girly but it was very feminine. "Awww, man... Trade?"

"Not a chance, Saotome," Ryouga smirked, picking up his pajamas and heading for the bathroom door. "I'm sure you'll look very ladylike in it. Just yell when you're done changing."

"Again with the chivalry?" Ranma groused, watching him as he made his way into the bathroom. "It's not like you got anything I haven't seen, Ryouga! We've bathed together, ya twit!"

Ryouga slid the door closed behind him. This isn't for YOU, Ranma. He sighed, leaned against the door and closed his eyes. It was true he had seen Ranma naked before - in both forms, yet. But he hadn't really been seeing her. He slapped his own cheeks. All right, get control of yourself, Hibiki! Just because she LOOKS like a cute girl doesn't mean she IS one! Even if SHE thinks she is sometimes... He winced at the last part, realizing it severely undermined his argument. He started stripping off his clothes, walking over to the sink and splashing himself in the face with cold water. At least I can do this without changing, thanks to the soap.

He paused. No, wait...! Without the soap I could have just changed forms, and none of this would have been a problem! He pulled at his hair. AUUUGH! I'm an idiot!

"Ryouga, you okay in there? I'm done changing if that's why you're still in there," Ranma called from the other room.

And because of the soap Ranma can't change either! We're trapped! Trapped in the worst possible bodies to be in together! He started giggling maniacally as he realized how easily his situation could have been avoided. No, no... He took a deep breath and resumed pulling on the pajamas. They were supremely comfortable, in a nice shade of green with a dragon embroidered in gold. They were a bit large, obviously made for a gentleman who was taller and with more girth than him, requiring he pull the drawstrings on the pants tight and double knot them. Get a hold of yourself. See? I look stupid, so
I bet Ranma does as well. It'll be Ranma in a shapeless silk pillowcase and you won't even be able to tell the difference between boy or girl except by the hair color. Now take a breath, be a man, and go out there and stop being silly!

He did just that and slid the door open.

Ranma was sitting on the bed, half-lounging, really. Her nightdress was green silk as well, long enough to reach her ankles but very sheer and light, falling across her body and accentuating her curves rather than hiding them, with cutout panels of lace over the hips up to the bodice enhancing the effect. The bodice itself was a deep v-neck, revealing a considerable amount of cleavage, supported by spaghetti straps. She wore a long-sleeved robe made of the same translucent lace over it, lightly draped and slipping off one shoulder. Her brilliant red hair fell across and just past her shoulders, cascading in careless waves and complimenting the deep green perfectly.

She smiled at him. "Well? How do I look?"

Ryouga slammed the door shut so fast and hard it nearly broke.

"Oh come on! It can't be THAT bad, can it?" Ranma said through the door, sounding annoyed.

Yes! Yes that is about as bad as that could get! Ryouga thought in a state of panic.

There was silence from the other side of the door for a few moments, then, more quietly. "... I look ridiculous, don't I?"

Ack…! Suddenly Ryouga's instincts were in conflict as the desire to not see a girl - even Ranma - in such an outfit and in such a situation fighting with the urge to protect her self image and not to allow her to think she was in any way unattractive.

The latter won. He slid the door open again. "No! No, it's…" He swallowed as he saw her once more. "... It's the opposite. You… you look like a girl."

She gave him a bemused look. "I am a girl, dumbass."

Ryouga winced. He could suddenly understand what Ranma was talking about when she said she forgot sometimes that she was really a guy, because right now he was having that problem. "No… I mean…" He swallowed, not sure what to say without giving some kind of offense or looking stupid. He finally decided there simply wasn't one so he just gave up and told the truth. "You're gorgeous."

Ryouga wasn't sure what reaction he was expecting. His instincts told him it couldn't possibly end well saying something so boldly. She would get mad, loudly reassert her manhood, make fun of him, something…

She blushed, quite fetchingly and look away self-consciously. "L.Look, I told you you don't gotta try and be chivalrous to try and protect my feelings or nothin'..."

Ryouga shook his head. "No… Ranma… I… That was one of the hardest admissions I've ever had to make!" He clenched his fists. "I'm trying to be honest here!"

Her eyes widened and the blush spread. She sat up and folded her hands in her lap. "O-okay, now you're going overboard…"

"You look like… like a princess on the cover of a fantasy novel, and I say that fully expecting you to get mad at me and punch me in the face," Ryouga said seriously. "You… like being complimented as a girl?"
She huffed. "I've always been proud of my looks as a girl! I-it's not like that's new!" She glanced at him again shyly. "You look… you… Well, you look like a dork."

He held up his hands, the overlong sleeves completely covering them. "Yeah, I know" He replied with a heavy sigh.

She giggled. Ryoga felt a bit better, as the tension seemed to ease a little. He walked over to the bed and sat down on the edge of it. Well, thank heaven for dorky PJs.

"Nabiki's right, though. You are cute when you're flustered." Ranma added.

Ryouga froze. Nope. Dorky PJs aren't gonna save me. He turned slowly to stare at her.

"What?" Ranma said, noticing his stare.

"Ranma, you just called a guy cute," Ryoga said, keeping his voice even, his tone serious.

"I called you cute before, remember?" Ranma said, her tone getting quiet. She got that look on her face that she got when she was dealing with difficult feelings.

"I figured… that was… just about my personality," Ryoga said nervously.

Ranma was silent. The void in the conversation stretched into awkwardness, until Ryoga opened his mouth to tell her to forget about it, that he understood, that it didn't matter.

"We're… we're being honest right now… right?" she asked timidly, beating him to the punch.

"I…" Ryoga's mouth felt dry. He knew it would probably be a really good idea to be looking at the floor, or the ceiling, or anywhere but into her eyes right now, but he couldn't seem to manage it. There was something hypnotic about them. "I… guess so…"

"Th-then… I'm being honest," she said.

Ryouga realized he was leaning towards her. He might not have noticed, but the bed was so wide that his balance had actually shifted, and he had nearly fallen over. The start it gave him was enough to break eye contact and break the spell. When he looked up again, she was looking away shyly.

"If… if the bed had been a little smaller… Ryoga thought, then quickly shut down that line of speculation as he found that he wasn't sure if he wanted it to be smaller or if he was glad that it was big enough to keep them safely separated.

He cleared his throat. "Uhh… we should get some sleep… y'know, because… school…" he said weakly. She nodded, so he carefully lifted the covers on his side of the bed and slipped under them while staying as far over on his side as possible. He lay on his side, facing away from her.

"Ryouga?"

Ryouga rolled onto his back, and looked over at her. She was rolled onto her side, watching him.

He swallowed, looking up towards the ceiling before he got caught gazing into her eyes again. "Yeah?"

"What do you figure your future will be like?" she asked softly.

"My future? What do you mean?" Ryoga looked at her again, confused.
"I mean… not plans, really, but… Dreams, I guess? What sort of future are you dreaming of? What does it look like? What are you doing?" She looked pensive.

"I…” He rubbed the back of his head. "I'm not sure I've got much in the way of that…”

"Yes you do!" she said crossly. "You were having a dream about it! You even have a name for your future daughter!" She sighed and settled her head onto her pillow. "I'm not talking about who you're gonna marry or the names of kids really, but… You always seemed to have an idea what you wanted your life to be." She smiled. "Lemme guess; On a farm, lots of kids, that sorta thing?"

Ryouga made a face. "It's… it's not like that. To be honest… I'm not really a big fan of farms. They're not bad, but… When you turn into livestock yourself, they start to seem a lot less benevolent." He sighed. "I always sorta imagined… a big house. Not on the farm, but somewhere with neighbors… a community… something I could be a part of. I… usually imagine something like the Tendo Dojo. That used to be because Akane was a big part of those dreams, but lately… well… I guess it's the first place that's really felt like 'home' since Dad died. A warm place that I can always find my way back to, full of family and surrounded by friends is what I always imagine. The good dreams, anyway."

"That sounds nice…” Ranma said quietly. "I… never really thought about it. My whole life was always so full of worrying about where my next meal was coming from that I never really spent much thought on the future. Even after I came to the Tendo Dojo, I didn't think much past the next challenge. Even when it came to Akane and me… I just couldn't envision it. Everyone else has… well, not always plans but… some dream about the future. But nothing really seemed real for me past tomorrow." She closed her eyes. "I didn't think it was important… not until Mom told me what my future was going to be. I felt so… so betrayed. Not because what she's got planned for me is so bad, but… because I didn't even get a chance to think of something on my own."

"Ranma?" Ryouga could hear the note of emotion in her voice. He considered reaching out and taking her hand.

She rolled onto her back. "I… am gonna have kids someday. That's such a weird thought for me. Like… I know it was a thing but… I never really expected it to apply to me, you know?" She smiled. "My whole life I've just accepted stuff as it came, but… For once I like the idea of wondering what something far off might be like."

Ryouga was quiet, thinking about that. His own dreams for the future had usually been indistinct, unlikely… pipe dreams. But… they had been comforting. "So… what are your kids gonna be like, Ranma?"

"Mmm?" she mumbled sleepily. "... Dunno. Gonna hafta start imagining, right?" She sighed. "... A girl first, I think… Just 'cause… I might steal the name 'Sachiko' for her…"

"What?! You can't do that!" Ryouga protested good naturedly. "Don't I get a say?"

"Mnnn-nnh…” Ranma murmured. "Nope… I'm her mother… s'my choice…"

"Ranma, you jerk, you can't just…” Ryouga started, then trailed off. "Wait… mother?!” He turned to look at her but the redhead had already rolled onto her side facing away from him and her breathing was slow and deep, obviously already asleep.

I referenced several different Ranma/Ryouga fanfics in Ryouga's dream! See if you can name them
all!

I also kinda fired a shot across the bow of 'Girl Days', but I think that's just because it was never finished :P

Thank YOU all for sticking with me thus far. I'm getting closer to the Endgame in what I have written so far, even if the editing and proofreading is lagging behind it by several chapters, so I think I can safely assure you that THIS fic WILL be finished.
The nightmare wasn't the one Ryouga might have expected, given the day's events. But it was a familiar one.

He was running through streets that were twisted and unrecognizable. Pushing through crowds of people and unable to see the route ahead, occasionally catching glimpses of a few recognizable landmarks that seemed to change which side of him they were on. He couldn't tell which part of the sky the sun was in, or if it was morning or afternoon. All of the street signs were unreadable.

I have to get back…! He thought, desperately pushing through the crowd. There was something important he needed to get to. Someone…? It was so hard to remember!

How long has it been? Two days? Three? He pushed into the open and started running. His legs felt heavy, his muscles ached and his lungs burned. Even though there were crowds obscuring his vision, his footsteps echoed like he was alone in an empty space. The sky was blinding, and his vision was full of disorienting afterimages, but he kept going.

Wait for me!

Ryouga woke up when he crashed to the floor in a heap.

Panic seized him as he struggled to free himself, arms and legs tangled up in yards of smooth, unyielding fabric. Finally, he managed to free himself and skittered back against the nearest wall and looked around wildly as his heart pounded in his chest and his breath came in ragged gasps.

It was all wrong.

The room was unfamiliar. His pack was nowhere to be seen and, for the moment, the fog of sleep still hid the memory of how he'd gotten here. Even the clothes he was wearing were not his - oversized and ill fitting if expensive. His panic surged as he realised that something else was missing, too - something impossibly important - something he needed desperately to find. He felt cold, icy fingers squeezing the heart in his chest as sleep inertia and adrenaline conspired to warp the world around him into a soul destroying abyss of darkness, loneliness and terror.

The door to the attached bathroom opened, and a girl with bright blue eyes and a mop of brilliant crimson hair poked her head out. She had a toothbrush which she pulled out of her mouth long enough to ask, "You okay, Ryo? You fall outta the bed or something?"

His breath caught - just for a moment - but it was enough to dispel the fog of sleep and panic and allow his memory to return. The room looked very different in the light of the sun shining through the balcony doors, but it was the room he and Ranma had been put in at the Kuno manor.

He knew where he was.

He knew where Ranma was.

He wasn't lost.

He closed his eyes and let out the breath he had been holding. "I'm… I'm okay."
She stepped out of the bathroom. Her hair was slightly damp and she was wearing her school uniform which appeared to have been cleaned and freshly pressed. "You sure? You have a nightmare or something?"

Ryouga stood and grit his teeth. He wanted to tell her about it - tell her about the persistent nightmare that had plagued him since the very first time he had gotten lost. The nightmare that had gradually grown and deepened every time he found himself wandering and unable to find his way. But he knew she'd probably pity him - maybe even give him that look - and after last night that wasn't something he could handle. "I'm fine Ranma. I just rolled over and got tangled up."

Ranma scowled then shrugged. "Okay, fine. Sheesh, ya don't gotta be all growly about it… Just lemme finish brushing my teeth and the bathroom's yours. You kinda slept in, so you should probably make it quick. Your school duds are in here too." She ducked back into the bathroom.

Ryouga breathed a sigh of relief once she was gone. Okay… Nothing happened last night. Whatever was going on with Ranma is over and Ranma's back to normal. Just… just gonna forget any of this ever happened.

He rubbed the sleep from his eyes and looked blearily at the bed. He had not slept well. He had spent most of the night perched on the edge of the bed as Ranma sprawled out. Something had told him that being in close physical proximity to her while sleeping would lead to Bad Things.

Would they really have been so bad?

Shut UP! Ryouga sternly silenced the rebellious little voice.

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The walk to school was a bit odd for Ukyou without Ranma there. Akane and Nabiki were walking together discussing something but, after their gaffe the other day, they were being guarded and secretive. The volleyball team was deep in their own discussion with Hiroshi and Daisuke - something about 'Cyborgs vs Ninjas as dating prospects', which didn't currently interest her. She found herself left alone with her own thoughts.

"Penny for Spatula Girl's thoughts?"

She glanced over to see Shampoo had fallen in step with her. She was holding up a small copper coin.

"Hang on, is that an actual penny?" Ukyou plucked it from her fingers to examine it. It was definitely an American penny, rather than a yen.

"Yes. Is not custom?" Shampoo said. "Had customer leave as part of tip at restaurant one day."

"It's just a saying - you don't actually need to give a penny." Ukyou flipped the coin back to her.

Shampoo caught it. "Dressing more like girl today?"

Ukyou glanced down at herself. She was still wearing the boy's uniform, but she had opted for the lighter, short sleeved shirt and pants that were properly sized and cut for her figure, as well as opting for a bra rather than her usual bindings. She had also left her hair unbound and worn her ribbon as a hair bow.

"It's a girl day," Ukyou admitted. She had felt much more inclined to listen to her own whims after her date with Ranma. She had even briefly considered a girl's uniform, but the last time she had
tried that had been disastrous.

"Might have to try that style myself. Fighting in pants much easier," Shampoo noted. "Skirt too long, get in way."

"Yeah, well, your preferred 'skirts' tend to barely qualify as belts, sugar," Ukyou said.

"Leaves legs free, best for movement," Shampoo shrugged. "If also distract opponent is bonus, yes?"

"It's overkill for the pervs around here," Ukyou muttered. "All I had to do was show up to school in a dress and they lost their minds."

Shampoo smirked. "Problem not dress. From what Shampoo hear of story, Ukyou try act girly. Make seem more approachable. But Ukyou also have confidence. Same reason why they chase after Akane or Airen's girl form." She held up a finger, going into lecture mode. "Males naturally wish for female stronger than them, who choose them. Especially in Japan where such desires repressed by misguided culture attempting to be male-dominant. Natural order of things male subservient."

"I… don't think that's entirely true, Shampoo," Ukyou said, giggling.

"Why think 'tsundere' such popular concept?" Shampoo folded her arms and closed her eyes, raising her chin haughtily. "Poor, misguided males of men's world seek atonement because instincts tell them they subvert natural order. Seek strong female to punish them to absolve of sins."

"Oh? What about Ranma, then?" Ukyou asked, honestly curious.

"Airen has very strong female side," Shampoo said. "Is mistaking strength as coming from male side because of idiot father teachings, of course, but males who know true strength find in balance between male and female natures. Is why Amazons make laws to add to tribe, because it rare and special thing."

"Well… I suppose that's at least better defined than Ranma's parent's whole concept of 'manliness'," Ukyou replied. She personally preferred to believe that strength didn't have a gender but she could see how someone from a female-dominated society might see things the way Shampoo did. It even made a bizarre sort of sense. Still, Nerima was hardly a fair representation of Japan as a whole. It was equally likely that growing up in the insanity of the place either forced one to turn to martial arts or resulted in a predisposition towards masochism and personality disorders. Or both.

They reached the gates just as the limousine pulled up. For a moment Ukyou wondered if the limo belonged to Himura, but then she saw the vanity plate that read 'BLACK ROSE' in English. Of COURSE she has her OWN private limo. Just one for the family obviously isn't enough, she thought sourly, considering how much it cost just for the average person to drive in Tokyo. So I wonder how the night went? Ukyou still wasn't entirely comfortable with Kodachi having her fiancee for an entire night but, at the same time, she knew the gymnast thought Ranma's girl side was a separate person.

The door opened and Ranma stepped out, dressed in her school uniform, followed by Ryouga. She had tied her hair back, but in a looser braid than normal, more of a french braid that Ukyou suspected Kodachi had insisted upon. Both of them at least looked well enough, and neither appeared to be drugged out or otherwise damaged. She picked up her pace to catch up with them.

Kodachi stepped out afterwards, forcing Ukyou to slow down a bit again. As eager as she was to see Ranma, her dislike for Kodachi was more than balancing it out. She felt her fingers curl into a fist as Kodachi put a hand on Ranma's shoulder, and the two shared a laugh over something.

"My, isn't Ranchan getting chummy with the enemy…?" Ukyou growled softly.
"Crazy girl think Airen different person when female. No have interest, Shampoo thought?"

Shampoo said.

"Maybe not romantically, but Kodachi definitely got an interest in her. She's just using her to try and win over male Ranma," Ukyou said tightly. "Playing all nice-nice to gain favor with Ranchan by charming his sister!"

"But… is no can work? Airen IS his own sister," Shampoo said, confused.

"That just means if she does charm her, it works much more directly," Ukyou said. "C'mon, we should keep an eye on them." She set out to follow the trio while hanging back enough to avoid being detected.

Unfortunately, hanging back was a mistake this time. By the time they got close to the gates, Ranma, Ryouga and Kodachi had already passed through and some sort of confrontation had started just inside. Shampoo and Ukyou broke into a run, hearing voices raised and then a most horrific noise: a whine like a cross between a jet engine and a water pump followed by the sound of crumbling concrete. They sprinted through the gates and skidded to a stop.

Ranma was off to the side in a wary stance. The courtyard was soaked with water, and there was a line etched deep into the concrete wall and along the ground leading up to the wall as if something had gouged a narrow trench - something that had continued past where Ranma now stood and had evidently only narrowly missed her. The apparent creator of the trench seemed to be some kind of heavily modified World War II tank that had two giant canisters mounted on the back and a customised nightmare of a main gun. In the turret, behind a plexiglass shield, sat Principal Kuno, holding a microphone.

"Eyyyy Kekis and Wahines! Your Headmaster had a brand new idea for de big fun, yey? I say to myself Tatsuyuki, how can de Headmaster be makin' de day easier for de students? ' and den I says back 'Always wi' de rushin' to school. Not time for propah breakfast! No time for proper hygiene! So your Headmaster is here to help! We be getting dis special Showah Cannon made just for de Kekis and Wahines to wash off even de toughest o' dirt. Guaranteed to wash de waterproofin' right offa the most squirrely delinquent, eyyy!""

"That's a high pressure water cannon you jackass!" Ranma shouted. "It's washing away the concrete! If you hit me with that I won't have any skin left!"

Principal Kuno got a maniacal look on his face as the turret swivelled to track Ranma. It had obviously been upgraded as it moved and tracked more quickly than anything that large had a right to. "Small price to pay for propah hygiene, yey?"

"Father, stop this!" Kodachi yelled as she pulled out her ribbon to strike at the turret. The attacks did little more than leave marks on the tough, clear material. "Don't you dare hurt her!"

"Sorry Kochi, but dis be a mattah of honah!" the Principal said as he opened fire once more. Ranma dodged frantically as the stream sliced through a nearby tree trunk.

"Can't be dodgin' forever, keki!" the Principal chortled. "Dis turret be havin' de same targettin' dey use to shoot down supersonic missiles! You no faster den a speedin' bullet, yey?" He glanced toward the gates and spotted Ukyou and Shampoo. "Or, mebbe we see how much you care fer your wahines, yey?" The turret swivelled to point at the two of them ominously.

"Awwwww crap…" Ukyou swore as the keening whine of the pump built up for another burst.
The handle of a familiar red umbrella struck the ground in front of them at an angle. It embedded itself and popped open just as the cannon fired, deflecting the high pressure stream. It started to crack and buckle almost immediately, but the moment was all that was needed.

Ryouga jumped up onto the front of the tank and forced the barrel of the turret up through brute strength alone. Motors in the turret whined as they fought back, starting to smoke as the force the lost boy was exerting started to overload the actuators. He reared back with one finger, locking eyes with the Principal before stabbing his finger into the armor plating of the tank. "Bakusai Tenketsu!"

High pressure coupled with explosive structural failure was a potent mix. The tank exploded in a massive cloud of steam and shrapnel as everything gave out at once in a deafening eruption.

Ukyou pulled Shampoo down with her to duck behind the ruined umbrella as the battered shield still provided enough protection to ward off the worst of the shrapnel. Something was flung violently from the center of the explosion, punched through the stone outer wall of the courtyard and came to rest on the far side of the street. After a moment, Ukyou realized the crumpled heap was a person.

"RYOUGA!"

The scream was Ranma's. The redhead vaulted over the wall and was next to the Lost Boy faster than Ukyou had seen her move since... since...

*The last time Akane was in danger...* she thought. She sprinted over to the injured Ryouga along with Shampoo.

"Ryouga? Ryouga! Don't do this to me!" Ranma had already gathered the battered lost boy into her arms and was shaking him. Ukyou could see a look of utter terror on her face and tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Nnnn... Not so loud..." Ryouga said weakly, cracking an eye open. "... gotta headache..."

"You dumbass!" Ranma hugged him tightly, sobbing in relief. "I swear to god if you ever scare me like that again...!"

Ukyou and Shampoo knelt on either side of them. They exchanged a glance with each other then set about checking Ryouga for injuries, as Ranma seemed too overcome to do it herself.

"Thank goodness for that hard Hibiki skull..." Ukyou said. "What were you thinking, sugar?!" She poked Ryouga's shoulder. "You're tough, but you're not *that* tough!"

Ryouga coughed. "He... was gonna make Ranma take the hit for you two. Didn't have another play ready..." He tried to sit up, wincing as his many bruises and contusions made themselves felt. "I... think I'm just gonna lie here a bit..."

"Just lie still, buddy," Ranma said, sniffing, smiling in relief. "I gotcha..."

"What about Crazy Pineapple Brain Man?" Shampoo asked.

"I'll go deal with him, if he's got any fight left in him," Ukyou stood up. "Shampoo, stay with them, okay?" Ukyou drew her battle spatula and stalked back to the gates. That was WAY too far! The Principal could have maimed Ranchan with that! He almost DID maim US! Time to take a page from Akane's book, I think; Best place for him right now is a hospital!

It seemed someone had beaten her to the punch. The armored turret the Principal was in had survived mostly intact, protecting him from the blast, though the remainder of the tank was now little more
than scattered debris and parts. The turret lay on its side with the Principal cowering inside as Kodachi stood on top of it, furiously lashing at it with her ribbon. The plexiglass was getting scored and cracked as her efforts steadily chipped away at the battered armor.

"Kochi! Please! Be reasonable!" Principal Kuno begged from inside of the plexiglass bubble as its structural integrity had rapidly begun to fail.

"I AM GOING TO KILL YOU!" Kodachi snarled. "How DARE you assault my friend! Come out of that bubble so I can injure you properly!"

Well… Much as I'd love a piece of him myself, I think I'll wait my turn and let Kodachi have her fun. Ukyou slotted her battlespat onto her back again and watched. Usually he's got a better escape plan than this, though…

Principal Kuno cowered a moment longer but as the plexiglass casing began to show fatal cracks and give way, he started to grin again. "Yer Papa is sorry ta do dis, Kochi, but ye be leaving me no choice. How about a nice Hawaiian…"

Ukyou's eyes widened and she started forward as soon as she heard him start his spiel, knowing from experience what was coming next. She dove and tackled Kodachi as compartments opened along the sides of the turret, and ejected a number of explosive pineapples which detonated in clouds of thick black smoke. Ukyou rolled as she hit the ground, instinctively trying to absorb as much of the impact as she could, though if she had been thinking more about who it was that she was saving, she might not have tried so hard.

Principal Kuno emerged from the cloud of smoke, blackened and singed, but whole. He sprinted away, cackling madly as he ran. "You canna catch a bruddah from de Isles! Bwahahahahahaha!"

"Get off me!" Kodachi shoved her roughly. "Simpleton! He's getting away!" She bounced to her feet, but could see that her Father was already out of sight. She gripped her ribbon and ground her teeth in frustration.

"You're welcome, sugar," Ukyou said testily as she rolled to her feet and brushed herself off. "I could have just let you eat that, you know."

Kodachi Wirled on her but her glare softened. Reluctantly, she relaxed her stance. "As much as it pains me to admit it… you have a point." She looked away, gripping the handle of her ribbon with white knuckles. "I… promised Ran I would make an effort to be civil so…" she seemed to struggle with the words, "... Thank you."

Ukyou blinked. "Umm… you're welcome. Wow… I didn't think you'd do that even for your 'Darling Ranma'!"

Kodachi pinned her with a glare. "I would not! Know this, Ukyou Kuonji! I still do not forgive your insistence on claiming my Darling Ranma's time or affections, nor your opposition to my rightful claim as his fiancee. But…" she ground her teeth again, "... Ran is more… delicate than her brother, and she values the harmony of those around her. So I will accept an armistice. For now." She glanced over her shoulder in the direction her father had run. "I have more… pressing quarry to track down."

Ukyou raised an eyebrow. Ran? DELICATE? She remembered that naescent feminine side Ranma had shown her on their date and felt a pang of jealousy that Kodachi might have seen it as well. Still, there was the matter of the Principal. "You want some help with that, sugar? 'Enemy of my enemy' and all that, right?"
Kodachi actually seemed to consider it for a moment. "No. Stay with Ran and ensure no further harm is done to her or her betrothed today. I know Father's haunts and his tricks. I am more than sufficient to this task on my own."

"You willing to do what it takes?" Ukyou asked sternly. "He just about killed at least three people I consider family, plus me. He needs to be taken out of commission before this gets any more out of control."

Kodachi gave her an evil smile that made her shiver. "Are you questioning my capacity to inflict debilitating pain and injury? Perhaps you should inquire as to how I acquired the title of 'The Black Rose'? Father will survive… he may even recover one day. But that is the very limit of the mercy I am willing to extend him." She coiled her ribbon. "Tell Ran I will see her once I have dealt with the matter satisfactorily. I will be sure to forward to you all the hospital where he will be staying in case you wish to have further 'discussions' with him." She turned and started to saunter, unhurried, in the direction her father had fled.

Ukyou raised an eyebrow. "Wow. And I thought Ranchan's family had issues."

The Lost Boy's resilience was remarkable, even for one who had undergone the Bakusai Tenketsu training. None of his bones were broken, though he had suffered some deep bruising and scalding from the steam. Shampoo had called upon some of her knowledge of pressure points to ease his pain and reduce the swelling, though she recommended having Dr Tofu look him over.

What was concerning to the Amazon was how her Airen was reacting. It was hardly the first time the Lost Boy had been injured, though admittedly none had seen him take such a direct and dramatic blow before. The redhead flat out refused to leave Ryouga's side, even once they had taken him to the nurse's office to get the worst of his scrapes disinfected and patched up. The look in her eyes was one of guilt and fear mixed with relief. It echoed a similar look that Shampoo had seen in her eyes before.

She was afraid she had lost him. Just for a moment. It scared her, Shampoo decided as she waited outside the nurse's office while Ryouga was cleaned up. There is emotion there that wasn't before. Emotion for him.

She remembered Nabiki's conversation with Akane the other day. My Pintou also has an interest in him? No, not the same. Maybe PHYSICALLY. She snorted. She had noticed that Nabiki had something of a roving eye. But she's already seen this between Ryoga and Airen. She's testing Ryoga, getting him flustered on purpose… maybe provoking Airen too? She sighed. This was why Nabiki was D'artagnan, after all. She had a talent for spotting such things.

Airen isn't ready to acknowledge yet, Shampoo decided. But Ryoga already protects her. This was problematic. It could completely upend the entire fragile relationship dynamic! Akane sees it. That's what set her off, even if she's talked herself out of it. That girl needs to learn to trust her instincts! Nabiki is trying to negotiate… seems to think it would just be a fling. Curiosity. She glanced at the infirmary door. No. Something more here. Something deep and powerful. Buried. She narrowed her eyes. Could hurt Airen… more than hurt, could wound her sense of self. All of this is on the girl side, unbalancing things. Plus, Lost Boy is obsessive and fickle at the same time.

She sighed. Still… he saved me and Ukyou. He deserves some consideration for today. She rubbed her chin. Airen is going on her date with Akane today. Maybe a good time to pull Ryoga aside for chat; see what is going on in his head. And… if it's the usual Lost Boy stupidity, I can use Xi Fa Xiang Gao to tweak his memories, let Airen down easy before she get too deep.
Of course, there was the question of what to do if it was more serious than one of Ryouga's infatuations?

Normally Shampoo would just proceed with altering the Lost Boy's memory regardless, but she knew that true emotions would always come to the surface and make it nearly impossible to cleanly disentangle the Lost Boy from Ranma's life. Worse, if Ranma found out, it would shatter the trust that Shampoo had worked so hard and so carefully to build with her.

Still, Ryouga was a rogue factor. He wasn't bound by the same pact as the rest of them and that had needed a year of strife to coalesce as it was. Plus there were some raw emotions between him and Akane still, as well as the whole worry that Airen even contemplating such a thing would represent a radical paradigm shift for her.

I'll ask Ukyou to help, she decided finally. Her judgement is good and she is willing to do what needs to be done to protect Airen. Besides, Lost Boy respects her. She knows him better than I do. What was the term they use here? 'Good cop, bad cop'? She smiled, remembering the TV drama where she had seen the interrogation technique. In the village back home they called it 'Friend and Foe', but the dynamic was the same. Simple and obvious, but Ryouga was just the simple and obvious sort it would work on.

She looked up as the door opened. Ryouga walked out, his jacket off and over his shoulder. His white shirt had a few tears and small bloodstains, and underneath she could see the spots where gauze had been applied to cover the worst of the scrapes. For the most part he looked greatly recovered.

"Thanks for waiting, Shampoo!" Ranma stuck her head out after him, grinning.

"Owed debt of honor to Lost Boy. Would be bad form to let die of infection after surviving explosion."

"I appreciate it," Ryouga said honestly. He winced as a sore muscle complained. "If there's anything left of that loud-shirt wearing freak, remind me I need to take a piece outta him."

"Ukyou went to go find. Should ask her," Shampoo said, standing smoothly. It was nearly time for their next class and she imagined Nabiki would want to know what happened.

"What I wanna know is where he got a tank-sized watergun from?" Ranma grumbled. "Just the bombs and traps were bad enough, but if he's gonna bring heavy armor into it…"

"Should just kill," Shampoo said.

Ryouga shrugged as both girls looked at him. "What, are you looking at me to object?"

"It's… not that simple, Shampoo," Ranma said weakly.

"Shampoo understand. Airen blooded, but not killer. Is Airen's choice."

"We should talk to Nabiki. She had some ideas for how to take him out of the picture," Ranma said, sounding tired.

"It sounded like the Kunos might even be on board with that," Ryouga said thoughtfully. "Maybe we could ask Kodachi?"

"Ask Crazy Girl for help?" Shampoo gaped at him.
"Things're different, Shampoo," Ranma said. "Kodachi is… well, okay, she's still kinda out there, but she doesn't hate my girl side anymore. And Kuno… Tatewaki Kuno…"

"He's downright reasonable," Ryouga said, rubbing the back of his head. "All it took was these little white pills. I barely recognized him!"

"Bokken boy… reasonable?" Shampoo gave him a skeptical look. "Shampoo believe when see. And Bokken boy better convince fast - Shampoo still owe him lumps for what he do to Ukyou!"

"I think Akane covered that debt, Shampoo," Ranma said. They reached their classroom and paused. "Okay, see you at lunch?"

Shampoo nodded. "Yes." *I have MUCH to think about!*

000

Lunchtime involved a lot of brooding.

Nabiki had *not* been happy to hear about the Principal's escalation. She immediately sent Hiroshi and Daisuke to find out more about where he had gotten the tank and what other toys he might have scavenged up, then eschewed lunch to go use the library computers to research whatever it was her plots required. Akane had been outraged and shown enough sympathy to the Lost Boy that he had regressed into some of his old stammering, awkward mannerisms around her. Deprived of her usual targets, Akane eventually stalked off to find some of the Principal's statues to smash to work off steam. Ranma seemed a bit embarrassed by the fierce protectiveness of the Tendos and eventually retreated to practice with her team and Ryouga limp after her to sit on the sidelines which left Shampoo and Ukyou alone to tidy up.

"Soooooo…" Shampoo said, suddenly unsure how to broach the topic.

"Today has been a weird day," Ukyou said. "The Principal loses his mind even for *him*, Kodachi is on *our* side for once… kinda… and…" She shook her head. "Did you hear Ranchan scream when Ryouga got hit? I've never heard Ranchan sound like that before. She was really scared, wasn't she?"

"Heard something like once before," Shampoo said quietly. "When Ranma think Akane killed at Jusendo." She took a deep breath. "Is what I wanted to talk with Ukyou about."

Ukyou didn't look at her, instead studying her hands. "You think there really *is* something going on between them, don't you?"

"Maybe. Maybe they not realize or accept yet," Shampoo said. "Maybe is new? Wanted to ask Ukyou, since she call Lost Boy brother sometimes."

"Like a brother," Ukyou corrected. "Not sure I'm ready to adopt that many issues, no matter *how* many times I find him half dead outside my restaurant." She sighed and looked at Shampoo. "Now I *really* wish I had squawked more about them going to the Kuno Estate together. You think something happened?"

Shampoo shook her head. *Airen* not good at hiding. Always act guilty whenever something happen between her and Akane. Not see that here. Not mean something *won't* happen, though."

Ukyou huffed and looked out across the field to where Ryouga was sitting. *How*, though? I mean I can see Ryouga's side of it easily enough; The line has gotten *really* blurry with Ranchan - especially since she's hardly ever a guy anymore, between the rules about her being a girl at school, the soap, and…" she trailed off, "... Hold up, when was the last time Ranchan was a guy around Ryouga?"
"Not since before Shi Shi Hokodan," Shampoo said.

"You… don't think she's doing that on purpose, do you?" Ukyou's eyes widened.


"Yeah… Ryouga told me he was seeing Ranma differently now. I thought it was just the near-death thing, but…” She cocked her head. "He told me he wasn't in love with her. He seemed pretty sure. And you know Ryouga, he's the sort to declare his love at the drop of a hat."

Shampoo was silent for a moment. "Watch Lost Boy," she said finally.

Ukyou did as suggested, and they both watched Ryouga quietly for a time.

"What you see?" Shampoo asked.

"His eyes are on Ranchan. The whole time," Ukyou said softly. "When she laughs, he smiles." She closed her eyes. "Ryouga, you jackass."

"Not like how was with Akane," Shampoo said. "Not dopey or tripping over self. Different. You sure?"

Ukyou sighed. "I think that just makes me more sure. Ryouga's always had one emotion pinned to the red zone. Anger, Love, Depression. About as complex as a Rubik's Cube with every side painted the same color. He's always been…"

"Childish," Shampoo finished for her.

"Yeah… yeah, that's a good word for it. 'Annoying younger brother' is where I would have pegged him. But lately? He mentioned that how he saw things has changed since the Shi Shi Hokodan. He talked about seeing things as 'cardboard cutouts' before, Ranchan in particular." She slumped. "So… the problem is that he grew up?"


"... And you think that's what this is? They both started growing up at the same time, seeing the world and themselves differently, and…” she gestured, "latched onto the nearest person who was going through the same thing?"

"Nearly die together," Shampoo said quietly. "Is powerful thing."

"So… what do you want to do?" Ukyou asked. "Have a Fiancee's Tea about it?"


"So… Ryouga then," Ukyou said. "Before you say anything else, I'm not gonna let you do anything weird to him. No potions or anything." She gave Shampoo a hard look. "He hasn't done anything wrong. He's a jackass and that stupid glass heart of his latches onto the worst targets, but…"

"... Is family, yes?" Shampoo said. "Like brother is brother. No difference that matter. Shampoo know this much about you," She smiled and reached up, lightly stroking Ukyou's cheek.
Ukyou closed her eyes and shivered slightly. "I really overshared over the sake, didn't I?"

"Is why Shampoo talk to Ukyou before do anything," Shampoo said. "Ukyou is friend. Partner. Sister. We start Fiancée's Tea, before Akane or Nabiki or pact. We plan for longest time to do things together. This no different." She leaned in and touched her forehead to Ukyou's.

Ukyou sighed. "So… what do we do if it's true? If Ryouga and Ranma…"

"Cross bridge when come to. First thing, find out if even is bridge. Nabiki right, we jump to conclusion too quick most times. So… we do better this time."

"And how do we do that?"

Shampoo grinned. "How is Ukyou's 'Good Cop'?"

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"Okay, okay, good enough!" Sayuri called an end to the practise, catching a towel Ryouga tossed her.

"Thanks, Towel Boy!" Yuka called as he passed out towels to the rest of the team.

"Could you not call me that?" Ryouga asked, grumbling.

"Sorry, M-Mr. Towel Boy-san," Rin said sheepishly as she accepted a towel from him.

"That's not…" Ryouga sighed heavily. "… You know what? Nevermind."

"We could go with 'Cabana Boy'?" Riko suggested, waggling her eyebrows.

"Down, girl. He's off limits," Sayuri grabbed her by the collar and dragged her away before Ryouga could get flustered.

Ryouga quirked an eyebrow. "Hold on… why am I off-limits?" He wasn't exactly eager to encourage the teasing he tended to get from the team but usually declarations of that nature were due to…

Sayuri's eyes flicked back to the volleyball court where Ranma was doing a few more cooldown stretches. "Reasons," she said with a smile.

Ryouga felt like hitting his head against a brick wall. Of course. 'Reasons.'

He glanced at the redhead again, feeling a twinge of sad longing. It wasn't like he didn't understand why they were thinking that way. It was starting to become clear to him that his heart had betrayed him once more. Once they had found a cure that his mother could use for the direction curse, he was going to need to see about getting himself good and lost the the old fashioned way - and stay lost for a good long time. He was sure that a few weeks alone in the wilds to clear his head would put a stop to all of this.

I won't be able to do it, he realized. A twisting ball of dread bloomed in his stomach at the thought of leaving. He looked up as she walked over. He remembered the desperate panic he had felt when he realized the Principal was going to get his shot with the water cannon. As long as she's in danger or needs me, I can't bear to leave… and it's RANMA… she's ALWAYS going to be in danger! I'm trapped… He chuckled bitterly as it sank in that he was doomed to an impossible situation, to have his glass heart ground into sand, and for no more than the occasional smile or laugh or casual
nickname he would keep turning the grindstone willingly.

Ranma cocked her head as she walked over to him. "What's with that expression, Ryo?" she asked, a flicker of concern in her eyes.

He felt his heart lurch in his chest. Yes, he was definitely doomed.

"It's… nothing," he said, looking away.

"Good." She walked up to him. His breath caught in his throat as she got close. Closer than normal. Too close.

And then slugged him in the gut.

It was a hard punch by anyone else's standards, certainly enough to drive the air from their lungs and double them over. He barely felt it. He grunted slightly as her fist hit a solid wall of muscle.

"Don't you ever do anything stupid like this morning again," she said quietly, her head down, eyes hidden behind her bangs.

"What, save your life?" Ryouga chuckled and tossed the last towel over his shoulder carelessly. "You have a weird way of saying 'thank you', Ranma."

"Shut up!" Ranma looked up at him and he could see her eyes were shining, dampness at the corners. Tears? "You didn't have to hit the tank's breaking point and you know it! You knew it was going to blow up with you standing on it!"

"That's kinda how the Bakusai Tenketsu works, Ranma," he said defensively. "That's why all that toughness training is built into it."

"For rocks and dirt and trees and stuff, yeah! Not metal shrapnel!" She glared at him. "That thing was a giant rolling pressurized hot water tank! You're not indestructible!" She frowned. "You promised."

"... What?" Ryouga blinked.

"It doesn't matter if it's blowing yourself up with a ki blast or doing it with a tank. You promised you weren't going to do it!" There was hurt in her eyes now and an echo of the fear that had been there this morning.

Ryouga winced. He hadn't really been trying to end his own life - just acting on instinct. But the problem was that his instincts didn't always take his own safety or survival into account. "I'm… sorry. I was just trying to…" he swallowed, knowing he was about to cross a line, "I was just trying to protect you," he admitted finally.

Her eyes widened, color rose to her cheeks and he knew that was another degree of separation between them he had just broken. She gaped for a moment then looked away. "I never asked you to protect me. I don't need it. I'm not Akane. I'm a better martial artist than you, even!"

"Yeah, and you've got nothing in your arsenal that would work on a tank. Don't try and tell me you were gonna get him to follow you into a spiral somehow," Ryouga said crossly. "And don't try and tell me you don't need protection!" He reached out and grabbed her shoulder. "When were you gonna tell me about your parents using the contract to blackmail you?"

She turned, blinking owlishly. "The… contract?" her eyes fell as she made the connection. "... oh."
"I saw that look in your eyes," Ryouga said. "When You were talking with the Kunos about your Mom wanting your future kids."

"I said I'm not going to let her take my kids and I meant it!" Ranma said fiercely.

"Yeah, but what you didn't say was you weren't gonna fulfil the contract," Ryouga said. "Kuno said it wouldn't mark your personal honor if you refused - you remember that, right?"

She looked away. "Yeah… but the family honor would be destroyed. And… and if I have kids at some point… What I do will affect them their whole lives." She looked at him. "I can save my kids, save my family honor or save my life, but only two of those. Which do you think I'll choose?"

"I'm not giving you a choice, Saotome," Ryouga growled. "You want me to stick around? Fine. One condition; I will stop you if you try and fulfill this contract."

Ranma's eyes widened and the blush returned. She looked away quickly. "W-what… what're you gonna do if I do decide to go through with it? You gonna watch me every minute of every day? Keep me in a room away from anything sharp? For my whole life?"

"Yeah," Ryouga said simply. "If that's what it takes. I've got nothing better to do."

She froze, her back to him. There was an awkward silence that stretched out long enough for Ryouga to consider reaching out to her but before he could, she relaxed.

"Oh… I'm your Anchor," she said softly. "Of course."

"Ranma?"

She turned and smiled at him, having regained some of her composure. "I'm sorry, Ryo. I didn't understand why this was such a big deal for you but I get it now. You don't gotta worry about me, I wouldn't do that to you."

"I… okay?" Ryouga replied, confused.

"We should get to class," she said brightly. She walked past him and broke into a light trot as she headed back towards the school.

Ryouga watched her but got the feeling that he had missed something important. He trailed after her and hoped that he could figure it out before it became a problem.

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The end of day came soon enough. With Principal Kuno absent, The Madness seemed somewhat subdued.

Nabiki had been spending most of her day making sure the Principal kept running. Kodachi had not been terribly happy to learn that Nabiki had her cell phone number but her anger had quickly faded when Nabiki turned over the tracking information she had collected on the elder Kuno. Taking him some irrelevant bit of paperwork to sign, a bit of carbon paper slipped between and a dummy company able to do credit checks had gotten her a remarkable amount of data about where Tatsuyuki Kuno spent a lot of his money and time. That included several private clinics and a few bars where Principal Kuno would go to patch himself up and/or drink away the latest of his defeats. Nabiki imagined several of them were probably rubble by now.

Never thought I'd be cheering on Kodachi Kuno, Nabiki thought, Much less while we're still in the
Nabiki sighed, chewing on her thumbnail as she walked. That might require letting Kodachi in on Fiancée's Tea, at least for the purposes of negotiating a cease-fire. But it was almost certain that the other fiancées would object strenuously to even that much. And what if Kodachi demanded a compromise and a 'share' of Ranma herself?

And we’d still need to explain the curse to her and weather THAT storm which could very well undo ALL OF THIS… No, for now we keep Kodachi in the dark, play nice and hope she does the same. She sighed. She walked out the doors of the school into the daylight, shielding her eyes.

For once she was the last one out. The rest of the group was waiting for her on the steps. Ranma was perched on the railing, Ryoga leaned against a nearby wall, Akane was chatting with Yuka, Sayuri and Riko while Rin listened politely and Hiroshi and Daisuke sat on the steps nearby looking bored. Shampoo and Ukyou were nearest the door, waiting for her.

My own little army, Nabiki thought with some pride.

"Oh, Nabiki!" Akane perked up and hopped over to her. "Ready to head home?"

"Yeah," Nabiki said, glad Cologne had given her the night off. "Any sign of Kodachi or Principal Kuno?"


"Himura's off at her away game, Principal's running for his life, and Kodachi's busy chasing him down. Alla the troublemakers are out for the day," Ranma said, hopping down from the railing.

"Well… all the troublemakers that aren’t us," Yuka amended dryly.

"We don't make trouble… do we?" Rin asked quietly.

"We do, but only for people who deserve it," Sayuri replied, ruffling her hair.

"So, what's the plan for your date, sugar?" Ukyou asked Akane.

Akane exchanged a glance with Nabiki, then grinned. "It's a secret. We'll tell Ranma when we get back to the Tendo Dojo."

Ukyou and Shampoo exchanged a glance.

"We-ell… then maybe we could let you guys get an early start? Shampoo and I can escort Ryouga home," Ukyou said. She leaned around Akane to look at Nabiki. "You got any plans Nabiki?"

Nabiki stretched. "Actually… I do. Haven't slept in my own bed for a while. As pleasant as the accommodations at the Nekohanten are, I miss home. I'm probably just going to veg at home tonight."

Ukyou raised an eyebrow. "Really? You sure you're okay on your own? Buddy system and all that, right?"

Nabiki smiled. "I'll be fine. Kasumi's home, and Daddy. And I'm sure I'll think of something to do. Like Kasumi said, it's a guideline, not a hard rule, right?"
Shampoo gave her a skeptical look. "Riiiiight."

Yuka leaned over to Daisuke, whispering audibly, "Is she plotting something?"

"Yes," Hiroshi and Daisuke deadpanned in perfect unison.

"Well, that works out for us anyway," Ukyou walked over and grabbed Ryouga by the arm. "C'mon, Ryo. Let's get you home!"

Ryouga jumped a bit. "Hey, wha…? Ukyou, what gives?"

Shampoo immediately grabbed his other arm. "Yes, good idea!" She waved as she and Ukyou dragged Ryouga along between them. "Have fun! No stay up too late!"

"Okay, now they're definitely plotting something," Yuka muttered as they watched them frog march Ryouga towards the gates.

"It's kind of a 'thing' with this group I've noticed," Riko noted.

Yuka gave her a sly look. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

Riko returned the look. "Ice cream plot?"

"Yup!"

Yuka grabbed Daisuke's arm and hauled him to his feet while Riko pulled Hiroshi up somewhat more gently.

"Come along, boys!" Yuka said as Daisuke yelped and flailed.

"What? Why are we coming?" Hiroshi asked, confused.

"We need someone to pay," Riko said sheepishly.

"Betrayal!" Daisuke cried as Yuka dragged him along.

"Oh stop being so dramatic!" Yuka growled at him.

Sayuri shrugged and stood up. "I've got a few bucks left over from my allowance. My treat, Rin?"

"Okay!" Rin hopped to her feet and followed after her.

Ranma watched them go, folding her arms. "Wow… everyone popped outta here pretty fast," she muttered. "Guess we should get going, girls?" She glanced at Nabiki. "You sure you're okay being on your own tonight, Nabiki?"

Nabiki exchanged a glance with Akane then gave Ranma a smirk. "I would be, but Akane had a more interesting solution…"

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"Point, Furinkan!"

Himura smiled as her team scored another point. It was looking like they were going to have another early night. It was amusing to watch how hard her benchwarmers would work to prove themselves, even knowing that their opponents were a joke and not worth Himura or her Elites' time. Hope
springs eternal. Especially desperate, misguided hope.

"So… this game is the root of your Grandfather's challenge?" the girl next to her asked in Mandarin. Dressed in a Chinese silk pantsuit of green and yellow, with a dragon embroidered in metallic shades of red and gold, she had her long green hair tied back in a ponytail that fell to the small of her back. Her eyes had a yellowish cast and she wore a haughty, disdainful expression. Her demeanor suggested that it was one of only two or three expressions she ever used.

"Call it a metaphor," Himura replied with a smirk. "The game itself is of no real importance. It merely serves as a proxy for an actual trial by combat. But it's a challenge Ranma has accepted all the same. Should my team beat Ranma's, I secure her services for the year and satisfy the conditions of my Grandfather's trial, thus securing my inheritance."

The chinese girl raised a skeptical eyebrow and folded her arms over her generous chest. "And this is the plan for which you require the elder's help?"

Himura laughed. "Oh dear, no. the outcome of the game itself is nearly irrelevant. But Ranma and his friends believe it is and pour all their effort into it so it serves a useful purpose in keeping them distracted. They'll also keep underestimating me since I planted the idea that I cheat to make things easier on myself and use my status and position to get away with it."

"But you are cheating," the girl replied, confused.

Himura shook her head. "No, no… What I've done is fooled them into thinking there are rules in this little contest. They're so focused on the cards I've tucked up my sleeve that they won't notice the gun I've already drawn under the table."

"If everything is arranged so perfectly, then why do you need us?" Tan Pohn asked.

"I can hardly afford to think only one step ahead, my dear," Himura replied. "Nabiki Tendo has the potential to be dangerous. She's already brought a number of previously conflicting elements in Nerima to heel and, once I make my move, she is liable to attempt to employ them in ways that would be… troublesome."

"Why not simply kill her? That's what obstacles like her are for," The Joketsuzoku warrior sneered.

"My grandfather's edict prevents it and I'm not in a position to openly defy him. Yet," Himura replied. "However, this whole matter has created an opportunity for me. I've had to accelerate many of my plans but what I've learned from all this has opened up a number of possibilities. If I must be perfectly honest, Nabiki Tendo has been rather useful in her attempts to pacify the chaos that normally exists here and concentrating what remains into a predictable pattern. It's made my own progress much smoother. I was hoping that I would get the opportunity to break her rather than destroy her. She would be that much more useful as a pawn."

"Hmph. She's a weak Japanese girl with no fighting skills. Just like you. You make what should be a straightforward battle into a complex, bloodless, joyless dance." She gave Himura a cold look. "If it wasn't for the Elder's instructions, it would not be worth my time to even speak to you, much less do your bidding."

Himura gave a self-depreciating shrug. "The King on a chessboard must seem ever so dull and limited to the Rook, but both have their place on the board. There will be plenty of the sort of entertainment you crave soon enough."

"More talk of games?" Tan Pohn made a skeptical snort. "Just so long as you uphold your end of the
bargain. Otherwise you and I will play a very short 'game' of our own. One that I doubt you will enjoy quite so much."

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"You want to do what?" Ranma said, eyes wide.

Nabiki smirked. Akane had retreated to her room to change, leaving Nabiki to float the idea she'd had to Ranma. "We want to do a girl's night out. The three of us. Hit a few dance clubs, take in the night life, that sort of thing."

"I thought this was supposed to be a date," Ranma said, looking disappointed. "I mean… I get that things kinda got messed up by Kodachi, but…"

Nabiki's smirk widened. "You wanted a little romance… some flirting and basically being touchy feely?" She grinned and laid her arms on Ranma's shoulders, leaning in close to the redhead as she blushed. "Ranma… have you ever seen girls at a dance club?"

"N-no?" Ranma said nervously.

Nabiki giggled. "Girl-girl is kind of a thing on the dance floor. Oh, it's a tactic girls use to get guys' attention, of course. Make out with another girl and suddenly all your drinks are free and all the eyes are on you. Everyone knows it's just playing to the fantasy. Well… that seems like a good place to go be public and open about things without any actual fallout. It just won't be an act when we do it."

"But… isn't that… kind of… perverted?" Ranma asked in a small voice, eyes wide.

"I think 'naughty' is a better term for it," Nabiki said. "Well? Wanna give it a try? I've already got an outfit or two in your size you can wear."

"You already bought me clothes for this?!!" Ranma squeaked, slightly aghast.

"Maybe? A little?" Nabiki said, somewhat bashfully. "I see stuff that would look good on you as a guy or a girl now and then and I pick it up…"

"Because it's way more daring than anything you would wear, and you figure that you can get me into it because I have no feminine modesty?" Ranma asked, folding her arms and giving Nabiki a skeptical look.

"Oho! Now that sounds like a challenge!" Nabiki said with a grin. "Besides, let's be honest; You have no male modesty either. You wander around in your boxers more than a male lingerie model!"

Ranma flushed a bit and ducked her head. "No one ever said anything about it!"

"Yeah, because you're hot," Nabiki waggled her eyebrows. "Trust me, if your Dad had tried that sort of thing we'd have tossed him out in the street."

"He kinda is, you know?" Ranma said. "He doesn't wear underwear under that dogi."

Nabiki winced and stepped back, putting her hands over her eyes. "Okay… I totally didn't need that mental image…"

"Trust me, never camp with him. It gets worse," Ranma said. "He doesn't wash that thing very much either. The smell is… memorable."

"Please… stop…" Nabiki muttered, starting to look a little green. "You win. Mood dead. I'll be
good."

Ranma smirked. "Besides, what's the point of getting dressed up just to give a bunch of guys a show?"

Akane's door opened and she stepped out of her room. There was a sound that could have been the door closing behind her or it could have been Ranma's jaw hitting the ground.

She was wearing a blue minidress, cut dangerously short and slit even further up each hip that drew attention to her legs and created the illusion that they were longer. She wore a wide black belt around her waist that accentuated her curves and the bodice was cut low, with a black nylon panel that ran up to a choker around her neck to leave her shoulders and upper back bare. Her hair had been teased and styled to give her dark locks a somewhat feral appearance and her carefully applied makeup highlighted her eyes and made them seem darker and more sultry. Her ruby red lips looked softer and fuller than Ranma remembered.

Akane gave the redhead a heavy-lidded look and in a breathy tone that simply dripped with seduction and promise said, "I'm not wearing it for the boys, Ranma."

"Hrk," Ranma whimpered, frozen in place.

"I think you broke her," Nabiki said softly after a minute of the redhead's lockup.

Akane stepped forward slowly and traced a carefully painted nail across Ranma's cheek. "Should I kiss it better, Ranma?" she asked.

"Grk," Ranma replied. Her blush deepened, but otherwise she didn't move a muscle.

"So… what do you say, Ranma?" Nabiki asked. "Want to go dancing with us? We'll head home if you're not having fun, promise."

"And I'll make sure Nabiki looks at least as good as me, just for you," Akane winked.

Ranma finally managed a slow nod, though one could almost hear a sound like a creaking, rusty hinge.

"Thank you!" Both girls threw their arms around the redhead's neck and hugged her, which only made the paralysis worse.

"Umm, one last thing…" Akane said shyly. "I know it's asking a lot, but… do you think maybe you could use the soap? Y'know, just to avoid accidents?"

"The… soap?" Ranma said dumbly. "Uhhh… sure, Akane…"

She beamed. "Great! Go take a quick bath and I'll help Nabiki get ready, then we can help you."

Ranma swallowed a bit as her mind started conjuring possibilities of what Nabiki might come up with and decided it would be wise to retreat before she simply passed out on the floor from the overload. She nodded, bowed clumsily (She wasn't sure why) and scurried for the stairs, nearly bowling Kasumi over in her mad scramble to get to the furo as fast as possible.

"Oh my…" Kasumi said, watching her go.

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"Gah!"
Ranma yelped and shuddered as she dumped the tub of cold water over her head. It was the seventh one so far.

Okay, get it together, Saotome! she thought, slapping at her cheeks. This isn't anything wilder than what you've already done!

Sha paused a moment, blinking a bit as that thought sank in, then clunked herself in the forehead with the wooden tub.

"I really am a pervert…"

There was a polite knock at the furo door. "Ranma?" Kasumi's voice was tentative, hesitant. "Are you decent?"

"Uh, not really…" Ranma said, looking down at the tub. "Sorry, have I been in here too long?"

"Oh, no, not at all. I just realized I had all the towels hanging on the laundry lines and forgot to warn you. I brought you some. Is it alright if I open the outer door and put them out for you?"

Kasumi said.

"Uh, sure," Ranma had learned to be nervous about the furo door, but at the same time Kasumi wasn't liable to drop a table on her head should she accidentally get an eyeful.

The outer door opened and Ranma could see Kasumi's shadow through the paper panels of the shoji separating the entryway from the bath itself. "Ranma… actually, now that I have a minute, I just wanted to ask how you're holding up?"

"Huh? Umm… okay I guess?" Ranma looked down at the tub in her hands. "I mean… the whole situation with my parents kinda sucks but… just about everything else is better, so… I guess it balances out?" She sighed. "I know I musta sounded kinda messed up the last time we had a serious talk."

Kasumi was silent for a moment. "Ranma… You're dealing with something I admit I can barely grasp." She turned and sat down on a stool just on the other side of the screen. "And that's okay," she added quickly, "but… I'm sometimes afraid that I'll say something offensive in my ignorance, so I've stayed quiet. But I DID want to say something today. I know my sisters can get carried away. I overheard your conversation with them about your date this evening…"

Ranma blushed and covered her head with the washtub. "Oh god, you must think I'm a freak, doncha… Taking advantage of Akane and Nabiki..."

"No!" Kasumi shook her head. I… see? This is what I was afraid of doing. No, Ranma, going dancing hardly makes you the least bit unusual, and even if it did… so what? In the almost two years I've known you, nothing about you has been anything but noble and kind. I don't believe you're CAPABLE of taking advantage of my sisters that way. It's not in your nature." She took a deep breath. "I am… a little worried they are taking advantage of YOU, however."

"How so?" Ranma lifted the tub off her head, looking over at her curiously.

"Ranma… when was the last time you got to change forms?" Kasumi asked.

"Ummm… " She scratched her head. "Tuesday, I think? Yeah… I was a guy Tuesday morning."

"And you haven't been able to change since, partly because the soap locks you for several days, right?" Kasumi said. "Usually you've been using the weekend as a respite from spending the entire
Ranma paused, glancing at the bar of soap nearby. "Yeah… it would…" I didn't think of that! I'd be stuck a girl for practically an entire extra week!

"I wanted to make sure you were aware, and you were okay with it," Kasumi said, "I know you're inclined to want to make Nabiki and Akane happy… which is good! But… I also remember how hard it was on you when you've been stuck in your female form for an extended period in the past." She sighed. "I know Akane in particular… pushes. If you'd like me to talk to her about this, I'd be happy to."

Ranma picked up the bar of soap from the dish and looked at it, then looked up at her own reflection in a nearby mirror. The Full-body Cat Tongue had me locked for almost a month. Am I just doing that to myself willingly now? Unconsciously the traced a finger along her cheek, although the freckles she knew were there weren't visible this far from the mirror.

She took a deep breath, then filled another tub with water and started lathering herself up. "Do you know the worst part of being stuck during the Full-body Cat Tongue?" she asked conversationally.

"What?" Kasumi asked.

"My clothes didn't fit," Ranma said, scrubbing. "That's always been the worst part of the curse. If it fits in one form, it doesn't in the other, and so I'm stuck wearing baggy, shapeless stuff that's somewhere in between. I kept wearing my guy clothes during the Full-body Cat Tongue 'cuz I didn't wanna admit that Akane's clothes were more comfortable."

"Even if they were too tight in the chest or baggy in the hips?" Kasumi asked, bemused.

Ranma shook her head. "I was just turning her crank. My guy side stuff was worse." She dumped the tub over herself to rinse off. "But I was terrified of being comfortable, you know? I was so scared of any possibility that I might learn to live with it - or even that it wasn't that bad, really. Just different." She looked at her hand. "I mean… that's all this is. Just… different. And… these last few weeks my clothes have fit most of the time and nobody blinks if I'm one way or another. I feel like… like I've been holding onto a ledge, trying with all of my strength to keep from falling, feeling my grip slowly starting to slip as my feet dangle in the air with no purchase anywhere… that awful, awful feeling you get when you're about to fall and ain't got no control? And then… My grip slips and there's the ground, right under my feet, and the whole time there never really was a fall." She shrugged. "So what if I spend another week as a girl? Or a month, even? It's just 'cause circumstance make it easier right now. That'll change, and maybe I'll spend a month as a guy. Or maybe I'll be back to back'n'forth. But even if I go a little girly… or even a lot… I can swing back just as easily. So it'll happen or it won't - but someday - at some point - it'll reach some kinda equilibrium. If I end up being a certain way, it'll be because I want to be that way. I'm comfortable being this way. Mebbe that is weird. Mebbe it wouldn't work for someone else. But it's how it is for me. I'm okay with being comfortable for now."

Kasumi was quiet for a long moment, but when she spoke, her tone was lighter. "Well, then I finally know what to get you for Christmas. Some kind of magic shapeshifting clothes."

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"I… uhh… I know I'm the last person who should be pointing out this, but…" Ryouga stared at the familiar sign out in front of Ucchan's. "This isn't the way to my house."
"Oh, we know that, sugar. We just thought we'd stop by to have a bite and see how Konatsu is doing running the place…" Ukyou said conversationally.

"... Tie you to chair and beat senseless until you tell what you intentions are for Airen?" Shampoo finished with a bright smile, then took two fingers and stabbed them into the pressure point on the back of his neck.

"Owww! What the hell!?" Ryouga clapped a hand over the spot on his neck and glared at her.

Shampoo blinked, then looked at her fingers. "Oops… Bakusai Tenketsu training make too tough for sleep spot to work…"

Ukyou sighed and slapped her forehead. "God damnit, Shampoo…" Great! NOW he's going to either get angry, run, or start a fight! Or all three! He's too strong for us to get him inside by force! She glanced at Shampoo, discarded an idea based on how the Furinkan girl's uniform was designed, then came to an uncomfortable realization.

"Sleep spot?! What the hell is going on?" Ryouga glared at Shampoo. "What are you up to this time?! What do you mean, 'what are my intentions for…'"

He didn't get to finish. Ukyou tapped him on the shoulder. He turned just in time to see the last button on her shirt and the front clasp on her bra pop open at the same time as she took a step back to make sure he got a good eyeful when she pulled her shirt wide open.

There was a moment where time seemed to slow. The breeze caught her shirt, making it billow, and the cups of her bra fluttered further apart as her breasts, freed from their lacy fabric prison, bounced lightly from the exertion.

Ryouga's eyes widened. His pupils dilated and his skin went pale as the blood drained from his face. His mouth hung agape and, contrary to expectations, there was only a slight trickle of blood from his nostrils. Then his eyes rolled back into his head and he collapsed in a boneless heap on the ground.

Ukyou closed her shirt quickly to avoid flashing anyone else, fumbling to try and get her bra clasped while simultaneously holding her shirt closed. "Don't just stand there, pick him up, Shampoo! We need to get him inside!"

"You are such jackasses! Both of you!" Ukyou finally got the clasp done up and, not bothering with the rest, knelt down and grabbed Ryouga by the ankle and dragged him into the restaurant.

Ryouga stirred. He felt groggy, his head throbbed and his nose felt itchy. When he tried to move his arm to raise a hand to scratch it, he found they were bound firmly in place behind him.

He cracked open an eye. There was a light being shone in his face so he shut it again and groaned.

"Finally awake?" a familiar voice said, though it sounded like they were trying to be gruffer, more menacing, so his confused brain couldn't place it for the moment.

"What is this?" He risked opening an eye again. "Ugh… could you move the light, please?"
"Uhhh... no," the voice said uncertainly. There was some whispering between the voice and another figure.

"What do we do if he asks us to move the light?"

"No move light! Light is in eyes so no can see us."

"Oh, okay."

"The light stays!" the voice said firmly. "We have some questions to ask you. Cooperate, and this will go easily. For you."

A glass of water was placed on the table in front of him.

"Refuse, and it will go... uh... LESS easily."

"That's okay. I'm not actually thirsty," Ryouga said. "Could you maybe undo the ropes, though? They're kinda chafing..."

A pair of hands slammed down on the table. "What you planning to do with Airen!?" The second voice demanded. "What you ALREADY do with Airen!?"

"... Shampoo?" Ryouga squinted, just able to make out a hint of her lavender hair past the glare of the lamp. "What are you doing?"

"Shampoo ask questions!" She slammed her hands onto the table again.

Ryouga shrugged. "Okay... what do you want to know?"

"You play hardball, huh? Prisoner who refuse to answer questions go to very bad... wait... what?"

"What do you want to know?" Ryouga repeated, a little more slowly.

"What you do with Airen!?" Shampoo demanded again.

"Umm... do you mean what kinds of things or did you misplace Ranma and are asking where I put her?" Ryouga asked, confused.

"Hmph... wise guy, huh? Maybe Shampoo show you what we do to wise guys here!" she growled at him.

"Where is 'here'?" Ryouga asked. "Are we still at Ucchan's? I'm pretty sure Ranma's at the Tendo Dojo, if that's who you're looking for, but you know that, we walked here together..."

"Oh my GOD..." the first voice interjected in exasperation. "She wants to know what you and Ranma did at the Kuno's last night, or if you guys did any compromising stuff together?"

Ryouga blinked. "Compromising...?" He paused, chewing over the question as he tried to work out how he had gotten where he was, in the hope of figuring out some of the context. "We had dinner, talked about bushido and stuff with the Kunos, then went to bed. Now... hang on, I remember walking home with you two and... and we got to Ucchan's but..."

"Just go to sleep?" Shampoo asked. "Or sleep TOGETHER!?"

"Well, together, actually. There was only one bed, after all." Ryouga said off-handedly. "Now... something happened when we got here, right? There was... there was some kind of 'popping' noise,
then…"

"You slept in the same bed!?!" the first voice yelped, aghast.

"Well, yeah, Ranma didn't want me to sleep on the floor. It wasn't a big deal, really. I mean, we've shared a tent before so…"

"You've slept together BEFORE!?!"

"Yeah, I mean, occasionally," Ryouga replied. "Ranma was usually a guy those times, of course… Now… Ugh… what happened that caused me to black out? There was… I saw something… There was… was… Ukyou was there, but…"

"You slept with him as a GUY?!" Ukyou yelped.

"Hold on… think this too easy." Shampoo said. She pushed the light out of the way, causing Ryouga to blink in the relative darkness as his eyes adjusted. She turned his chair to face her, gripped his shoulders and looked him in the eyes. "Shampoo ask plain because stupid Japanese is full of stupid metaphors because is stupid. Have you had sex with Ranma?"

Ryouga's eyes widened and he rocked back in his chair. "What!? NO!"

"Even though you sleep together in same bed?"

"It was a huge bed! We could have fit five people between us!" Ryouga protested. "I wanted to sleep on the floor, but Ranma said that was stupid because she knew nothing was going to happen! And nothing did!"

Shampoo nodded. "And no tempted at all?"

"Of course n-" Ryouga started, but suddenly he remembered the image of Ranma in that silk nightgown and how the moonlight had played over the highlights in her crimson hair as it fell past her shoulders, and cast shadows that only emphasized her curves. What light there was seemed to collect and pool in her eyes, making them the brightest things in the room. With a slight smile on her lips, she'd been like an illustration from a fairy tale. He trailed off, swallowing, then squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head. "Of course not!"

The chair was spun back around. Ukyou was in front of him now, and glaring daggers at him. "It took you almost 30 seconds to finish that sentence, sugar. You looked awful far away for a bit there. Care to try again?"

He swallowed, noting the anger in Ukyou's eyes as she leaned over him. Then, a little lower, he could see that the collar of her shirt was misbuttoned.

A flash of memory.

His eyes widened. "When we got here… you… Your shirt… You flashed me!"

Ukyou's eyes widened and she took a quick step back, covering her chest. "Don't look THERE, pervert!"

Ryouga shut his eyes tight. "I'm sorry! I…" He cracked one open. "You were trying to knock me out?"

Ukyou clapped her hand over her eyes. "This was a terrible idea. Why did I let you talk me into this,
"Shampoo?"

"Hey, getting tits out Spatula Girl's idea. Shampoo just try and use pressure point," Shampoo huffed.

"Why were you trying to knock me out?!" Ryouga demanded.

"So we could get some answers!" Ukyou shot back. "You're doing that thing where you make a girl the entire center of your universe. Except it's our Ranma! We wanna know what's going on!"

Ryouga sighed. "What's going on is Ranma doesn't feel that way about me. It's Ranma. Why would she?" He glared at Ukyou. "If you wanted that answer, you should have just asked me, Ukyou!"

"Ryouga," Shampoo walked around in front of the chair and crouched down on her haunches so that she could look him in the eye. "How many people you think Airen cry for? How many you think she let see cry?"

"I..." Ryouga blinked.

"Only hear that scream from Airen once before. Bad, bad day. Akane nearly die," Shampoo said. "Airen scared ever since of losing someone she care for. See it in eyes. Airen have that fear when you get hurt. So Airen care for Lost Boy."

Ryouga blinked owlishly at her, his expression shifting as he tried to process that. Of course he knew Ranma cared on some level; It was impossible to be linked to her without knowing that. He had very carefully and willfully avoided processing what that mass of warm, reddish-gold emotions he felt from her towards him might mean. It was very important for the sake of his sanity that it wasn't... THAT.

"Ranma can't feel... that way about me," Ryouga said carefully. "I've seen how Ranma acts when she... when she feels that way about me. There was... an incident with a magic fishing rod and..."

"That magic," Shampoo said. "Shampoo know from experience that real thing different." She looked away guiltily. "Magic... magic compel. Hollow out inside, make only love. Simple, like cartoon of real thing. Real love complex, mix with other feelings... annoyance and jealousy and selfishness and insecurity and need."

Ukyou walked back over and squatted down as well. "We're not asking how Ranma feels, sugar. We're asking how you feel?"

"I told you..." Ryouga started.

"You told me you're seeing Ranma differently," Ukyou said. "You've been evasive about how you feel which is so not like you it isn't funny." Ukyou poked him in the chest. "Look, I'm not trying to attack you... We just... This is kind of a paradigm shift in things."

Ryouga closed his eyes. "You want the truth? Fine. I... I..." He shuddered. "In my head, I know this is the worst thing I could be feeling. I try and think about Akari, or even Akane and how much that hurt. I try and keep the face of that arrogant, smug jerk in my mind. But... but then she looks at me... smiles... and even though I know it's just an illusion, I..." he trailed off.

Ukyou wrapped her arms around him and gave him a fierce hug.

"I've been there, Ryouga," Ukyou said softly.

"I can't do this..." Ryouga shook his head and shuddered. "She's my friend... she always was..."
Even when I thought I hated her. When I met Ranma I didn't have anyone else. My Dad was dead and my Mom was gone and… and I was so alone… then she… he left and… She trusts me now and this… everything I feel is just a betrayal of that trust and I need it to stop so I can just be what she needs me to be… what she thinks I am instead of… of…” He started sobbing softly.

"Easy, sugar…” Ukyou sighed. She felt like a complete tool now.

Ukyou was a bit surprised when Shampoo hugged him from the other side.

"Shampoo understand how feel," Shampoo said. "Sick, sad feeling. See what want, but can't have."

Ryouga chuckled a bit, bitterly. "I'm sorry, but you don't."

Shampoo jerked back a bit, as if burnt. Ukyou backed off a little more slowly. She could see his jaw had tensed.

"You got what you wanted in the end. All of it," Ryouga said in a low voice. "Maybe you thought it was out of reach once or twice, maybe you doubted, but you didn't start off knowing that it was impossible… and fall anyway." He gave Shampoo a hard glare.

"Lost Boy not know what he talking about." Shampoo glared back defiantly. "Not know Shampoo's heart. Not know what Shampoo felt." Her expression softened. "You know what magic love like. Hollow. Wrong. Think Shampoo try such thing if not desperate? Think Shampoo use such magics on own self if not think no other way?"

Ryouga's own expression shifted as he remembered the incident she was talking about. "The red thread. It affected you too?"

Shampoo looked away sadly. "Of course. Shampoo already love Ranma, but… but…” She shuddered. "Magic love all-consuming. Push out all doubt, all other emotions. No why anymore. Not love other person because of who person is, love because."

"And yet you re-tied it anyway?" Ryouga asked.

"Wait, you got involved in that mess?" Ukyou said, a little surprised.

"Lost Boy try to stop Shampoo. Almost succeed, too," Shampoo said, twiddling her fingers.

"Why?" Ukyou said, flabbergasted. "You would have had Akane all to yourself if Shampoo had pulled it off!"

Ryouga looked away, embarrassed. "It would have hurt her. Akane didn't deserve to have her heart broken because of some stupid magic spell. What I got out of it didn't matter." He sighed. "That's what I told myself, anyway. When it came down to it, I froze up."

"You never really believed you were gonna get anywhere with Akane, did you?" Ukyou said. "That's why you kept blowing all of our long-term plans in favor of getting a couple of minutes with her. You figured you were gonna lose anyway, so get what you could, right?"

He shook his head. "I think you're giving me too much credit. My brain just kind of switched off whenever Akane smiled at me."

"I… kind of understand that now, actually," Ukyou said, blushing a little.

"Should untie. No need for ropes now," Shampoo said, moving behind Ryouga to undo the
"Oh, uhh… did you need the rope back?" Ryoga asked over his shoulder.

"No, is just old rope. Why?" Shampoo asked, curious.

Ryouga tensed, flexed his shoulders and casually snapped the rope. "That was actually really uncomfortable. I was worried it was valuable rope or something and I'd twitch and wreck it." He rubbed his arms, leaning forward a bit in the chair.

Shampoo blinked. "Maybe should take Lost Boy back home to Joketsuzoku village. Girl problems solved with one challenge there!"

Ryouga winced. "No thanks. I don't like the idea of some girl having to marry me because some law forces them to."

"Agreed. That always struck me as sorta creepy. What if some cretin from the Musk came in and just beat up an Amazon girl and said she was his bride now? Ukyou said, folding her arms.

Shampoo shook her head. "Not work like that. Challenge must be formal, and accepted, and no dishonor if Joketsuzoku tell Outsider to get lost. Women not accept challenge unless prepared for consequence." She cocked her head at Ryoga. "They see Lost Boy's strength, they ask him to challenge. That way it normally work. Is test of worth, not way to win trophy!"

"That's not how I heard it went with you and Ranma, sugar," Ukyou said, raising a skeptical eyebrow.

Shampoo suddenly looked nervous. "Uh… Shampoo's case special…?"

Ryouga turned in his chair as Ukyou came up next to him, both of them giving Shampoo an incredulous look.

"Shampoo… have you been fudging the law this whole time?!" Ukyou asked, aghast. She started to giggle. "Are you serious? After all we bet on those stupid Amazon laws in the first place?!

"Not fudged!" Shampoo said haughtily. Then she paused and considered. "Well… first time come to Japan, maybe fudge a little. Ranma boy-side cute and strong. But original challenge proper, just circumstance of Airen's curse not known. Elders rule original challenge valid under marriage law."

"In other words, you wanted Ranma really really badly and so your Great-grandmother pulled some strings to make sure it happened," Ukyou said with a smirk.

"Yes, that," Shampoo said brightly, standing up and dusting her skirt off. "All work out in the end."

"Yeah…” Ryoga said, standing up from the chair. "I'm happy for you. Honestly. So… is this the part where you tell me I need to stay away from Ranma, and should go get myself lost for a few months?" He rubbed the back of his head. "Because I've considered it. I… I just need another week or two to see if we make any progress on this cure for my family directional curse. For my Mom's sake."

"Do you want to disappear for a couple of months, sugar?" Ukyou asked, giving him a searching look.

"It'd give things time to cool off," Ryoga said. "It's how I used to deal with my Akane problem, to try and get over her. It never really worked, but…” He sighed heavily.
Ukyou put her hand on his arm. "That's not what I asked, Ryouga."

He closed his eyes. "It's… I…"

"Just be honest," Shampoo added. "Be here, or be free?"

His shoulders slumped. "I never wanted that kind of freedom. Ever. The first time I got lost in my life was the worst feeling in the world. When I started tracking Ranma, I spent two years alone. I almost died… I don't know how many times, and I knew that no one would ever even miss me. Since I got my curse I've had as many close calls in a month as I had in my first year of wandering." He clenched his fist. "I don't want to go. I want to be here."

"All right," Ukyou said gently. "In that case, this is the part where we go downstairs, see if Konatsu is awake, crack open a couple of bottles of sake, and you two can tell me funny stories to get my mind off of how much revenue I'm losing by keeping the shop closed today."

Ryouga raised an eyebrow. "What happened to Konatsu?"

"Spatula girl not close shirt when drag Lost Boy inside," Shampoo said. "Ninja see, pass out cold."

"Yeah… uh… yeah, I can see that…" Ryouga pinched his nose closed as he remembered exactly what had knocked him out. "It was… it was… was the angelic choir something you guys arranged, or was I just hallucinating at that point?"

"Lost Boy hear too?" Shampoo smirked. "That allll Ukyou."

"Wow…" Ryouga shook his head. "You'd never think… I mean, I guess with the bindings and all you don't normally get a real idea…"

Ukyou blushed and self-consciously crossed her arms over her chest. "Okay, great, yeah, can we please stop talking about my chest now?"

"Why?" Shampoo asked innocently. "Ukyou's chest amazing."

Ukyou closed her eyes. "Okay… Sake and an aspirin…"

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"Nervous, Ranma?"

The redhead glanced over at Nabiki. The middle Tendo had opted for a deep maroon strapless minidress with a matching half-length open front shirt overtop. She had finished it off with nylons and a set of black heels.

Ranma herself was wearing a short sleeveless qi-pao made from iridescent silk, silver in color with black edging. There was a chinese-style dragon embroidered over the left breast in blues and greens, with red and yellow accents. It was cut very short, no more than mid thigh, and slit up to the hip. "A little? I mean, I've worn daring stuff before, but I kinda always had an escape route…" She glanced at the club door warily.

"A little risk is part of the fun," Nabiki replied. "Besides, the bouncers here are sweethearts."

"You've been here before, Nabiki?" Akane asked.

"I used to come a lot more before Ranma came and made Nerima more interesting," Nabiki said as they got into the line. "Broke in my first fake ID here. Speaking of which… they usually know not to
check me, but just in case." She handed each of them a laminated card.

"Ooooh, right…" Akane bit her lower lip and looked nervously toward the door as she accepted the card. She glanced at it curiously.

"What's this?" Ranma asked. It looked like a standard Government ID card with her picture on it, but the rest of the information was all wrong.

"'Kei Yasuhiko'?" Ranma asked, raising an eyebrow at Nabiki.

"I'm apparently 'Yuri Takachiho'," Akane added, tucking her ID away. "When did you even get these made, Nabiki?"

"Safe to say the less you know, the better," Nabiki replied with a smile.

"There's no way they're gonna buy this," Ranma said darkly. "Nobody is going to believe that I'm twenty!"

"You're not trying to prevent them saying 'no', Ranma. You're giving them an excuse to say 'yes' and not get into trouble." Nabiki grinned. "Just look hot and it'll go smoothly."

Ranma gave her a cocky grin. "Well that I can do!"

"Yes, we know Kei dear." Akane leaned over and murmured in her ear. "Just remember you're very, very taken by a jealous uncute tomboy who wants your eyes on her tonight."

Ranma gave her a wink. "And who would that be? I thought I was your date tonight, Akane?"

"Ooooh, smooth!" Akane said with a grin and kissed Ranma's cheek.

"She's been rehearsing that one for a while," Nabiki said dryly. "And save the PDA's for the dance floor. Trust me."

Several people ahead of them were turned away at the door as the line advanced, until the usher waved them forward. The bouncer was a huge man clad in an untied navy blue yukata, with a sarashi wrapped around his midsection and dark, loose pants. He had muscles upon muscles, and stood well over six feet tall. His eyes were nearly hidden behind dark bangs. He regarded the three girls levelly as they approached.

"Hey, Rasha!" Nabiki chirped and waved to him with a bright smile as they walked up. "How are you? It's been a while!"

"Faye," he said, his stone-like face cracking into a subtle smile. "I haven't seen you around here for a long time. I was afraid you'd gone respectable on me."

"Me? I'd never do such a thing!" Nabiki acted shocked. "I just lost my taste for watered down drinks for a while."

He barked a short laugh. "Well, I'm afraid we can't help you there. Only the finest liquors and spirits are sold to our patrons at The Ruby Sea."

Nabiki raised an eyebrow. "Really?"

"No, of course not. Seawater will get you drunker than the shite they serve in there and probably be less likely to make you blind," Rasha said with a chuckle. "But Tansui is working the bar tonight and he knows better than to try and swindle Faye Valentine." He looked over Ranma and Akane.
"Minions of yours?"

"Friends, as it happens," Nabiki said.

"They up for this place?" He looked them over skeptically. "The sharks in there will be all over a cute pair of minnows like them."

"Oh, trust me, they can take care of themselves. They're most of the reason I've been away, actually." She stepped in closer and motioned him to bend down so she could whisper in his ear. "Your fire insurance is paid up, right?"

Rasho raised an eyebrow. "Well, if Faye is vouching for you… Look for the boys in the blue yukata if you get hassled." He stepped aside, pushed the door open and motioned them through.

"That was easy…" Ranma said as they made their way into the club's foyer.

"It's his job to pack as many pretty girls as he can into this place, then fill the rest with guys with fat wallets. The dynamic from that does the rest of the work for them," Nabiki said, stretching as she breathed in the heady scents of hot skin and alcohol. "Oh yes, I have missed this place!"

"Sounds like they should be paying us," Ranma said, looking around.

"Oh, they've got girls on the payroll. Float around, coax a few drinks out of the poor wallflowers. Gets their confidence up enough to try again, gets more cash in the till for the bartender, and it keeps the energy up," Nabiki replied.

"You seem to know an awful lot about it," Akane said skeptically.

"I only did it for a couple of months," Nabiki said off-handedly. "Found doing it on someone else's schedule kind of sucked the joy out of it. Plus, some of the other girls were a little too competitive for my tastes."

"Nabiki!" Akane yelped, aghast.

Nabiki rolled her eyes. "What, I scammed a few free drinks and trinkets by flirting with the boys? Trust me, that's one of the less eyebrow raising things I've done."

Akane folded her arms. "I'm not sure I wanna know…"

Nabiki led them into the club proper. The first thing Ranma noticed was that it was big. The main room was perhaps forty meters square and the ceiling was high enough that, with no overhead illumination, she couldn't make out any real detail. It had a definite oceanic theme - oceanic rather than nautical. The walls were painted in light, concealed floods in pastel shades of blue and green that shifted color just enough to suggest a wavelike motion. Coupled with strategically placed planters with frond-like vegetation a number of large, internally lit fish tanks, it created the illusion of being under water.

The round dance floor filled the middle of the room. Set a few steps down from the main floor, it appeared to be made of a translucent material and was lit from underneath. Three of the room's four corners were arranged with booths and tables while the massive bar, a great arced counter, occupied the fourth. A door in the far wall likely led to a kitchen and doors in either side wall bore signs for the restrooms.

The place was just starting to fill up with a scattering of patrons at tables, while most clustered around the bar or on the dance floor. The lights in the floor pulsed and dimmed in time with the
music which was loud enough that Ranma could feel the beat like a physical force.

"So… uh… what do we do?" Ranma asked, eying the dance floor warily. "I… umm… probably shoulda said that… I dunno how to dance?"

Akane smirked and hooked her arm through one of Ranma's. "Don't worry, Ranma. We'll show you how."

Nabiki nodded, hooking her arm through the other. "Dancing is just improvising to a beat anyway. I don't think you'll have any trouble with it."

"Y'know, Ryouga, your problem is you take everything too seriously," Ukyou said, levelling a finger at the Lost Boy, her words just slightly slurred. "Y'gotta lighten up a bit. I mean… we ain't even twenty, right? Who finds their soulmate that young? Nobody's got it together that early."

They were sitting at one of the booths with a number of sake bottles, many of which were empty now. Konatsu was passed out to Ukyou's left and Ryouga was sitting opposite her with Shampoo on his right. They had made a respectable dent in Ukyou's supply of sake.

Ryouga gazed at her with tired eyes, his head pillowed on his fist. "Says the successful business own'r who's set t'marry both th' girls I like and is even younger'n me?"

"Two months, jackass! You're still th' little brother because… because… because!" Ukyou said crossly, her finger wavering. "And stop tryin' t'be two of you, I'm not that drunk!" She frowned. "Also… thought you gave up on 'Kane."

"Jus' 'cuz I gave up on her doesn't mean I don't still… y'know…" Ryouga said, slumping a little.

Ukyou's scowl softened. "Ouch. Sorry t'hear that, Ryo…"

"Is only two girls?" Shampoo asked, leaning in closer to Ryouga. "Heard maybe is something with Nabiki?" She tried to poke his nose but came closer to his cheek. "Pintou talking about keeping Lost Boy as pet."

Ryouga leaned back away from her, blushing. "I-I don't know what you're talking about!"


"Ack!..." He fumbled to pinch his nose closed, eyes widening as despite the effects of the alcohol (Or perhaps because of them) he caught the implied come-on. "Sh-Shampoo, you've got the wrong idea! Nothing is going on with Nabiki! She was just messing with Akane!"

Shampoo smile widened, her eyes half-lidding seductively as Ryouga's frantic babbling yielded more interesting information. "Is so? Perhaps Akane not so indifferent to Lost Boy as she claim?" She scooted closer, forcing him back up against the wall and slid her arms around his neck. "Think Lost Boy enjoy it, though. Think Pintou enjoy too, maybe enough that sometime she forget she just teasing. If Ranma, Akane and Nabiki all want Lost Boy, must be something to Lost Boy, hmmm? Perhaps worthwhile to test for own self?"

Ryouga made a small, strangled noise, eyes wide with panic. He glanced at the wall behind him, searching desperately for the breaking point so he could blow it out and escape.
A wrapped straw plinked off of Shampoo's forehead.

The Amazon girl blinked and turned to give Ukyou a perplexed look.

"Could you keep it in yer pants for once, Shampoo?" Ukyou growled. "I don't need t' clean up six litres of blood and/or fix a hole in the wall when he freaks out!" She crossed her arms and glared at her. "Honestly, ever since you uncorked your libido you've been shameless! You can't just drag someone into your bed because they catch your eye!"

Shampoo cocked her head, still halfway into Ryouga's lap with her arms draped around his neck. "Why not?"

"Because it's a different culture here!" Ukyou snarled angrily, her ire having sobered her up considerably. "Because it's more meaningful here and maybe because it makes the people you've already slept with feel like you're ditching them!"

Shampoo blinked, her eyes widened and she scooted back. "Oh!" she said, suddenly looking sheepish. "A-am sorry! Not mean to…"

Ukyou rolled her eyes. "Whatever. I get it. Sex's jus' like playin' cards fer Amazons. No big deal if you play wit' me or Ryouga or… or whoever!" She scooped up the bottle of sake and took a slug from it directly.

Ryouga took a tentative breath and relaxed a little. He didn't let his guard down, though, because it sounded like things could get tense in a different way.

"N-no! Not that way with Ukyou." Shampoo reached out and caught Ukyou's hands. "Is true, mean different things in Japan. But… but… Ukyou special! Ukyou first."

Ukyou blinked. "W-wait… hold on…" She leaned closer. "There's no way you knew how t'do all that… that stuff th' first time!"

Shampoo blushed self-consciously and looked away. "Is… is… is many writings on subject in Joketsuzoku village…"

"You got all that stuff out of a BOOK!?" Ukyou yelped.

"Scroll. Maybe… lot of scrolls…" Shampoo replied sheepishly. "Most girls Shampoo's age already have lover or two, but… Shampoo not well liked among sisters. So… study lots."

Ukyou blinked, looked thoughtful then leaned forward. "You… uhh… dinn't happen t'bring 'em with you from China, didja?"

Shampoo smiled. "Can loan if Ukyou want read?"

Ukyou blushed. "Uh… m-maybe… y'know… outta… curiosity…" she mumbled.

"Maybe can read together?" Shampoo asked, her voice dipping into a low, suggestive purr.

"God, you're shameless!" Ukyou protested, blushing harder and ducking her head. "... I-I guess… since I can't read Mandarin at all… You could translate 'em for me…"

Ryouga snatched a bandanna from his head and plugged his nose with it. Unfortunately for him, both Ukyou and Shampoo noticed.

"Pervert," Ukyou said, giving him a glare.
Shampoo smirked. "Maybe Lost Boy want to borrow too?" She winked at him. "Maybe will let see. But no can translate… Unless sister say is okay." She winked at the qualification.

Ryouga squeezed his eyes shut.

"Y'know, I should let her," Ukyou said, glowering at Ryouga. "You'd never survive the blood loss."

"Since when are you my sister?!" Ryouga said defensively.

Ukyou folded her arms and raised her chin, eyes closed. "Someone has t'look out fer you. You need an older sister!"

"You're younger than me!" Ryouga protested. "By two months!"

"I'm more mature!" Ukyou shot back. "So… so metaphor'ly I'm th' older sibling!"

"Hmmm..." Shampoo glanced back and forth between them, a slow smile spreading across her face. "siblings. That have potential."

"DON'T GET IDEAS!" they both shouted.

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Performance anxiety wasn't something Ranma really had a problem with.

Ranma had long ago learned that worrying about how she looked to others while in front of the crowd was pointless. Not just because self-consciousness was a distraction but because if you were worried you might look silly, you already did. But if you were confident, whatever you did would tend to work out and be well-received. Ranma had cultivated a kind of 'zen' of confidence, feeding off the crowd as it responded. She found she enjoyed performing, liking the rush from the positive feedback.

… Except for kiss scenes.

… Well… maybe kiss scenes wouldn't be so bad anymore…

Dancing, however, was unambiguously awesome.

There was a beat, throbbing and deep enough to feel rather than hear, all through the club, a steady, solid rhythm to move to. There were no katas or established forms, just movement, unrestricted and demonstrative - a way to express feelings through motion.

It was heaven.

It took a few minutes for Ranma to learn the 'language' but Akane and Nabiki being there helped. Eventually she forgot about the crowd almost entirely to focus on the music and the two girls with her as they wove their dances together. Ranma realized that if the dancing was like a language, then what Nabiki and Akane were 'saying' would be a little suggestive. She was a bit hesitant at first but then she decided to set her worries aside. It was a little exhilarating, like sending naughty messages by secret code.

Ranma didn't stop to consider that their 'secret code' was something just about everyone in the club was fluent in.

She realized her mistake when, after a pleasant eternity dancing, she cracked open an eye to notice that the crowd had pulled away and formed a rough circle around them as they watched the three of
them dance. Normally an audience wasn't a big problem for Ranma, but those watching were mostly male, and Ranma was starting to see familiar look in the eyes of some of them; entirely too much like that of some of the Hentai Horde from Furinkan.

"Uh oh…" Nabiki noticed it as well. "I think it's maybe a good time for us to take a break and get a drink, huh girls?"

That was apparently the wrong thing to say, because a small knot of young men stepped forward from the crowd.

"Why not let us buy your drinks, ladies?" The leader of the group said, thumbing towards his chest proudly. He was wearing a cheap business suit, as were those with him, but their hairstyles were all over the place. Bad dye jobs, pompadours - the entire spectrum of the stereotypical 'thug' styles.

"You three seem kinda lonely dancing by yourselves. Why not let me and my boys show you a good time?"

Ranma remembered Nabiki's comment about getting the boys to pay for their drinks but something felt off about this. She shot a glance to Nabiki, who shook her head slightly and stepped forward.

"Thanks for the offer, boys, but we're good for now. Maybe later?" Nabiki said lightly.

"Nah, nah, you've been out here puttin' on a show for nearly an hour!" The leader walked up and slipped an arm around Nabiki's shoulders. "We gotta booth off to the back where it's nice'n dark, an-AUUURGH!"

He didn't get to finish. His hand never came to rest on Nabiki's shoulder. Ranma glared at him as she held his wrist between two slender fingers in a vice-like grip. She gave one of the pressure points a none-too-gentle squeeze.

"That's mine," Ranma growled softly. "You don't touch her without permission."

Ranma was aware that the rest of them were moving in closer. There were six or seven of them, all reacting to the leader's cry of pain.

The leader withdrew his had and gave her an amused look as he rubbed it. "Easy, Red! No need to be so hostile. Me'n my boys just wanted to show you girls a good time, since you were all on your lonesome. A lotta girls would be happy to spend time with us."

Another guy with his hair dyed a shocking shade of red leaned over and leered at Ranma.

"A lotta girls would be happy to spend some time with us. The boss here is movin' up in the world an' bein' nice to us could have some serious benefits, y'know?"

Nabiki folded her arms and raised an eyebrow coolly. "I'm afraid we're not interested in that kind of work, fellas."

"Nah, nah, nah," the leader chuckled. "We don't ask our girls to do stuff like that. You three are way too high-class for that kinda stuff, right boys?"

There was a chorus of chuckles and assent from the rest of the band of thugs that just served to emphasize the fact that they were more or less surrounding them now.

Ranma traded a glance with Akane. She didn't want to start a fight and get them kicked out of Nabiki's favorite club, but if this went on much longer…

"Look…" the leader leaned in conspiratorially towards Nabiki. "A guy in my position's got a
certain… rep, y'know? Gotta keep up appearances and all. Every night me'n the boys come here, find the hottest girls in the joint and give 'em a good time. I got a direct line to the good shit, too. None of this crap cut with bakin' soda. Whatever you like. So you three are the hottest girls this place has seen in weeks, mebbe ever, and so we just think you should be properly escorted is all. I promise, you won't regret it."

"TOUMA!"

The booming voice caused the Thug Leader to freeze, his face showing fear and recognition. He turned quickly toward the one who had addressed him.

Another young man stepped forward. He was in his mid-twenties with dark brown hair tied back in a neat ponytail and, although he had obvious stubble, it was that carefully groomed type that was meant to evoke manliness. His dark suit was the polar opposite of those worn by the thugs; crisply pressed, perfectly tailored and obviously high-end. Despite the heat of the club, he didn't look like he was sweating. He fixed the leader of the group with his dark eyes and folded his arms. "You know, if my grandfather knew that he was paying you to harass girls and do drugs rather than keeping tabs on me like he thinks he's paying you to do, he might have to reconsider his payroll."

The leader's eyes widened at the implicit threat. "I… I…"

"I came out of my private booth, yes," the dark-haired man said. "That's what happens when you utterly fail to be discreet."

"L-look, we don't work for you!" one of the other thugs stammered.

"No, you work for my grandfather," the dark haired man replied, not looking at him. "He pays you a lot of money to keep an eye on me without me noticing. So how do you suppose he might react if I were to call him and complain about how you're harassing friends of mine, making a scene and completely ignoring your assigned task - thereby failing completely in every single aspect of your jobs?" His voice boomed and narrowed his eyes. "Shall I remind you what happened to the last low-level street thugs who made that mistake?"

"Th-that's not necessary…!" the leader said quickly.

"Good," said the dark haired man. "Now… go back to your table and your drugs and whatever other floozies you can attract and you play nice for the rest of the night and you leave my friends alone. I keep my mouth shut, you keep your fat paycheck and everyone is happy. Fair?"

"Yeah… yeah!" the Leader said, breaking into a wide grin. He stepped away from Nabiki and bowed. "You know… you're alright. You're an alright guy, Yuto. Me'n the boys look forward to working for you."

"You aren't," Yuto growled, his arms remaining crossed, his glare cold. "Suck up to my sister if you want to try and score points with your future boss." The dark haired man smirked slightly. "Not that it'll get you anywhere."

The thugs backed away, leaving only the well-dressed man and the slowly dispersing crowd who had been watching the scene. Ranma stared at him. The name seemed familiar, but she didn't recognize this man at all.

"Thank you for the assist… 'Yuto', was it?" Nabiki said, raising an eyebrow. She seemed to be studying him carefully. "I'm guessing that if you're willing to come to our rescue, there were no lasting hard feelings about that 'One Cup Genki' incident?"
"That was you?" Yuto yelped, a disgusted scowl crossing his face. "I might not have helped you if I had known! It took me a solid week to get the aftertaste out of my mouth!"

"Yuto!" Ranma suddenly made the connection. The scraggily, inebriated, demanding, eccentric Beer Otaku from the beach weekend.

Yuto raised an eyebrow. "Yes. Has my reputation preceded me? I'm afraid I'm the one at a disadvantage then, Miss…?"

"Yeah, the beach weekend, doncha remember?" Ranma said excitedly. "Asahi and Chiyako, and there was the clam bake and…"

"Ran," Nabiki said sternly, cutting her off. Ranma gave Nabiki a curious glance but after a few more seconds of Nabiki's steady warning look she remembered her current form and glanced down at herself. Crap! I'm a girl right now! He only knows boy-type Ranma! And I've soap-locked myself so I can't even show him to clear things up!

"You'll have to forgive Ran," Nabiki said, using the name Kodachi had come up with. "She's gotten so used to living vicariously through her brother's exploits that she sometimes forgets she wasn't actually there."

"Brother…?" Yuto said, then his eyes widened. "Ah, you mean Ranma!" He cocked his head and regarded Ranma skeptically. "... Are you adopted, maybe? I don't see the resemblance at all."

Ranma boggled a bit at that but then paused to consider. My hair is down and styled, I'm not dressed at all the same, I've got makeup on, I'm a lot shorter… maybe all the differences add up? "I'm… uh… his half-sister," Ranma said, electing to stick with a bit of the backstory she had woven for Kodachi's sake.

"And this is her date, my sister, Akane." Nabiki said, motion to the brunette who was regarding Yuto warily. "Akane, this is Yuto, someone Ranma and I met during our beach vacation."

"Yeah, you failed to mention," Akane said, giving her sister a scathing glare. "In fact, I'm starting to wonder what other little details you might have left out about that trip?"

"Aheh..." Nabiki looked a bit sheepish. "It... well, at the time..."

"Maybe we could take this back to my private booth?" Yuto suggested. "This sounds far more interesting than Asahi or Chiyako's usual prattle."

"They're here too?" Nabiki asked, following him as he turned and led them through the crowd towards rearmost corner of the club. The bouncer guarding it nodded to Yuto as he pulled back the rope and waved them through into the VIP area.

"Yes. They needed a designated driver for tonight," Yuto said off-handedly.

"Designated driver... You..." Nabiki said flatly.

Yuto shot her an annoyed look. "I am fully capable of driving."

"Yes, but..." Nabiki gestured as she struggled to find the right words, "... I would think that your 'hobby' would generally preclude..."

Yuto rolled his eyes at her as he led them past a much smaller, private dance floor to the corner booth in the very back. The area was dotted with tables, and had its own bar, with a much more subdued
atmosphere. "It is not a hobby. It is a way of life. I am a gourmet, good lady, not some common drunk! While I'm sure most of the unenlightened masses who come here are content with their sour grape juice or ungodly Russian potato squeezings or even the pale, blasphemous imitations of the One True Beverage, my liver is a temple and I will not defile it with these lesser offerings! My friends are taking advantage of my good nature and insistence on quality... as well as the fact that while I'm visiting my family I have to keep up appearances."

"What he means is that since they aren't selling some obscure microbrew from Yugoslavia, he won't touch the booze here." A familiar mop of sandy hair popped up into view as Asahi got up from the table and walked out to meet them. "Nabiki! What brings you to this wretched hive of scum and villainy?"

"Hives of scum and villainy make the best nightclubs?" Nabiki grinned and stepped forward, ignoring the outstretched hand to give him a hug. "If I had known you were in town I would have arranged to meet up! What're you guys doing here?"

"Moral support," Asahi said. "Me'n Chiyako tag along whenever Yuto has to go be sociable with his family."

"Hi!" Chiyako peeked out from behind Asahi, having snuck in behind him. "What, no hugs for me, Nabiki?"

Nabiki laughed and hugged her too. "All of the hugs for you, Chi!"

Ranma felt a little awkward, having to consciously remind herself that, as much as she might remember them, she had to play the part of being a stranger or it would bring up questions that she couldn't currently answer.

Nabiki stepped back and motioned to Ranma and Akane. "This is my sister, Akane and Ran…"

"... Her girlfriend," Akane finished, giving them a defiant look as she looped her arm through Ranma's.

Nabiki blinked at Akane's fierce tone then shrugged. "I was gonna say 'Ranma's sister', but... fair enough."

"The siblings are out!" Asahi said, unconcerned about the pairing. "I don't think Ranma said anything about a sister, though I think Nabiki mentioned hers once or twice." He held out a hand to them. "I'm Asahi, this is my fiancee Chiyako and you've already met our pet eccentric rich person, Yuto."

Yuto huffed but remained silent.

"Fiancée?" Nabiki raised an eyebrow at Chiyako, who responded by lifting her hand and showing off a ring with a stone that caught the light. "Chi, you devil! When did you propose to him?"

"Hold on, that's backwards..." Asahi protested.

"No, no, she's got you dead to rights, Asahi," Yuto said with a grin.

"I strongly hinted at the idea..." Chiyako said carefully.

"You took him ring shopping," Yuto said.

"Ring window shopping," Chiyako corrected him.
Asahi sighed, the sound of long suffering. "I think I need a drink."

"Excellent idea!" Yuto clapped him on the back. "Asahi! Find our friends something drinkable in this den of philistines and heathens!"

"Augh!" Asahi stumbled forward at the slap. "Why me?!"

Yuto folded his arms. Despite his tailored suit and perfectly groomed looks, his countenance was now much more that of the slightly manic Beer Otaku Ranma remembered. "Because everyone should be relied on for their expertise and your expertise runs to swill and palate-numbing fruity froo-froo nonsense. So get to it!"

"Look, Yuto, this stuff in the VIP lounge is all $30 glasses of wine and stuff. I'm sure if you just gave it a try…" Asahi said diplomatcally.

Yuto ignored him. "And get me a sasparilla! And make sure they put enough of those little umbrellas in it this time!"

"How many umbrellas do you need?"

"More than I got last time!"

Ranma noticed Akane's uncertain expression and patted her arm. "Don't worry, 'Kane. You'll like these guys."

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At some point it was decided it was time to walk Ryouga home so his mother didn't worry. A less inebriated soul might have pointed out that perhaps that a phone call could easily reassure her, and that perhaps Ryouga and the girls should stay put until they had slept off some of the many bottles of sake they had worked their way through.

Unfortunately, that less inebriated soul was passed out under a table.

Leaving Konatsu to sleep off the sake, the three of them stumbled off in the direction of Ryouga's house. Ryouga was the steadiest, his endurance allowing him to at least walk straight (Though his directional curse was still a problem). So Shampoo and Ukyou still needed to steer. However, as tispy as they were, this required they lean on him rather heavily. From the perspective of an outsider, Ryouga looked quite the playboy - with a couple of very pretty girls hanging off his arms and giggling occasionally.

"I coulda made it m'self…" Ryouga muttered, completely oblivious to the appearances of the situation. He was sulking, but mostly because he was tired and Ukyou had said it wasn't okay for him to just pitch his tent in the alleyway behind the restaurant to sleep. It also didn't help that he hadn't been able to find his tent.

"Maybe… inna week," Ukyou mumbled. "Yer boyfrien' would get mad."

"Ranma isn't my boyfriend!" Ryouga protested. "She's not my girlfriend, either!"

"I meant Nabiki," Ukyou said, giving him a leer.

"That… doesn't… I don't think that even makes sense, Ukyou…" Ryouga said, scowling as the perfectly obvious reasons that it didn't make sense were kinda of lost in the haze at the moment.
"You don't make sense!" Ukyou shot back.

Shampoo muttered something that might have been in Mandarin, but was more likely just incoherency.

They reached the door. Ukyou fumbled for her keys, trying to find the one that fit. "Jus… just hang on… just…"

"Ukyou…" Ryoga said blearily.

"Hang on… I got this…" Ukyou squinted at the lock, then went back to her key ring. "S'always the third one… usually always… 60% of the time every time it's th' third…"

"Ukyou…" Ryoga repeated.

"Shut up, shut up, I can't see th' keys with you makin' all that noise…" Ukyou lifted a key into the light, squinting at it.

"Ukyou, this's my house," Ryoga finally managed to get out.

"Huh?" Ukyou blinked and refocused on the door, wobbling a bit. "Oh, yeah…"

Ryouga reached for the door and gripped the handle. "I dun' even think it's locked…"

He didn't get to finish, as the door was pulled open from the inside. He toppled forward and Ukyou and Shampoo - who had been leaning on him heavily - toppled in on top of him, all landing in a heap on the floor.

Standing over them with a look of concern on her face was Ryoga's mother. "Ryo…?"

"Hey Mom… I jus… I jus… I wanted t'let you know I was gonna be late…" Ryoga said weakly before he passed out on the floor.

"Oh dear…" Mrs. Hibiki said as she looked over the three snoring teenagers.

"Mom was… well, I don't remember her, I was too young, but… I think mebbe she was part Irish? Y'know… because of the hair? Dad 'collected' me early on when he set out to go on his training journey with Ranma, so i don't know anything of my life before him. He didn't know what to do with a girl, so I guess he just raised me the same as Ranma. Not that he knew what to do with a boy, either. So we got dragged all across Japan and half of Asia for fourteen years on this nutso quest of his." 'Ran' recounted the tale of her origin as Yuto, Asahi and Chiyako listened, rapt.

"Oh, so you're trained in martial arts as well?" Asahi said, leaning forward. "As good as Ranma?"

"Better," Akane said with some pride.

Ranma shot her a confused look, unsure if that should wound her pride or not. "W-well… we kinda go back and forth, y'know?"

Nabiki was rather proud of the redhead. After Kodachi had extrapolated part of 'Ran's' backstory, Nabiki had thought it prudent to hash out the fictional Saotome's backstory so they could keep it consistent. She found it interesting how Ranma had added little details to it to flesh it out, like one about Gemma hating her hair color, or the stuffed rabbit that had been her only thing from home that she lost along the way. She had even (very timidly) suggested an unrequited crush on Ryoga in
middle school as a backstory for their fictional engagement. That last addition had surprised Nabiki and, so far, had been kept just between the two of them, given how volatile the whole situation around Ryoga remained.

"That's crazy, though! Fourteen years practically homeless?" Chiyako shivered. "Two children out in the world like that? So many terrible things could have happened!"

*Terrible things DID happen*, Nabiki thought darkly, remembering when they found the Neko-ken manual in Genma's pack. She had desperately wanted to put the horrible thing through a paper shredder, but she hadn't dared, just in case there might be something in it that could someday help cure Ranma's ailurophobia.

"Pops did a pretty good…" Ranma started, then paused. "... Well, he did *okay* at…" Ranma tried again, but quickly realized that was just as false. "... My parents are kinda *crazy,*" she said finally, hanging her head.

"At least you seem to have gotten out alive," Chiyako said then smiled at Akane. "And even found someone… though I'm guessing Ran's father wasn't too happy about that, judging from what I heard?"

"He was more hoping I'd go for his *son,*" Akane said with a smirk.

"Mom wants grandkids," Ranma added, a dark note entering her voice.

"We should go freshen our drinks," Chiyako said. "*And* I need to visit the little girl's room and I'd feel *much* better having a couple of martial artists along." She stood, Akane and Asahi following suit.

"Well, not sure Nabiki's training is far enough along to fend off bar creeps, but Akane can handle anything this place can throw at her," Ranma said distractedly.

"She means me and you, baka." Akane grabbed the redhead's arm and dragged her out of her seat.

"H-hey, wait… *ack!" Ranma flailed as she was given very little choice in the matter.

"And so it falls upon me again to be waiter," Asahi sighed. "What will you two have?"

Nabiki held up a hand. "Just a water for me. Two is enough. I'd rather keep a clear head." She smiled at him. "Bring something sweet back for Ran, though, alcoholic or not. She'll appreciate it."

"Nothing for me," Yuto muttered. "Even the *root beer* is a travesty here!"

"Gotta." Asahi nodded and trotted off toward the bar.

"Your sister and her girlfriend are adorable," Yuto said gruffly. "Almost gives me *cavities.*"

"Aren't they though?" Nabiki said with a smile. She leaned forward on the table, steepled her fingers and fixed her eyes on him. Her smile was still there, but it wasn't reaching her eyes anymore. "We should probably discuss your sister while we have the chance, though," she said.

"Caught that, did you?" Yuto sighed. He straightened, his eccentric demeanor dropping away as the stern, confident young man who had told off the thugs returned.

"Too many coincidences," Nabiki replied. "An eccentric rich boy who's wasting time at school to avoid dealing with his family, has a tinge of alcoholism, not only has a grandfather who
hires *Yakuza* thugs to keep tabs on him, but is on a *first name basis* with them and has a little sister who is the true heir apparent." She smirked. "*How is* Himura, by the way?"

"Like the rest of my family; as far out of my life as possible." Yuto said gruffly. "If you're looking for information about her…"

"So you know about the conflict between her and me," Nabiki cut him off.

Yuto sighed heavily. He scrubbed his hand down his face. "I know *of* it. Grandfather made damn sure of that. Mostly to make sure everyone knew to stay *out* of it. *Which I intend to do*. I have no *interest* in it. My family and I have an arrangement; I stay on my side of the crazy, they stay on theirs. I stay out of their business and drink to forget they exist and they pay me to do it far away from them so they can forget *I* exist."

"And yet here you are," Nabiki narrowed her eyes. "Stone cold sober, dressed up and out at the club with your Grandfather's boys."

"Yes, well, even the family drunk has to pay his respects now and again if he doesn't want his allowance to suddenly dry up," Yuto said. "Trust me, I don't plan on being here any longer than I have to be. I have a package from Holland waiting for me at home and a handful of classes to pretend to attend."

"And that's it?" Nabiki raised a skeptical eyebrow.

"You've *met* my sister," Yuto said. "They're *all* like that. There are only monsters and victims in my family. If you were smart, you'd let my little sister have whatever it is she's after and move to a different area code."

"What she *wants* is Ranma," Nabiki said coldly. "*As a servant.*"

Yuto raised an eyebrow, then looked away, his expression unreadable. "... My advice stands."

Asahi wound his way back to the table, ending the conversation. "Alright! A water for the lady. Chilled, of course." He set a glass down in front of Nabiki. "A beer for me… And a dry mouth and sense of pride for my friend Yuto." He sat back down at the table.

"Actually… I'm going to see what they have," Yuto stood.

"Wait, *what?!* I was just up!" Asahi said, moving to get up.

"Sit," Yuto barked. "I don't want anyone observing my shame, *least of all* a Sapporo Light drinker!" He stormed past, heading for the bar as Asahi watched him, agape.

"Well… either he's turning over a new leaf or visiting the family has him more stressed than I thought," Asahi said, pillowing his cheek on his fist.

"What do you know about Yuto's family, Asahi?" Nabiki asked carefully.

Asahi shrugged. "They own a big pharmaceutical company. Typical rich family bullshit." He took a pull at his beer. "He doesn't talk much about them and we don't ask. It's sort of been our unspoken rule and the reason he's stuck with us for so long."

"But you're here now for moral support?" Nabiki cocked her head.

"Well…" Asahi shrugged. "You don't make flunking out of college over and over and *drinking*
heavily a hobby when your home life is all that great. He bailed out me'n Chi when things got sticky with finances, he's been there to grunt supportively when whenever we get stressed out of our minds with classes and he was the loan that paid for the shiny rock that's on her finger. I figure that's close enough to family that we can stand to keep him company while he gets his yearly dose of whatever kind of suck his real family is."

"You ever met any of his family?" Nabiki asked.

Asahi raised an eyebrow. "Awful lot of questions. What's sparked your interest in our resident Beer Otaku?"

Nabiki briefly considered how much was safe to share. "Turns out his little sister goes to my school," Nabiki said finally.

"Ah," Asahi nodded understandingly. "Let me guess - 'Total bitch'?

Nabiki smirked, covering it with her drink. "Something like that."

"Eh, she's a teenager. More hormones than brains," he said off-handedly then blinked and gave Nabiki an apologetic look. "Ah… present company excluded, of course!"

She held up a hand. "No, I think you're probably right about 90% of my peers. Such as..." She gestured with her glass as Ranma, Akane and Chiyako approached from the bathrooms.

Asahi looked up. "Who, Chiyako? Yes, definitely a walking hormone-Aoouch!" he yelped as she swatted at him.

"I see my fiance has not been behaving, as usual." Chiyako sat down next to him and gave him a warning glare. "Where's Yuto?"

"Up getting a drink," Asahi said. "As in... alcohol."

Chiyako boggled at him for a moment. "That bad, huh? All right... I'll... uhh... I'll keep emergency services on speed dial."

"I know. Last year he held out until we got back to the hotel room where his stash was," Asahi said, looking concerned.

"Something wrong?" Ranma asked.

"Yuto doesn't deal with his family terribly well," Asahi said. "We've only come with him once before. That time he mostly kept it together until after he met with his grandfather."

"Which is tomorrow," Chiyako reminded him, touching his arm. "So don't let him get blotto until after."

"So his family sucks too, huh?" Ranma murmured thoughtfully, looking out towards the bar where the erstwhile Beer Otaku was compromising his vows.

"You'd be shocked how many people go to college just to get away from awful families," Chiyako said. "They're the ones who stay in the dorms over breaks or get really anxious when it's time to go home." She looked sad. "Sometimes I wish I was taking psychology instead of medicine so I could help more."

As if sensing the mood was dipping, Asahi moved to put an arm around her. "Now, now, we've
talked about this, sweetheart. I can't have you taking psychology and figuring out how much I don't deserve you." He kissed her cheek.

"Baka," she muttered affectionately and leaned into the kiss. "I don't need a psychology degree to know that."

"On that note, how are you and Ranma doing?" Asahi asked, changing the focus to Nabiki. "I… uhh… notice he's not here with you."

Ranma blushed and sank down in her seat a little.

Nabiki smirked. "Oh, he's here in spirit, trust me. Anything that goes on here you can bet his little sister will report back to him in detail." She gave Ranma a wink. "But tonight was my sister's date night. I'm just…" She searched for the right words dramatically. "... Ensuring that they're properly corrupted."

"Well, I did suspect that if anyone was responsible for getting the three of you in here…" Chiyako admitted sheepishly.

"And Ranma?" Asahi pressed, leaning forward. "Come on… I have money on this!"

Nabiki raised an eyebrow. "How much money?"

"Asahi had this ridiculous idea that Ranma was going to propose to you, which is what got us talking about it…" Chiyako started. "... I told him you were both obviously too young, and…"

"Last Monday," Nabiki replied with a smirk.

"I knew it!" Asahi crowed, pumping his fist in the air. He turned to Chiyaki, hand out. "Pay up!"

"Hold on!" Chiyako said. "You're high schoolers! You're teenagers! You're… you're… how did he afford a ring!?"

"Oh, uh…" Nabiki's eyes flicked over to Ranma and Akane, and she winced, realizing she hadn't considered her words carefully. Ranma was looking like she wanted to sink into her seat, and Akane was alternatively looking at her, and then at Nabiki, her eyes full of questions and a spark of the old, dangerous jealousy in them. Whoops!

"Well… uh… no ring yet…" Nabiki said, embarrassed. "It was kind of a promise…"

Chiyako grinned and folded her arms. "Hah! Doesn't count without a ring, Asahi! You pay up!"

Asahi scowled. "Oh come on! How materialistic can you get, Chi?"

Chiyako glared at him and poked him in the chest. "It's not 'materialism'! It's a demonstration of the lengths someone will go to sacrifice for and provide for their future wife!"

"You're studying to be a doctor. I don't think either of us has any illusions about me being the breadwinner in the family," Asahi protested

"It's symbolic," Chiyako growled, cradling her ring hand protectively.

"'Expensive symbology…" Asahi muttered.

"I don't think that's right!" Ranma piped up suddenly, causing everyone to look at her.
The redhead ducked her head again, suddenly flustered. She looked to Nabiki for support as she spoke. "I-I mean… the ring is just a ring. It's just meant to show that you're serious, but if you are serious about it, that's what really matters, right?" She twiddled her fingers nervously. "... Right?"

Asahi and Chiyako glanced at each other, then at Nabiki.

"Was it at least romantic?" Asahi asked.

Nabiki took a deep breath and shot Akane an apologetic look. "We… were on the roof at night. He goes up there to think a lot and I climbed up to join him. We looked at the stars for a while. We started talking a bit, about the future, the present… " She closed her eyes, smiling in spite of herself as she remembered. "I was feeling uncertain about the future and he picked up on it - Reassured me. The cracks were kind of showing that week and… and he made that okay. He called me brilliant… not just told me, but described how I was brilliant. Then… he talked about how the things we decided together were more important than the things other people decided for us or what seemed to be inevitable… and how sometimes you couldn't wait for the perfect moment to do something, you had to make the moment… And then he asked me to marry him. And I said 'yes'."

She opened her eyes and blinked a bit. Taking a deep breath, she felt the ghost of that moment and a little bit of blurriness in her vision at the memory. "S-sorry…" She picked up a napkin and dabbed at her eyes.

Chiyako stared at her for a moment, set her jaw, then reached into her purse, pulled out two 1,000 yen notes and handed them over to Asahi. "Okay, you win. That counts."

"Hah!" Asahi snatched the bills, grinning in triumph. "So… why was it I had to mortgage my soul to The Church of the Brew for a ring?"

"Because you make terrible decisions about your schooling, vacation plans and, more importantly, your choice of beverages," Yuto said, clapping him on the shoulder as he came up behind him. "And the karmic scales needed to be balanced with a sacrifice so that you could, for once in your miserable life of cut-rate hops and rushed fermentation, actually successfully make the right choice."

"That and you proposed in a coffee shop," Chiyako said dryly, closing her purse with a *snap*.

"We aren't allowed up on the dorm roof! Plus it's filthy up there!"

Nabiki was distracted enough by their antics that she didn't notice Akane suddenly stand up.

"Sorry… I just need some air," she said quickly. Is there a place I can duck outside for a few minutes?" Akane asked, her bangs covering her eyes.

"Back exit over there," Yuto pointed. "Tell the bouncer you're going out, he'll stamp your hand so he knows to let you back in when you knock. People go out there to smoke."

"Thanks." Before Nabiki could protest Akane turned and walked quickly towards the exit.

Nabiki started to get up but Ranma held up a hand, already out of her seat. "I'll go."

"This is on me, Ranm… Ran," Nabiki said, stumbling bit as she nearly got the name wrong.

"No, it's not," Ranma said evenly. "We gotta work this out between me and her." She flashed Nabiki a smile. "I'll be right back, I promise."
Akane stepped into the night air, the chill making her shiver. The door led out into an alley behind the club, though it was well lit and a bouncer at the door kept watch over the area. One couple was standing over by the wall sharing a cigarette and talking.

She walked a few feet away and took a breath, closed her eyes and tried to get her emotions under control. 

*It hurts,* she thought miserably, folding her arms tightly and gritting her teeth. *It hurts, it hurts, it HURTS.*

Part of her wanted to get mad, bury the pain under familiar anger again. But that just brought with it a surge of despair as she was reminded how she had ended up in this position. *Why did Nabiki have to say all that? Why didn't she tell me!? Why is she… why is she so much CLOSER to Ranma than me?!*

*You know why.*

She closed her eyes more tightly but she couldn't shut out the accusatory voice. 

*How many times were you on that roof with her? How many chances did you have to tell her? How many times would it only have taken you giving an INCH to be the one? How many times did you sabotage it?*

"Akane…?" a familiar voice sounded as Ranma poked her head out.

"Not yet." Akane winced. "I'm… I'm alright, Ranma, I just need a minute." *Please PLEASE just go away and let me get this under control!*

"'Kane, what's wrong?" Ranma trotted over to her. Akane didn't look, but she could hear Ranma's footsteps, feel the girl's presence behind her.

"Please just give me a few minutes," Akane said softly. She could feel the redhead reaching for her, feel her hesitate as she spoke.

"This is my fault," Ranma said softly.

Akane turned to look at her and shook her head miserably.

"Just say it, Akane," Ranma repeated softly. "It's my fault. Just… just tell me and get mad so… so I can make it up to you somehow and…"

"But it's not," Akane said softly. She could feel the tears running down her cheeks now.

"I… I shoulda…" Ranma started, but trailed off.

Akane knew why. "You should have what, Ranma? Not proposed to Nabiki?" She sniffed and shook her head again. "Don't you get it? That's absolutely what you should have done! Because… because you love her. This is my fault." She clenched her fists. "How many times were we on that roof together, Ranma? H-how many times did we look up at the stars?"

"A-Akane, don't…" Ranma started, but it was too late, the ball was rolling.

"How many times was it just one word I could have said differently? Just one thing I could have *done* differently? How many times could I have just *said something* and no one would have
had to know but us?" The tears were flowing hot and freely now. "I just had to say it! I just had to
say the words! 'I like you.' 'I love you'. *Something!* And it would have been me! *Just me!* But I kept
waiting! I kept putting it off until tomorrow! I-I kept…"

"I should have said it!" Ranma said. Tears were running down her cheeks too. "I-I should have… I
should have just… just been a *man* and said something!"

Akane almost laughed at that. "I didn't… I didn't love the *man*, Ranma…" She reached out and
cupped her cheek. "I loved you… what was hiding inside of him… under all that machismo and
posturing and insecurity. I *love* you. And… I kept waiting… for you to say the words you didn't
have… or tell me the things you didn't know… because I was too afraid to take a risk."

"I'm… I'm sorry…" Ranma repeated, her hand moving to brush Akane's.

Akane couldn't take anymore. She stepped forward and pulled the redhead close, crushing her in a
tight embrace, like she was afraid she was going to be taken away if she let go. "I feel like I'm going
crazy, Ranma," she said softly. "I keep thinking of all the ways I could have done it better. All the
different ways I could have handled it… I-I threw you away because I was too afraid… that you
might throw me away first. A-and now that I know all I had to do was… was say *something*… it's
killing me."

"I didn't… I don't..." Ranma shuddered. "I don't know what to do, 'Kane. How do I fix this?"

"You can't, Ranma," Akane said softly.

"Please…" Ranma pulled back, looking into Akane's eyes with desperation. Akane could see there
that old fire, that drive that had pushed Ranma to do incredible things for her, even kill a god.
"Please, whatever it is, I'll do it! Whatever it takes, I'll make it happen! Whatever I need to be…!"

She cupped her face. "No… Ranma, you can't fix this because it's *me*. I'm what's broken." She fell
silent for a moment, looking into those blue eyes as they gazed imploringly at her. There was still
the *innocence* there that had drawn Akane to her the day they'd first met. Something she had felt an
overwhelming need to be closer to and to *protect*. She brushed her thumb over Ranma's cheekbone,
tracing where she knew the faint line of freckles to be. *Why did I fight this so long? Even when it cost
me everything? Why am I still fighting it?*

"I wanted to be strong enough to protect you…" Akane said softly. "Even when I knew you didn't
need it. Even when I knew that you couldn't accept it. It was all I ever wanted. It still is."

Ranma reached up and cupped Akane's cheek in turn. Her eyes were clear now, shining with…
understanding? A slight smile crossed her lips. "Then protect me," she said softly. "You let me
protect you. Even when you didn't need it, right?"

Akane blinked. Something lurched in her at those words. She let her fingertips trail down from
Ranma's face to her shoulders as she looked intently into her eyes. Her mouth felt dry. "S-say that
again?"

Ranma looked confused a moment, cocked her head a bit, then understood. She wrapped her arms
around Akane's neck. She shivered slightly and started to speak, pausing a time or two, as though
she were struggling with something. "Protect me," she said at last, her voice barely more than a
whisper.

It wasn't something Ranma could have ever asked for before. The 'man amongst men' couldn't be
that vulnerable. He couldn't ask for help - could barely *tolerate* it. He had to be the strongest. He had
to be undefeatable. He had to be *invulnerable*. That was Ranma Saotome.

Ranma had been willing to give up his life for her. She could never want that. Ranma had been willing to give up his manhood for her. She didn't want that either. She wanted him to be *her* because it suited her and made her happy, not as a sacrifice.

Now Ranma was willing to let Akane be strong for her - to allow herself to be weak, even if only a little bit. Even when she didn't need to be.

Akane *needed* that.

Akane kissed her fiercely, drawing the redhead into an ever tighter embrace as she smothered Ranma's lips with her own in artless need. *This is mine*, Akane thought as Ranma responded, kissing back with equal passion. *Nabiki gave Ranma her Art. I'll give Ranma my Strength. I'll be strong sometimes so that she doesn't have to be.*

The two patrons smoking in the alley, as well as the bouncer, were clapping and cheering when they finally broke, leading them to both blush, though their eyes were only on each other.

*This part of Ranma is mine*, Akane thought again.

"Ranma, will you marry me?" Akane asked softly.

Ranma's eyes widened, then slowly filled with tears. "I-I thought I was supposed to ask that…" she sniffled.

Akane shook her head. "I'm not going to wait to say things anymore, Ranma. I'm not going to make someone else ask for what I want. I'm not… going to wait for the perfect moment. I'm going to *make* the moment, just like you did with Nabiki. You're her 'boy on the beach' she told me… Well you're my 'girl in the dojo'. Even if that's not what you were born as. Even if that's just part of who you are, I want that part for me."

Ranma's arms tightened around her and she giggled softly. "That was… that was the first time I ever wished I was a real girl…"

"Well?" Akane prompted, feeling a slight pang of nervousness.

Ranma laughed. "Yes. Yes! I'll marry you, Akane Tendo!"

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Tatsuyuki Kuno was many things, but *stupid* wasn't one of them. *Crazy*, maybe… but not *stupid*.

In his youth he had done many things; made many enemies. One didn't get to be where he was with the *Yakuza* without doing that even if his position had been because of family connections. He had *earned* his place despite that. At least, before his breakdown.

So he knew when to lay low and how.

The bar wasn't anything like what he'd normally frequent. It was dingy and dull; understated. It was the sort of place you'd *expect* to find someone laying low but the absolute *last* place you'd expect to find the bombastic Hawaiian-shirt wearing Principal of Furinkan High. He was seated at the bar, wearing a dark brown suit. He had traded in the large sunglasses for a pair of modest wire-framed
spectacles and his hair had been re-tied into a ponytail. He was virtually unrecognizable.

Sometimes being loudly and obviously crazy had its benefits - especially if you could turn it off when you needed to.

Tatsuyuki sipped his colorful drink, the one nod he was allowing himself to his usual demeanor. I'll let the girl tire herself out hunting for me tonight, maybe take a few days off. Perhaps I'll take Nobu up on that standing invite to stay at his country club. Then when she's forgotten why she's mad, I'll see about getting those damned pills away from Tatewaki. I'll probably need to move back into the manor… Maybe see about getting the boy to sign it back over to me.

He held up his nearly empty glass, swishing it as he caught the bartender's eye to signal for a refill. I'll show those ungrateful children of mine who is in charge and THEN I can get back to having a little fun at school. Hmph, Ranma thinks a TANK is over the top? Hehehehehehe… nnnh! No, don't start laughing yet. Keep the Kahuna under wraps. Play it straight. Gonna need a few more drinks.

Before the bartender could pour, a purple flash snapped out, shattering the glass in Tatsuyuki's hand.

He spun, an old reflex causing him to reach for the shoulder holster that hadn't been there for nearly a decade. His eyes widened as he saw a girl in a green leotard step out of the shadows, idly twirling a harmless-seeming ribbon.

"Hello father," Kodachi said softly, a wicked smile gracing her lips. "Tag… you're it."

000

Ranma was in that kind of pleasant haze that came from a combination of having successfully weathered an emotional crisis, having had a little too much to drink to celebrate and being with someone with whom she was comfortable being casually affectionate.

… Well, two someones. But Ranma Saotome rarely ever did things the normal or easy ways.

She leaned against Nabiki, an arm around her waist. Her other arm was around Akane as the three of them walked slowly home. She wasn't so drunk that she needed the support, but it was chilly and they were warm and soft in the right places and smelled nice; and right now it was just nice to be held.

"You're not passing out on us, are you Ranma?" Nabiki asked. Ranma felt long fingers thread through her hair, nails trailing pleasantly along her scalp.

"No… just enjoying this," Ranma replied. "It's kinda new to be able to be relaxed like this with other people."

"Just relaxed?" Akane asked playfully. "Are the two of us not doing anything for you? Is that what you're saying?"

In the past that comment would have thrown Ranma into a panic of denial and stammered apologies. But Ranma could hear the playfulness in her voice now. She tightened her arm around the brunette's waist and grinned at her. "Is that a challenge I hear, Akane Tendo? Need me to prove something to you?"

"Well it is my turn," Akane grinned back, bumping Ranma gently with her hip. "I think I've been very patient."
"Oh? So all that pounding me into the ground over the last year was just your pent up sexual frustration?" Ranma poked back.

"You have no idea, Ranma," Akane purred, leaning in against her more heavily. "... but you will."

Ranma started to feel some of that old nervousness returning, though somehow it was less an all-encompassing fear and more a… nervous anticipation. "W-well… there was what happened in the showers…" she said timidly, unsure if Nabiki even knew about that.

Akane waggled her eyebrows. "That was just a quickie, Ranma. That hardly counts. It barely took the edge off."

"Took the…" Ranma squeaked, suddenly feeling a lot more nervous as she wondered what she might possibly have unleashed in the youngest Tendo. Ranma herself remembered it as considerably more than just a quickie.

Nabiki remained oddly quiet for the duration.

They reached the Tendo Dojo and made their way quietly inside. It was late enough that everyone was probably asleep, and they had told both Kasumi and Soun to not wait up for them. Soun was still struggling with his joy over the prospect of the schools finally being joined and the future of his dojo being secured conflicting with the manner in which it was happening, so it was no surprise that he had turned in early. Kasumi was sometimes a night owl, but thankfully tonight she had turned in early as well. They quietly doffed their shoes and sneaked inside, avoiding the creaky floorboards as they crept up the stairs, giggling like children getting away with a prank.

They reached Akane's room and Akane opened the door carefully and stepped in. She tugged gently on Ranma's arm, grinning at her. Ranma didn't resist and got about halfway through the door before she realized Nabiki wasn't following.

She turned back, then her eyes widened as she realized the problem. They're sisters. This is probably really, really weird and awkward for them. I didn't think, I just expected… after Nabiki and Shampoo… "Nabiki, I…"

Nabiki shook her head. "It's okay, Ranma. This was always Akane's night. She was just nice enough to let me tag along. I think I can survive one night in my own bed without having to share." She smiled but Ranma was getting good enough at reading her to see the cracks.

Akane surprised them both by grabbing Nabiki's arm and tugging.

"Akane, what're you doing?" Nabiki asked, staring at her blankly.

"Just shut up and get in here," Akane said gruffly, looking away and blushing.

Ranma looked back and forth between them. "L-look, guys, we don't have to… I mean, it was a good night, I can just go to my room and…"

"You said we need to, Nabiki," Akane said. "We need to be around each other, as much as we can, as many ways as we can, so we can figure out… figure out where the lines are, right?" She bit her lower lip and looked down. "This… this is gonna come up again, over and over and over, and you know it is a-and… and we need to know…"

Nabiki looked away awkwardly as well. "I... " She took a breath. "You're right, but… this is your night, Akane. You shouldn't have to share it with your sister being awkward and uncomfortable. We can figure this out later…"
"When?" Akane demanded. "You know how our lives are. You said we needed to hash this out as early as possible. If... if it were Ukyou or even Shampoo here right now, we both know how this would go already. S-so... just get in here with me and Ranma and... and... we'll see where the lines really are, okay?"

Ranma looked from Akane to Nabiki and then back again. She felt the uneasy twisting in her gut of guilt and the overwhelming desire to help somehow. They're having to go through this because of me...

She reached out and hugged the pair of them tightly, earning squeaks of surprise from both.

"I'm sorry," Ranma said, closing her eyes tight. "I know you'd tell me it isn't my fault, but it is because it's because of me, and... and I don't know what this is like for you but I know all about awkward and uncomfortable." She hugged tighter. "You don't... you don't need to do this for me. Even if neither of you ever touched me again you've already both made me happier than I've ever been, and... and... Don't do this for me."

Nabiki and Akane stared at the redhead for a moment, then at each other. Slowly they both smiled and wrapped their arms around Ranma as well.

"Ranma, stop being an idiot," Akane said gently. "We aren't doing these things just for you, and it's not like as if we don't get anything out of it." She sighed heavily. "You're making it sound like we're making some noble sacrifice for your sake!"

"Aren't you?" Ranma asked, slightly muffled.

Nabiki shook her head. "Maybe at the start, when we all sat down to talk out this arrangement, it might have been something like that. But we did that, the sacrifice was made and everyone was happy with the deal. This?" She gave Ranma a sheepish smile. "Ranma, if I've learned anything over the last couple of weeks? We're all perverts. All of us. Even those of us in denial about it." She glanced at Akane and gave her a wink.

"Especially those of us in denial about it," Akane admitte, slightly subdued. "Right now this is just us... deciding how to figure out how far we're willing and able to go with this. We're not suffering, we're just..."

"... Testing boundaries," Nabiki finished. "And... thank you for reminding me about that part, Akane." She gave her sister a shy smile.

"... So... do you guys just wanna sleep instead?" Ranma asked, not having really followed the entirety of the conversation, but relieved that the awkwardness seemed to be bleeding off.

Akane and Nabiki shared another glance then smiled and nodded almost imperceptibly.

"Nope," Akane said, turning her gaze back to the redhead. She stepped back and guided the other two into her room.

"Wait... what do you mean...?" Ranma asked nervously. "What're we doing?"

"Testing boundaries," Nabiki replied as she pushed the door closed with her foot.

000

Welp. If there was EVER a chapter I was gonna eat shit on, it'd be this one.
For those of you reading the scene in question, throwing up your hands in the air and yelling out "What, just like that?!" It's not going to be 'Just like that', I promise.

It's probably would have been a lot easier if I had just left things are whatever unstated assumption the reader is comfortable with. But my Muse occasionally decides I must suffer and tackle such things and their consequences.

I am, referring, of course, to Yuto drinking inferior beer.

What did you THINK I was talking about?
Ryouga was waking up far too often with a splitting headache and no memories of how he had gotten where we was of late.

He blinked a few times to clear his vision and recognized the ceiling of his own room. At least I know WHERE I am this time.

He sat up slowly holding his head with one hand, utterly convinced that, if he didn't, it was going to fall off. The unbearable pain seemed to lessen slightly once he was upright. He looked around the room and saw a glass of water and a notecard with a white caplets on top of it.

He grabbed the pills and swallowed, chasing them with a sip of the water. The sip turned into a gulp and he'd finished the glass before he realized how thirsty he'd been. He wiped his mouth, feeling some of the awfulness washed away, picked up the note and read it.

Take these when you wake up and drink more water. It will help the hangover. The girls are in the guest room. Take a shower and, when you feel up to it, come downstairs so we can talk. Don't worry, you're not in trouble!

Mom.

(P.S. Those girls are very cute! When were you going to introduce me to them?)

Suddenly, jumping out of the window seemed like an excellent idea, save for the fact that Ryouga was fairly certain he'd need to find a building at least 50 stories tall, first. He rubbed his temples as his headache throbbed.

Shower, he decided, getting to his feet and trudging towards the door and reached out for the guideline he had strung to find his way to the bathroom.

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Shirokuro met him on the stairs as he came down. The shower and a fresh change of clothes had done wonders. His head felt mostly clear as he let his dog guide him to the living room.

His mother was sitting in an armchair while Shampoo and Ukyou occupied the couch. Ukyou looked a little rough but Shampoo appeared bright, bubbly and none the worse for wear.

"Ryo! You're up! I was worried I was going to have to send the girls up to fetch you!" Mrs. Hibiki said, beaming. "How are you feeling?"

"Better…" Ryouga rubbed the back of his head sheepishly. "Look, Mom, I'm sorry…"

She waved him off immediately. "Ryo, I did the same sorts of things at your age. Well…" she glanced at the girls and smiled knowingly. "... mostly."

Ryouga sighed. I need to head this off before it gets out of hand. "Mom, it's not what you think…"

"Oh no, you don't have to say a thing, Ryo. We've just been chatting and I understand that these girls were very concerned about your intentions towards Ranma, and had you over to talk about it. After which things got… I believe 'a little out of hand' was the phrase you used, Ukyou dear?" She smiled at the Okonomiyaki chef.
"Yes, but…" Ukyou started, realizing that her account of events had been misinterpreted.

"It certainly is reassuring to find out how popular my Ryo is!" she gushed. "I had worried… I mean… when I was his age, I struggled. Our… family condition makes maintaining friendships difficult. Though…" she cocked her head at him. "... don't you have any male friends, dear?"

"Yes, of course!" Ryoga said. "There's…" He trailed off as he realized the only one that came to mind was a girl as far as his mother was concerned and it would be nearly impossible to explain without Ranma actually present to demonstrate the curse. "... Ummm…"

"Thought Pi… Ryoga and Sword-Boy team up now and then?" Shampoo suggested helpfully.

"No, he tried to kill Ryoga last time I saw him," Ukyou said.

"Oh dear! What brought that on?" Mrs. Hibiki asked in a shocked tone, casting a worried look at her son.

"Oh he flipped his gourd when Ranma told him she and Ryoga were engaged," Ukyou said. "He sorta got a bit unstable after that."

Mrs. Hibiki's eyes went wide. "Engaged!?"

The sound of Ryoga's palm hitting his forehead was almost like a gunshot.

"It was a scam!" Ukyou said hurriedly, with a nervous laugh and an apologetic look for Ryoga. "Ranma just told Kuno that to get him to stop pestering her for dates!"

"And so he attacked Ryoga?" Mrs. Hibiki looked concerned. "And are you alright, Ryo? Did you tell the police?"

Ryoga waved her off tiredly. "It's fine, Mom. He and I are cool now. He was… uhh… he was kinda off his meds at the time. He's promised to keep up with them from now on."

"Oh… well… I'm glad to hear it's resolved. That's very understanding of you to give him a second chance, you know. Mental illness is a difficult thing to deal with," Mrs. Hibiki smiled at him. "I was also unaware that you and your 'rival' had that kind of relationship…"

"We don't!" Ryoga said quickly.

"They don't!" Ukyou and Shampoo said at the same moment, in suspicious synchronicity with him.

Mrs. Hibiki raised an eyebrow and looked over the three of them in turn before nodding slowly. "I see."

AAAAUGH! Ryoga could almost hear the clicks in his mother's mind as assumptions and misconceptions snapped into place.

"And the two of you heard about this 'engagement' and were concerned as well?" Mrs. Hibiki asked, pouring herself another cup of tea.

"Oh no, we know is fake story. Know since beginning," Shampoo said brightly. "It get out of hand at school, though."

"Oh? But why the talk then?" Mrs. Hibiki asked. "You obviously thought there was more to it, right?"
Ukyou elbowed Shampoo in the ribs hard. "What she means to say is we had our doubts, but after talking with Ryo… Ryouga alone, we cleared up the misunderstanding, and now we know there's nothing going on between him and Ranma."

"Ah, and finding out my son was unattached was cause for celebration, then," Mrs. Hibiki beamed.

"Yes-NO!" Ukyou yelped as she realized where that particular train of thought was going to jump its tracks. "I mean, I don't like Ryouga that way! He's like a brother to me!"

"I see."

"A younger brother!"

"Mmm-hmm."

"An annoying younger brother!"

"Of course."

Ukyou closed her eyes and clenched a fist. "Shampoo, tell her!"

"Shampoo not decide if she want to sleep with Ryouga or not," Shampoo replied nonchalantly. "So no can be sure of relationship yet."

Ukyou nearly fell off the couch. Ryouga did faceplant behind it.

"WHAT!?" Ryouga and Ukyou both demanded, red in the face.

"Shampoo not spend much time with Ryouga before this, so no decide. Is important thing to figure out, yes?" Shampoo said, blinking innocently. "Not mean Shampoo actually sleep with, just if would want to."

Ryouga pinched his nose closed. "W-why would you…?! Th-that's not…! H-how…?!"

Shampoo smirked then kissed him on the nose. "Is cute when stammer. Maybe Shampoo keep after all."

Ryouga's legs went out from under him as he collapsed behind the couch again.

"Oh my," Mrs. Hibiki said, blinking in surprise.

"COuLd YoU eXcUsE uS?" Ukyou asked, her voice cracking as she grabbed Shampoo by the collar. Not waiting for confirmation from Ryouga's Mother, she dragged Shampoo off the couch and around behind it, grabbed Ryouga by the back of the shirt, and hauled them both off into the kitchen.

"Shampoo, what in the HELL is wrong with you!?!" Ukyou growled. She dropped Ryouga unceremoniously on the floor and pinned Shampoo back against the wall. "Have you lost your mind?!"

"Oooh, Ukyou getting rough? Maybe wanted kiss too?" Shampoo asked, giving her a wink.

Ukyou blushed and released her. "Not here you jackass! Not in front of Ryouga's Mom!"

Ryouga pushed himself to his feet. "What's the big idea dragging me across the floor, Ukyou?!"

"Oh you are so lucky that's all I did!" Ukyou snarled at him. "What are you going to do to fix this,
"Me!? Why is this on me!? You're the one who told my Mom you were grilling me about a love rival!" Ryouga protested.

"We didn't..." Ukyou shouted back, then quickly modulated her tone to an angry hiss. "... We didn't say anything about a love rival! She wanted to know why we were out drinking together and I was kind of on the spot, okay? I figured the truth with a few omissions was the best policy!"

"Yeah? Well now she thinks the three of us are-!" Ryouga started.

"You and Shampoo," Ukyou corrected him. "I told her that you're like a brother to me!"

"Yeah, and she didn't buy it! She thinks you're just being tsundere!" Ryouga protested.

"I do not have a tsundere bone in my body and I'm certainly not tsundere towards you!" Ukyou growled. "Tell him, Shampoo!"

"Pig Boy and Spatula Girl so tsundere together, should have own anime," Shampoo replied, sounding bored.

"Shampoo!" Ukyou yelped at the betrayal.

Shampoo was leaning against the wall, her arms crossed. She rolled her eyes and sighed. "Both idiots. Mother concerned son find nice girl, latching onto any hint. Ryouga and Ukyou give lots of hints. Even if fix, probably go back to thinking Ryouga in love with Ranma."

"I am not in love with Ranma!" Ryouga protested.

"Yeah, even I don't buy that one anymore, sugar," Ukyou muttered. "Look, we'll just tell her Shampoo and I are dating Ranma and take all three of us off the table."

Shampoo raised an eyebrow. "Is common for three girls to date each other in Japan?"

Ukyou paused. "Uhh... well, no... Okay, so you're dating Ranma and I'm just the sister figure..."

"She already doesn't buy the 'older sister' routine. Look, we should just accept that she's gonna think what she's gonna think and wait until we've got everyone here with a kettle of hot water and a bucket. Then we can sort the whole mess out with her all at once when we've got our stories straight," Ryouga said in a rare moment of clarity. "She's been convinced that there's something going on between me and Ranma for a while now, and nothing..."

"Something is going on between you and Ranma!" Ukyou growled. "And I am not leaving misconceptions like this with another parent-figure! Before you know it we'll walk into a shotgun wedding or there will be some kind of secret 'Hibiki Family Recipe Marital Aid' slipped in our tea to help 'coax us along', or..."

"My Mom isn't like that!" Ryouga protested.

"I can't take your word for it! You're an idiot!" Ukyou shot back.

Shampoo waved her hand in front of her face, as if trying to waft away fumes. "Getting very tsundere in here..."

"Shut up!" both of them shouted at her.
Shampoo shook her head and wagged a finger at them, as if lecturing a pair of particularly slow children. "Is making too complicated. Just reassure mother Ryouga find girl - be taken care of. Keep her happy and not-worry until Ryouga get mess of life straightened out and find actual girlfriend."

"Yes, but how do we do that?" Ukyou said. "I'm sure as hell not gonna play the role! I've finally got my romantic life straightened out…"

"'Straight' probably not best term to use," Shampoo noted playfully.

"Hush! I've got my romantic life sorted out and I don't wanna risk screwing it up!" Ukyou said finally. "So find another girl to play the loving girlfriend and leave me out of it, okay?" She folded her arms and huffed angrily.

"Okay," Shampoo said, unperturbed. She walked over to Ryouga, put her arms around his neck and beamed at him. "Wo ai ni."

Ryouga froze stiff - his eyes widened and his pupils dilated in fear.

"Shampoo, what are you doing?" Ukyou asked, gaping.

"Is playing loving girlfriend," Shampoo said, smirking at her. "Should have good pet name…" She peered at Ryouga, who was still petrified and unmoving. "Bendan? No… Shagua!"

Ukyou pinched the bridge of her nose. "Shampoo, this is an incredibly bad idea…"

"Maybe is jealous, qinai de?" Shampoo winked at her.

Ukyou blushed at the term of endearment. 'Y-you can't just call me 'darling' and expect me to go along with whatever stupid plan you're hatching!'

Shampoo looked genuinely hurt at that. "Is not stupid plan! Shampoo trying to help! Care about Ukyou. Ryouga Ukyou's family, so help Ryouga. Do what Ukyou can't, make things easier," she pouted, releasing Ryouga and turning away, folding her arms and pouting.

Ryouga blinked and snapped out of his trance and his brain reset and rebooted into Cute Crying Girl Protection Mode upon seeing Shampoo looking so despondent… maybe even a few tears in her eyes? "Shampoo, I-I appreciate what you're offering to do, really!" Ryouga said earnestly.

Ukyou was caught similarly off guard. "Look… I'm sorry, sugar. You're right, I shouldn't be so judgemental. When you think about it, that's a really big favor you're offering to do for us…"

Shampoo sniffed softly. She gave them a sad smile. "Is okay. Understand hard to trust Shampoo after all she do in past."

"N-no! I trust you!" Ryouga said quickly, moving closer to her, though he was uncertain how to comfort her.

"Yeah, we both trust you, Shampoo," Ukyou nodded, getting caught up in the moment.

Shampoo gave them each hopeful looks. "Prove? Can Shampoo have hug?"

They looked at each other, then nodded again. They walked over and awkwardly hugged the amazon girl between them.

Shampoo sighed and closed her eyes, rested her head against Ryouga's chest and relaxed as Ukyou held her from behind. After a minute she starting making a soft thrumming sound, almost like
"Is... that better?" Ryoga asked nervously. Shampoo no longer being unhappy was causing reality to re-establish himself and, right now, reality consisted of him and Ukyou sandwiching a very attractive, buxom young lady - which was doing unfortunate things to his hormones.

"Shampoo?" Ukyou piped up as well. "Sugar?"

"Mmmmm... Siblings..." Shampoo murmured in a far away voice.

"Oh god damnit, Shampoo!" Ukyou roared.

Nabiki was deep in thought for most of the school day, mentally digesting the events of the previous night.

Akane had been right. Nabiki knew it was something they were going to have to explore and define at some point. To be fair, she was going to need to see where her comfort zone with Ukyou was as well, so it wasn't a unique problem. It would probably be a lot easier with Ukyou, with whom she didn't have any sort of pre-existing relationship, much less have grown up with her as a sibling.

Nabiki wasn't sure if it should disturb her or not how easy it had been to get past the whole 'squick' factor once they'd got going. Ranma was into it, obviously, and that helped them to focus on her enjoyment of the situation. But after a while, as they got more comfortable together, it had become more of a game and the mutual focus on Ranma had gradually drifted.

God, stop using euphemisms, Nabiki, she chided herself as she feigned paying attention to whatever gibberish the teacher was writing on the blackboard. You had sex with your little sister. You weren't coerced or tricked - you jumped into incest with both feet.

She sighed. They had spent some time the morning after just lying in bed together and talking about it while Ranma still slept. Ironically, Akane seemed to be handling it somewhat better, having freshly stepped out of the closet and still full of defiance for societal prejudices and norms in general. Nabiki, for all her supposed worldliness and open-mindedness, found herself wrestling with it a bit more.

It bothers me that it doesn't bother me like I thought it would - like I think it SHOULD, she decided finally. It certainly wasn't something that she ever would have considered if their circumstances weren't already so far outside the norms but she was fairly certain she could incorporate it into their relationship. And that disturbed her more than anything else.

Taboos and Social Conventions exist for a reason, I guess, she thought glumly. They're not always right or healthy or fair, but they keep the moral footings inside of them simple, safe and secure. Step outside them and everything starts getting crumbly, confusing and complicated. I guess there are consequences to thinking that you know better than countless generations of society as a whole.

One of those consequences was that bathing with her sister was now considerably more awkward. Breaking that particular taboo had stripped Nabiki of the mental filter that kept her from seeing her sister as a sexual being - and now that it was gone, even though Nabiki definitely preferred males, she was forced to admit that the drooling hentai hordes at Furinkan had a point where her sister was concerned; Akane was hot.

I wonder if this is like the problem Ryoga is having with Ranma? Nabiki thought, feeling a pang of sympathy for the Lost Boy. Different taboo but it's still all about being attracted to someone you shouldn't be. At least I'm alright with loving my sister, even if I'm still not entirely secure about
expressing it THIS WAY. Ryoga's going from hatred and resentment to… she remembered that warm, red-gold feeling from Ranma that had ever-so-briefly enfolded her, and how something very much like it had connected Ranma and Ryoga… I want to try the link again. I'm starting to see the benefit of having a second opinion on your emotions. Also, Ryoga deserves a hug. No wonder the poor boy has been melancholy lately!

She glanced over at Shampoo's desk and noticed that it was still empty. Where is Shampoo? She didn't meet us this morning, either. Weren't she and Ukyou going to take care of Ryoga? She sighed and hoped that everything was all right with her. Impulsively she pulled out her phone to check, even though she knew Shampoo didn't have a cell phone, and usually didn't bother with such modern contrivances as the telephone.

There were no messages or missed calls but her eyes moved to the cartoony cat face icon that had recently appeared on her phone. A hacker would be a big help but not enough to take the risks they're asking. She switched to her contacts and the three freshly added names: 'Asahi', 'Chiyako' and 'Yuto'.

Yuto might be a useful source of information or he could blow me out of the water by ratting me out to Himura. She pillowed her cheek on her fist and blew out a frustrated breath. I'd RATHER just let him be the eccentric Beer Otaku rather than part of a scheme. Why did Himura have to pick MY Ranma to mess with? I can't even have nice college friends without her screwing it up!

She thought of something else while she was there, though, and scrolled down to another name; 'Rin Ito'. She glanced up to make sure the teacher wasn't looking her way and sent Rin a quick text:

**Nabiki: How did things go with your Dad?**

Rin was quick to reply,

**Rin: Really good! He loved your idea! He's got a meeting with the school principal Monday. The school seemed really excited about the idea too!**

Nabiki sighed in relief. Something going right for a change!

**Nabiki: Good. Keep me posted. Did the vid Hiroshi and Daisuke got you of next week's opponents help?**

**Rin: Oh yes! (¬‿¬) Sayuri asked me to thank you. So... thank you Ms. Manager!**

**Nabiki: Manager, huh? (; －_－;) Just as long as I'm just managing you as a TEAM and not your love lives. I get enough of that at home. Speaking of which, how is Mousse?**

Nabiki could almost hear the resultant blush.

**Rin: Ms. Nabiki! We're just friends...**

Nabiki rolled her eyes. "You ruin your own credibility if you actually type the ellipsis, Rin."

**Nabiki: Well, keep me posted on that, too? Neriman Martial Artists need a lot of looking after. I'm trusting you to keep him out of trouble.**

**Rin: I'll do my best, Ms. Manager! <(¬‿¬)>**

Nabiki tucked away her phone, satisfied. **Rin should keep Mousse from wobbling too much and I'll see what I can do to help Ryouga - so barring some outside challenger suddenly appearing, or a**
new flock of fiancées, that should keep the chaos manageable enough to focus on upending
Himura. Nabiki sighed, feeling like she was finally getting on top of a problem where she had been
playing catch up since the beginning.

So why did she have a sudden, formless feeling of dread in the pit of her stomach?

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When Ranma and Nabiki knocked at the door, it was a very pale and tired-looking Ryouga who met
them at the door.

"Ryo? You look like hell man! What happened?" Ranma asked, peering at him with concern.

Ryouga sighed. "Long night." He muttered. " Longer day."

"Ryo!" His mother called out. "Who is it?"

"It's Ranma and Nabiki, Mom. We've got an appointment at the hospital. You know, the
neurologist?" Ryouga replied.

"Oh, that's right! It completely slipped my mind!" There was the sound of footsteps, and Mrs. Hibiki
poked her head out next to Ryouga. "Hello girls!"

"Hi Mrs. Hibiki." Nabiki said with a smile. "Sorry we can't stay for tea today."

"That's okay, girls. We'll catch up next time. I've gotten behind on my housework anyway. I wasted
the whole day chatting with Ryo's girls."

Ranma and Nabiki blinked.

"Ryo's… Girls," Nabiki said carefully.

Ranma just glared at him.

Ryouga slumped in defeat.

"Oh, yes! They're classmates of yours, I think? Ukyou and Shampoo. I see Shampoo with you in the
mornings. And… does Ukyou have a brother? I thought I saw a boy who looked like her with you.
Anyway, I'm just teasing poor Ryo." She patted his shoulder. "They all dragged themselves here late
last night and stayed over. I'm sure Ryo will tell you all about it."

Ranma was doing a fairly good impression of Akane's best death glower now.

Nabiki raised an eyebrow. "I'm sure he will."

Ms. Hibiki turned him to look at her. "I'll see you when you get in. Give me a call if you get lost,
okay Ryouga dear?"

He sighed heavily and nodded.

Mrs. Hibiki chuckled. "Oh don't look so hangdog! Just remember what we talked about and you'll be
fine."

"Yes, Mom," Ryouga said in a defeated voice. He turned and trudged out the door, walking silently
past Nabiki and Ranma. Ranma was staring daggers at his back now.
They followed after him and quickly flanked him to nudge him back on course. Nobody said anything until they rounded the corner and were out of sight and earshot of the house.

"Well?" Ranma asked impatiently, glaring at him. "Are you gonna tell me what's going on, or do I need to hurt you first?"

"Isn't that one of Akane's lines, Ranma?" Nabiki asked playfully, more amused than concerned by what was shaping up.

Ryouga took a deep breath. "It's not what you think. And it's not what my Mom thinks, but she jumped to all kinds of wrong conclusions and I can't convince her otherwise." He rubbed a hand over his face.

"Start at the beginning," Nabiki suggested.

"Yesterday Ukyou and Shampoo dragged me off to Ucchan's. They did some kind of… interrogation, I guess? They were trying to disguise their voices, bright light in the face and everything. They wanted to know what my intentions were towards Ranma."

"I do hope you didn't tell them the truth, Ryo. They don't handle competition well," Nabiki said casually.

Ranma nearly tripped. "Nabiki!"

Ryouga just groaned. "Yeah, yeah, make jokes. If having those two have the wrong idea was the worst of this, I would be laughing. So, I hashed things out with them…"

"Figured out the sleeping arrangements? Ranma likes to be in the middle." Nabiki cut in with a smirk.

"Nabiki, stop helping!" Ranma growled.

Ryouga winced. "I cleared up the misunderstanding with them so they know I'm not any kind of competition. But it was kinda rough getting there, so we decided to have a couple of drinks."

"You'd think Ukyou would remember how much trouble sake gets her into," Nabiki said. Then she smirked "Or maybe she enjoys the trouble."

Ryouga gave her a confused look, then shrugged. "Well… We kinda had too much. I probably should have just crashed in the storeroom or something but they insisted on walking me home. By some miracle we actually made it, but…"

"... but you came home drunk with a pretty girl on each arm," Ranma finished. Her angry expression had softened into one of recognition.

"And your Mom saw," Nabiki added, understanding.

Ryouga laughed bitterly. "It gets even better, though! We all passed out, so she took care of us. By the time I had woken up, Shampoo and Ukyou had already blabbed all about how they had grilled me about whether I was interested in Ranma, trying to convince my Mom that I wasn't…"

"... Without realizing that their enthusiastic tactics would imply to the uneducated outsider that they are interested in you," Nabiki finished for him.

"And then they made it worse, didn't they?" Ranma asked. "It always gets worse after that part."
"Well, Ukyou wanted to try and convince my Mom that she's only interested in me as a sister, but Mom wasn't buying it, so Shampoo volunteered to pretend to be my girlfriend to divert her from possibly doing something stupid like arranging an *omiai* with Ukyou's Dad or something."

"And you *went along* with that?!!" Nabiki asked, incredulous.

"Of course he did," Ranma muttered. "Because Shampoo did that cute little pouty-lip thing she does, and the big pleading eyes, and then you're tripping over yourself to do whatever she asks because she's *adorable*!"

Ryouga nodded miserably. "I'm not any good at plans," he added, "My only idea was to just leave it alone and not worry about it."

Nabiki blinked. "Well… yes, that was the right play. You should have done that."

Ranma and Ryouga both stopped and stared at her.

Nabiki cocked her head at both of them. "You two *have* realized by now that most misconceptions work themselves out in the end as long as you just act consistently, right?"

They both blinked owlishly at her.

"You haven't noticed that *everything* you do to try and 'fix' these problems just makes them worse?" Nabiki demanded, growing concerned.

More blank stares.

"You *do* know that sometimes *doing nothing* is the best course of action - especially when you don't have enough information to know what the consequences of your actions will be?" Nabiki put her hands on her hips and glared at the two of them.

They both looked sheepish.

"Now we do?" Ranma said timidly.

Nabiki threw her hands up in the air. "Aaargh! No wonder your lives are such chaotic messes! You never leave well enough alone!"

Ryouga sighed. "Sorry about this…"

Nabiki blinked at him, momentarily thrown off by the familiar phrase and tone.

Ranma took his arm and started steering him in a different direction.

"R-ranma…?" Ryouga said, confused.

"Ranma, the hospital is *this* way," Nabiki jogged to catch up.

"I know, but we've got time," Ranma said, eyes forward as she walked purposefully. "And that bad day Ryo just described? I've had that bad day. And whenever I have *that* bad day, I need ice cream. So I'm taking Ryo for ice cream."

Nabiki raised an eyebrow, though she noticed a light blush on Ryouga's cheeks. Her eyes flicked down to the arm Ranma was holding firmly. *Close contact. They're linked right now and Ryouga's picking up on something through it. THAT'S what keeps driving this mess; Ranma can't hide her feelings from Ryouga as well as she can hide them from herself. It would make things a LOT easier*
if we could just spread that insight around a little.

"As long as you're buying, Ranma," Nabiki shrugged, acting nonchalant.

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"So she lectured you?" Ranma asked, spoon poised over her ridiculously colorful ice cream concoction. "About being a Casanova?"

Ryouga sulked, chewing on the straw from his milkshake. "She wanted to make sure I didn't lead the girls on, and made my intentions clear, and how I could unintentionally really hurt someone if I wasn't careful."

"Well, that is true, Ryo," Nabiki said thoughtfully, twirling her spoon. She was seated next to him, working on a cheesecake sundae.

Ryouga gave her a sideways look. "I am amazed you can say that with a straight face," he muttered darkly.

She smirked and leaned against him. "Who said I was leading you on, Ryo Baby?" she purred.

"Nabiki, don't tease him," Ranma said impatiently, then paused as an odd expression crossed her face. "When did I become the one who says that?"

"Since you took over Akane's job of being the one leading poor Ryo on?" Nabiki commented dryly.

"She's not leading me on," Ryouga growled irritably.

"It's adorable when you two get protective of each other," Nabiki chuckled. "You don't need to bite my head off, I'm on your side." She leaned forward, pointing her spoon at Ranma. "Which is why I think we should show Dr Tofu how you let me in on the Link before."

Ranma gave her a skeptical look. "... Whyyyyyyyyyyy?"

"Because the more we know about the mechanics of how this works, the faster we get a cure, right?" Nabiki said matter-of-factly.

"You just want to get into our heads again," Ryouga muttered.

"Yes!" Nabiki said brightly, then at the dark looks sighed. "Okay, fine. full disclosure. Do you have any idea how hard it is gonna be to hold this relationship together in the long run?" She stabbed her sundae with her spoon, scooped up a bite and popped it into her mouth, swallowing it before she continued. "Right now... all the forces around us... with the exception of Ranma's parents... are actually pushing us all together. Amazingly Cologne is on board and so are Daddy and Kasumi. We've even defused the Kunos. That's not going to last forever."

"Yeah... we're kind of overdue for some kind of major crisis," Ranma said glumly.

"Even without it, we've nearly wobbled this little ship to pieces a couple of times. "Ranma, you probably don't realize this, but Akane and I just crested a major hurdle last night, and it could have gone bad really easily. You've gone over more than I can count and you've stumbled on a few, and I know Ukyou and Shampoo are having to deal with things as well. This all requires a lot of rapid shifts in perspective and a lot of understanding and patience - which is inevitably going to run out."

Ranma blinked. "Are you saying it isn't going to work?"

Nabiki shook her head. "No… No, honestly I couldn't imagine this working with any other group, but we all seem to be just the right kind of crazy to fit together. But… we'll still need every edge we can get to keep it up. We're not seamless and we're never going to be." She leaned across the table towards her. "Imagine… if we were all linked?"

Ranma's eyes widened. "That's… a lot of people in my head…"

"It wouldn't be all the time, just when we're in physical contact, right? And if you don't 'listen' it's just background noise? You and Ryouga seem to manage okay," Nabiki said quickly. "But… it would be another 'sense' to help us to defuse problems before they start and to head off misunderstandings. If any two of us get mad at each other, we just go sit quietly together and hold hands until we understand each other's feelings. And if we want to be alone with our own thoughts, we just need to be alone. It's not like you and Ryouga are constantly reading each other's minds."

Ranma frowned. "Speaking of which… What about Ryouga? Assuming the link works the way we think it would with that many people, he'd be stuck with it too." She glanced at Ryouga and something like regret flickered across her features. "I mean, choosing an Anchor is supposed to be a major deal for his family, something he was hoping to share with the girl he marries someday. It's already screwed up now because he accidentally picked me, and now you want him to be stuck with four more girls who aren't ever gonna be more'n friends with him? I ain't putting him through that!"

Ryouga looked surprised at the vehemence of Ranma's last sentence. He blushed and focused his gaze on his milkshake. "It's… not that big a deal, Ranma. You aren't the cause of my romantic problems…"

Nabiki considered. She glanced at Ryouga, then at Ranma. Ranma has a point. I wonder about Ryouga's, though. If Ranma has been his Anchor since middle school, I wonder how that's influenced him? The link pulls them both together, whether they acknowledge it or not. I wonder… "Well, there's no reason if we figure out how to make new links that Ryouga can't make one with someone new."

Rouya looked surprised at the vehemence of Ranma's last sentence. He blushed and focused his gaze on his milkshake. "It's… not that big a deal, Ranma. You aren't the cause of my romantic problems…"

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Ranma looked thoughtful. "I… guess that's true. But…"

"... And we can probably find a way to break the link between you and Ryouga." Nabiki finished, watching them both carefully for their reactions.

Ranma and Ryouga both froze.

"H-hold on…!" Ranma said nervously. "Ryouga's Mom said that it's really really bad for a Hibiki to lose their Anchor…!"

"Interesting," Nabiki thought. "This would be presuming we cure the direction curse first," Nabiki added, raising an eyebrow.

"Even so…!" Ranma huffed, busying herself with her ice cream suddenly. "I don't think it would be a good idea to monkey with the original link like that. It could make everything fall apart, make Ryo relapse…" She stuffed a laden spoon in her mouth. ".. Can't we jutht leave it ath ith?"

Ryouga was twisting the straw wrapper, studying his hands. Nabiki could see the muscles in his jaw flexing as he mulled something over.

"I'm alright with you using the Link if it helps you," Ryouga said finally.
"Ryouga?" Ranma nearly choked on her mouthful. She swallowed, then thumped her chest to try and get the chunks of brownie, nuts and whatever else was in her parade float of a sundae down. "You can't be serious...!"

"I'm just here to cure the family curse so my Mom can live a normal life," Ryouga said gruffly. "If I can do that, I won't need an Anchor anymore, or the Link. Having this connection between us is just messing up your life, Ranma, and if we can cut it and still save my Mom, then..."

"No," Ranma said sharply, her eyes flashing.

Nabiki let the tension hang in the air for a moment, curious if anything else would be said. Finally she sighed and nonchalantly scooped up more of her ice cream. "I agree with Ranma on this, to be honest." She popped the spoon in her mouth.

"What?! But you said..." Ryouga gaped at her.

Nabiki chewed slowly and kept her eyes closed, her expression one of schooled indifference. "I brought it up as a possibility, yes... and Ranma made a good point about the potential downside, so I'm revising my position." She opened one eye, fixing Ryouga with it. "Which means we're into Plan B. Which is 'Find a way to explain all of this to the other fiancees so they don't kill us.'"

Ryouga winced and closed his eyes. "I'm sorry..."

"Don't be. This predates everything but Ukyou's claim, after all," Nabiki said in a businesslike manner. "We just need to be careful how we tell them about it, how we explain why we didn't tell them sooner and how we reassure them that this doesn't threaten their relationships with Ranma."

Ryouga and Ranma stared at her.

"This isn't an engagement, Nabiki," Ranma hissed, a light blush on her cheeks. Nabiki noticed her steal a quick furtive glance at Ryouga. Nabiki could see out of the corner of her eye the Lost Boy was blushing too.

*Oh this would be SO much easier if you two would just KISS ALREADY!* Nabiki thought grumpily. "It's a deep and permanent emotional bond between you that will, as I understand it, last your entire lives. If we assume nothing else changes from how it is now, Ryouga is going to be constantly finding his way back to you, Ranma, so he is going to be a fixture in your life. And by extension he will be a fixture in our lives. You might as well be married."

"Nabiki, don't joke about that," Ranma said quickly.

"I'm sure Kodachi would be overjoyed to help plan 'Ran's' wedding..." Nabiki continued with a smirk.

"Now you're gonna give me nightmares!"

Nabiki giggled. "You'd look cute in a wedding dress, though!"

Ranma flushed and pouted as Nabiki expected, muttering something prideful about how that was only natural, but it was Ryouga's reaction that interested her. In the corner of her eye she saw him stiffen, eyes going wide and unfocused as though he had remembered something.

*Well! Did I pick out an image from a daydream, Ryo?* Nabiki raised an eyebrow but left it alone for the moment. *This is getting ridiculous. I need to get them drunk together or something... This repression is going to give one or both of them a coronary.*
"Anyway, we should get going," Nabiki scooped up the last spoonful of her dessert. "Don't want to keep the doctors waiting!"

It seemed in the intervening week since the last appointment, Dr. Hirano and Dr. Tofu had been pouring over a bizarre mix of MRI scans, medical charts and dusty old scrolls and martial arts techniques. Dr. Hirano's desk was piled high with manilla folders and ancient texts in equal measure.

"I can't stress enough how incredibly important your contribution to this effort has become," Dr. Hirano gushed as he escorted them to the MRI room. "What you've shown me has remarkable potential but we're still very much in the proving stages. Ono and I have only just begun to codify and rationalize some of the existing knowledge about ki pathways and translate that into a set of assumptions we can accurately test under scientific rigor. The live data the two of you have been providing is… well, priceless."

"Priceless, you say," Nabiki perked up. Ranma could almost hear the *cha-CHING* of the cash register in her mind.

"Yes, absolutely," Dr. Hirano continued, not noticing. "Of course, we have a considerable amount of skepticism to overcome before we have any hope of securing research funding."

"Well, we should get to that!" Nabiki started walking faster, spurring them all on to keep up.

"Ummm… yes… what is your relation to Ms. Saotome and Mr. Hibiki again, Ms…?" Dr. Hirano asked uncertainly.

"Tendo. Nabiki Tendo," Nabiki said, smiling brightly at him. "I'm their accountant and relationship counsellor."

There was a twin crash behind them as both Ranma and Ryouga missed their next steps at the same time and pitched face first onto the floor.

"Are you two alright?" Dr Hirano asked, concerned. "I've heard that there are some problems with loose floor tiles. I'll point out this section to maintenance right away, I'm very sorry!" He knelt and offered them each a hand up.

"Yes, right. Floor tiles," Ranma said tightly. "Oh, Nabiki, could we have a moment in private?" She got to her feet, grabbed Ryouga's arm with one hand, Nabiki's arm with the other and dragged them both around the corner.

"Relationship counselor!?" Ranma hissed, glaring daggers at the middle Tendo. "Are you trying to make this worse?!

"I love you," Nabiki said and quickly kissed her on the nose, giving her an impish smile to defuse her ire. "Your cover story is that you and Ryouga are engaged, right? Quick question… did you remember to explain the cover story to Dr. Tofu?"

"I…" Ranma's expression slowly morphed into one of horror. "Oh no…"

"Aaaaand Dr. Hirano didn't mention it, so either Dr. Tofu has magically developed clairvoyance and knows that it's all a ruse despite you two having developed a deep emotional bond and getting all quiet and cuddly when you're together…"

"We are not cuddly!" Ryouga protested.
"... You're still holding onto each other," Nabiki noted dryly.

Ranma glanced down, realized she was still holding Ryouga's arm and released it as if it had burned her.

"As I was saying, either Dr. Tofu has decided to ignore the mountains of evidence of a relationship which includes you two blatantly claiming to be in one and has also elected to play along and keep his new best buddy Dr. Hirano in the dark, or… It's officially already worse." Nabiki jabbed a thumb at her chest. "So… relationship counselor."

"She's right…" Ranma sighed, feeling the Cloud of Impending Doom settle over her head. "We forgot to explain the fiancee thing to him and Doc Tofu's been looking at me kinda weird the last few times I saw him."

"But… there's no way he'd really believe you and I are…" Ryouga said, laughing nervously. "I mean…. There's just no way…!"

"I dunno. Dr. Tofu is pretty perceptive," Nabiki said.

"That's right!" Ranma smacked her fist into her palm. "Doc Tofu had me'n Akane pegged from the start! He's good at seeing when people like each other, even if they don't see it themselves! So… we're in the clear!"

Nabiki blinked, winced, then rubbed her temples as if in pain. She walked over and took Ranma by the shoulders and gave the redhead a sad, affectionate smile. "Ranma dear? I love you more than life itself, but… you are so dense."

"Ummm… terribly sorry to interrupt, but… are you maybe ready to get started?" Dr. Hirano called from around the corner.

They resumed their walk to the MRI room, slightly subdued. Dr. Tofu was already there and looking excited. He was seated in the MRI booth, comparing a picture on the screen with one of his dusty old scrolls.

"Ranma! Ryouga! Good to see you!" Tofu beamed, stood up and walked out to greet them. "And… Nabiki Tendo! What brings you out today?"

Nabiki smirked. "We've figured out a new trick, Doc. We figured out how to share the link."

"Pardon?" Tofu said, eyes going wide.

"It only lasted for about a minute," Ranma said. "But we figured a way to push the link through Nabiki's aura."

"We could show you," Nabiki said, beaming at the excuse to try the link again.

"Baselines," Dr. Hirano said quickly. "We need to see if anything has changed with Ryouga and get baselines for Ranma and Ms. Tendo here before we make any more changes." He turned to them. "If you could hold off on your… ah 'demonstration' until we can take a scan of each of you, that would be greatly appreciated."

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Getting three MRI scans done was tedious, especially given Dr. Hirano's insistence on full-body scans, but eventually it was finally done.
"I apologize for the tedium, but we need to begin our observations with at least a modicum of scientific rigor," Dr. Hirano said. "Now… if you could demonstrate this effect, we can observe it, then take another set of scans afterwards to see how things have changed."

Nabiki nodded. She gave Ranma and Ryouga a grin each, and then extended her hand.

"I think you're a little too into this, Nabiki," Ranma whispered as she put her hand on top of Nabiki's.

"Being telepathic has always been a secret fantasy of mine," Nabiki murmured back. "This is almost as good, and it's real."

"Hopefully it'll even work this time," Ryouga said as he cupped her hand and frowned. "You've been working out with Cologne since then."

"What difference is a few days going to make?" Nabiki asked.

They all closed their eyes. Ranma focused and felt the resistance of Nabiki's ki but, unlike before, she was unable to push through it to connect to Ryouga's.

"Ow…" Nabiki winced.

"Sorry!" Ranma said sheepishly, cracking open an eye.

"Yeah… I thought so," Ryouga said sadly. "Cologne's training is real effective."

"No… that's not fair…" Nabiki whimpered, opening her eyes and looking at her hand despondently. "I didn't even want to train!"

Dr. Tofu and Dr. Hirano glanced at one another. Tofu looked thoughtful for a moment and brightened. "I think I might have a solution." He went to his old fashioned physician's bag, opened it, rooted around and fished out a small bottle. He then shook out a small pill into his hand, a capsule filled with what looked like ground up herbs.

"What's that?" Dr. Hirano asked, slightly concerned.

"It's an herbal medicine used to suppress a patient's ki in order to facilitate ki healing," Dr. Tofu replied. "It allows the healer's ki to invade to a degree so it might help with what you're trying to do." He hesitated. "I do have to warn you that it's also a fairly potent sedative."

"Is it dangerous at all?" Dr. Hirano asked, slightly concerned.

"Only in large doses," Dr. Tofu replied. "Overly suppressing the ki can lead to the heart stopping, organ failure… it can cause basic life functions to cease. But that's true of any medication, yes?"

"I suppose," Dr. Hirano said, sounding unsure.

"Don't worry my friend, I've been Nabiki's family doctor for ages. I am confident of the dosage." Dr. Tofu handed Nabiki the pill. "Nabiki, you're going to feel drowsy and a little cold." He got a small bottle of water from his bag and handed it to her as well. "That's normal."

Nabiki nodded. She popped the pill into her mouth, opened the bottle of water, and took a swig. "So… how soon will it take effect?"

Tofu checked the clock on the wall. "About half an hour. Go sit down over there. Dr. Hirano and I will process your baselines while we wait."
Nabiki sighed and walked over to the set of chairs against the wall, sat down and crossed her arms. Ranma sat on her right, concerned.

"You okay, Nabs?" Ranma asked.

Nabiki shook her head. "I was hoping it would get easier - that'd we'd be more 'in sync' or something." She pulled her legs up onto the chair with her, hugging her knees to her chest. "I don't like the idea of having to rely on pills to make this work."

"It… doesn't work that way, Nabiki," Ryouga said gently, sitting down on her left.

"It works that way for you," Nabiki retorted. "When you made the link back in Middle School, neither of you even realized that you did it."

"Yeah, but it was just a tether then," Ryouga explained. "A way to find… well, Ranma. It wasn't until…" he looked down, looking ashamed. "... It wasn't until I overloaded it with ki that it got this way."

"Hey, I seem to remember being there too!" Ranma said crossly.

"Yeah, but you were only there…" Ryouga started.

"... Because I wanted to be. I knew what I was doing," Ranma said fiercely.

Nabiki hugged her knees tighter and shivered. "You two are so cute," she said softly with a smile.

"We are not… Nabiki, you're shivering…" Ranma said, noticing halfway through the sentence. She reached out and grabbed Nabiki's hand. "Holy crap your hands are like ice!"

"I guess the pill works faster than advertised," Nabiki said, her voice sounding small. "I feel so tired…"

Ranma started rubbing Nabiki's hand between hers. "Hey, Ryouga, warm up her other hand? I think the Doc overestimated the dosage."

Ryouga nodded and took Nabiki's other hand, rubbing it between his. Ranma started blowing on Nabiki's hand, cupped between hers.

"You're being silly, you two," Nabiki said. "It's just the pill, it's not like…"

She stopped talking just as Ranma felt it. Like a pull, drawing warmth from her hands and arms, through Nabiki's hand like water pouring into a container. At the same time she heard Ryouga gasp and suddenly the Link flared to life. Except it wasn't just Ryouga - Nabiki was there too, and far more intensely than the last time.

"Ooooohh… I feel..." Nabiki murmured, then her eyes opened wide. She took a deep breath and turned her head to look at Ranma as she uncurled. "I feel that! That's you!" She grabbed hold of Ranma's hand tightly then turned to look at Ryouga, gripping his hand tightly as well. "It's working!"

Ranma nodded dumbly. She closed her eyes, feeling a bit of a headrush. "Woo… feels like my ki's going down a drain."

"Nabiki's is almost totally suppressed, so I think ours is filling the void," Ryouga said, his brow furrowing as he tried to focus on analyzing what was happening and not the pink, sparkly, happy emotions that Nabiki was suddenly radiating.
Nabiki had uncurled and stopped shivering. "That's so much better..." she purred, closing her eyes and leaning back in her chair. "It's like a warm bath... Mnnnh... little bit of cold... awww, were you worried about me?" She glanced at Ryouga.

"Worried in general, yeah..." Ryouga said. "Are you feeling okay?"

"Mnnn... Kinda floaty... Don't you dare let go..." Nabiki murmured.

"Doc?" Ranma called out, a little concerned. "Ummm... something happened..."

Dr. Tofu poked his head out of the MRI booth. "Yes, Ranma? It hasn't been half an hour yet."

"I know, but..." She held up her hand, still holding Nabiki's. "We, uhh... we were trying to warm her hands and... Well..."

"The Link?" Tofu immediately popped out of the booth and came over. "Stand up. Keep holding hands, let me get at your backs so I can see what's going on."

Dr. Hirano stepped out as well, curious. "Can you tell what's happening?"

The three of them stood, though Ryouga and Ranma found they needed to scoot in close to Nabiki and prop her up; she was a little unsteady on her feet. "That pill is kinda strong, Doc..." Ranma said, sounding worried.

"Yes, I might have overestimated how much Cologne's training increased her ki," Tofu said. He stood behind them and started methodically touching pressure points on Nabiki's back, pausing at each one as he 'listened'. "Oh my..."

"What? What's wrong?" Ranma asked, starting to sound panicked. She resisted the urge to turn and grab him by the collar, but only barely.

"Not wrong, per se... Nabiki is fine. It seems the sedative effect is just hitting her hard," Dr. Tofu said reassuringly. "But what's happening with her ki... Do you think we can get her onto the MRI table and scan without you two letting go?"

They carefully maneuvered Nabiki onto the table, Ranma on one side, Ryouga on the other, still holding her hands.

"How are you feeling, Nabiki?" Dr. Tofu asked. Dr. Hirano gave her a preliminary check, using a penlight to check her pupil reaction.

"Good," Nabiki said. "Very good. Relaxed, but..." She closed her eyes, as if trying to think of the right words. "All of these feelings... emotions... are flowing... like they're flowing through me. They have a... temperature, I guess? There's some that are cold, but most of them right now are warm... some are even hot, but not... not the kind of hot that burns, if that makes any sense?"

Ranma felt Nabiki weave her fingers around her own, holding her hand more securely. She glanced up, saw Ryouga blush and realized Nabiki had done the same with his hand. She could feel some definitely conflicted emotions from him about all of this.

*I haven't looked at Nabiki very closely yet.* "Hey... uhh... Nabs..." Ranma said as the Doctors retreated to the booth to start the scan. "How worried about you about us... uhh... 'looking'?"

Nabiki turned her head to look at her. Ranma could see a flicker of fear on her face and an accompanying surge of a darker, colder emotion. Nabiki took a deep breath. "I don't know how long
this will last… this isn't really the best or most private place, but…” Nabiki swallowed. "Look at all
of it."

"Nabiki?" Ranma furrowed her brow. "Look… even me'n Ryouga haven't done that, and we
already know way more about each other than we're comfortable with. Doncha think…"

"Ranma… I… I have a lot of things in my head I'm terrified of you seeing," Nabiki said softly. "I
have a lot of things I'm terrified you will judge me for. I have a lot of things I've kept hidden from the
entire world. Most things I've kept hidden from the world. And it's exhausting. So… it's okay. Look.
See me for what I really am."

Ranma leaned a little closer and grasped her hand a bit more tightly.

"You too, Ryouga," Nabiki said, surprisingly. "I need someone who… who doesn't have a stake in
me to see. Someone who'll just judge me for what I am. And I don't know any other way to get my
guard down enough to do that than… well… this."

Ryouga scowled. "First Ranma, then you… Why are you all coming to me for therapy?"

Ranma blushed and shot Ryouga a glare, but Nabiki just giggled.

"Because we trust you?" Nabiki said. "You'd think most boys your age would be happy about
having a couple of cute girls coming to him for help. Or are we not cute enough for you, Ryo?"

Ryouga blushed and stammered a denial. Ranma narrowed her eyes.

"Don't tease him, Nabiki," Ranma said.

"It helps me figure out what all these colors and shapes and temperature mean," Nabiki replied. "I'm
pretty sure that's embarrassment, then. You guys are further along than me in figuring this out,
right?" She glanced at Ranma for confirmation, then turned her head back to Ryouga. "Here, Ryo…
don't be embarrassed. Look…"

Ranma could feel it as Nabiki reached out for the Lost Boy. Ryouga's head snapped around to gape
at her, his eyes widening as she shared her own feelings with him.

Nabiki smirked. "You can't tell me your self-esteem is so low you didn't realize…” Her eyes
widened suddenly as she 'looked' a little deeper. "... Oh my god, you didn't! No wonder…!"

"Ryouga's a bit of a… a…" Ranma struggled to find the right term.

"'Kicked puppy'," Nabiki said softly. "Ryouga… You have a very dedicated set of fans among the
female populace of Furinkan. There's nothing wrong with you." She sighed and closed her eyes.
"The two of you… Ranma's all artificially inflated confidence and you've got an irrationally inflated
sense of unworthiness. No wonder you're both so… so…” she closed her eyes and frowned.
"... God… you're so lonely. Both of you. Even when you're surrounded by others."

Ryouga frowned. "You're one to talk, Nabiki! You're all surface emotions covering up…
covering…” He cocked his head as he 'listened'. "... Fear?"

Ranma could see it too, now. Nabiki's emotions were like a shell. Shapes and colors Ranma
recognized as Confidence and Happiness, supported by others that were darker, possibly Avarice or
Desire, but all of it was wrapped tightly around a big black ball of something else. Of course Ryouga
would know that one, Ranma thought, recognizing some of that blackness in Ryouga himself.
"See?" Nabiki said, smiling weakly. "This is why I wanted this. The stuff that frustrates you and the things underneath it that cause it, that make you sad."

Ranma felt her squeeze her hand, and she was surprised to see tears starting to run down Nabiki's cheeks. "Nabiki?" She could feel some of that black mass start to bubble up, gradually coming to the surface and bleeding off.

"This is… just dredging up some stuff…" Nabiki said, sniffling.

"Your Mom had dark hair… didn't she?" Ryouga asked.

Nabiki looked at him, surprised. "Y-yes, but how…?"

"I got an image from that, a flash…" Ryouga said. "Happened once before with Ranma, too. I think it happens when a lot of emotion is tied to the same memory."

"You get memories too?" Nabiki whispered, eyes widening.


Ranma dropped her gaze, remembering when she had nearly slipped into the Neko-ken.

"I see… So… Most of my problems lead back to one big memory, while you two have had more variety in your terrible experiences." Nabiki's bottom lip quivered. "I'm… Is it usually this hard to keep control? I usually… don't have to…" she sniffed, "... I don't want to remember…"

"Alright, we're done with this set. You can get and walk around if you like," Dr. Hirano's voice came over the intercom.

Nabiki sat up. She trembled as if cold and was squeezing their hands hard.

"Nabiki?" Ranma said. She could feel more of Nabiki's barriers starting to crumble as more of the black ooze bubbled up. "Are you okay? Maybe we should let go now…"

"Don't," Nabiki said sharply and shuddered again. "Don't you dare Ranma!" Her control started to crack and tears started to roll freely. "Don't you dare uncork this then leave me alone with it!"

Ranma gasped as she started to get image after image. A woman with dark hair, smiling kindly. She reminded Ranma a little of Kasumi in expression and the general 'feeling' she got. Then the smile faded into a sad expression as the eyes grew tired and lifeless. There was a vision of clumps of dark hair in the bathroom sink and the sound of sobbing, and then the woman was wearing a headscarf, looking wan and tired… diminished. Finally a hospital room with beeping machines and a frail-looking figure on a bed with tubes and wires running into her; far too many tubes and wires. Suddenly the machines stopped beeping and there was just one, long tone.

"Ahhkgh!" Nabiki shuddered and nearly doubled over. "I don't want to remember…!"

Ranma moved to comfort her but was shocked when Ryouga beat her to it. He sat down on the table next to Nabiki and put his arm around her, holding her hand in a firm grasp.

"No," he said with surprising gentleness. "Remember it. It's okay. This is what you said the Link was for, right? Work through it."

"N-not this…" Nabiki hiccuped. "I… I didn't cry then! Daddy said I had to be strong. Mommy
looked so sad… I didn't want her to be sad! I didn't want her to be afraid! I'm not… I'm not supposed to cry!" She shuddered again. "Akane cried so much Dad had to take her out of the room but I didn't want that to happen! I needed to be there!"

"You were alone with your Mother when she died…" Ranma said, sitting to her other side and slipping an arm around her as well. "And you didn't cry, even though you wanted to, because…"

"S-she told me not to cry… n-not to be sad… I promised…" Nabiki huddled between them. Ranma could feel the proximity increasing the effect of the Link and focused on trying to send reassuring emotions to Nabiki. She shuddered a bit as the wave of blackness hit her. It's spreading the hurt over the three of us and Nabiki is STILL crying? How long has she bottled this up inside her? She felt her own vision get blurry as she struggled against the sadness.

"So you didn't cry. Ever," Ranma said softly. She sniffed, feeling the ache in her chest. She could see more images now… of Nabiki's father being withdrawn, listless… of Kasumi's slow transformation into a clone of their mother, her own personality gradually subsumed by the role she took on for Akane's sake… of Tachi and his betrayal. Everyone leaves, even if they're still there. So you stopped caring so it would stop hurting.

"She didn't want you to hurt," Ryouga said softly. "But she didn't want you to stop feeling," He closed his eyes. "When… When my Dad died, I wasn't able to get there to be with him at the end. But… The last time we spoke…"

"... Don't be afraid to cry," Ranma said, getting a vivid image in her head of a telephone, one she recognized from the Hibiki house. A warm, male voice like Ryouga's but older and deeper. "Ryouga, was that…?"

"... Just after Shirokuro had her pups, yeah. I was able to make it home a few more times after you showed me where it was," Ryouga chuckled. "He was curious who 'Yoiko' was… this girl who had convinced me I had a sister. He was worried and asked me if you were okay… Thought you might be homeless or abused..." His jaw tightened. "He… he said the treatments were going well…"

Ranma closed her eyes and huddled in closer, feeling more of that black awfulness flooding out. It was cold and damp and pulled down on her like a weight. It was the same as the feelings that had threatened to crush her in the Shi Shi Hokodan. She wrapped her arms around them both as best she could and crawled in closer to them. No, don't hurt! Please! I'm here! I'm here!

Somehow, that helped - like lashing oneself to the mast in a storm. Gradually, the tempest of released emotions ebbed to leave them all dizzy and shaking. Ranma discovered, to her surprise, that she was sniffling and her cheeks were wet as though she had been bawling. Warmer emotions gradually filtered through the cold, though it was tough to tell at this point from whom they had come, or even if they belonged to anyone individually.

"Is… is it always like that with you two?" Nabiki asked in a hushed voice.

"No… aside from when Ranma and I pushed the Link too hard, that's the first time…" Ryouga replied. They were all huddled together now, their foreheads practically touching. Ranma could see their eyes were red and puffy.

"It feels… better, though," Nabiki said after a moment, sounding almost unsure. "Lighter…"

"Yeah… that's a good word for it," Ryouga replied.

"I don't feel any different," Ranma huffed. "I'm just upset because you two were!"
"That's right… that was just us," Nabiki looked at her. "I wonder why?"

"Are you three all right?" Dr. Tofu interrupted, peering at them. Ranma realized they hadn't been aware of what was going on around them. The two Doctors were standing nearby, though they had kept a respectful distance.

"You were… glowing," Dr. Hirano said, his face pale.

"Up. Now," Tofu motioned them to stand. "Stay in contact with each other for the moment, please." He moved around behind them and began testing pressure points again, eyes closed.

After a few moments of prodding, he stepped back and walked back around to face them again. "Ryouga and Nabiki's ki balances have shifted considerably, though it's hard to tell with all the intermixing going on. Whatever that was, it was a bleed off of a large amount of negative ki. What happened?"

Nabiki smiled. "I guess you could call it therapy…"

"There was some kind of resonance," Ryouga added. "For some reason, Nabiki and I started thinking about… well, we each lost a parent…"

Dr. Tofu rubbed his chin. "Hmmmm… Similar traumatic memories reinforcing one another?"

Dr. Hirano cocked his head. "I'm afraid my knowledge of psychology is somewhat basic, but… I believe it's common for emotions and memories buried by trauma to begin to re-emerge when the individual is in a place of sufficient emotional stability and security to begin to 'unpack' them. I've had a few patients who suffered from various forms of PTSD who sometimes reported such things."

"And because the Link provided support, you think that's why all that stuff came up?" Nabiki said.

"Or it's possible the circulation of emotionally charged ki unbalanced your emotional state and allowed those feelings to surface," Tofu added. "Right now it's almost impossible to tell where either of your ki begins or ends. For now, though, I think we should break the connection while we look over the scans. I want you three to avoid physical contact for at least an hour, to give your ki time to settle and return to normal."

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Nabiki sat curled up in her chair, pouting as she rubbed the palm of her right hand with her left thumb. She shivered - the feeling of cold was not as bad as before, but there were the lingering feelings unearthed when the memories of her mother had erupted, coupled with a depressing sense of loneliness to contend with.

That was just a few minutes of the Link at full strength. Nabiki thought, her hand twitching. And… I want to grab them and get it back already. It's addictive…

She considered that a moment, pondering if it was, in fact, habit-forming. The Link hadn't been a high, as such… though there had been an almost euphoric rush at the start. It had more been that she hadn't realized how lonely she was until she wasn't anymore.

It felt like… like when Mom used to hug me, when I was scared or hurt or feeling bad, she thought. That's why I thought of her and all that stuff came up. She glanced over at Ryouga. He was sitting slumped in the chair, staring at the wall, looking drained and a little melancholy. She felt the ache of sympathy that came from being far too aware of what he was feeling. Ranma is right… you end up knowing too much about someone. Except…
She glanced at Ranma. The redhead looked bored, but didn't seem to have gone through the same unburdening that she and Ryouga had. I couldn't 'see' the same kind of black mess in Ranma, but… she didn't uncork when Ryouga and I did… as if something is keeping it bottled up. She sighed. Ryouga and Ranma said something about the Neko-ken? Maybe it's good it didn't come up, but… Maybe that just means it should? But what would make Ranma feel safe enough to do that? She shuddered as she imagined Ranma going into a Neko-ken fit and the damage she could cause. That might explain why Ranma has to find someone she feels safe with to snap out of it, though. Maybe if Akane linked with her?

She closed her eyes and massaged her temples. No, I am not considering trying to add Akane to this! Not yet. She glanced at Ryouga. I need to learn more about this. About how this might… CHANGE things.

She took a moment to take inventory of her own feelings. Her opinions of Ryouga had shifted considerably. Mostly it involved a whole pile of guilt for all the teasing and exploiting she had done, as well as a more complex and complete mental picture of what motivated him and what demons haunted him. He was a lot more fragile than she had estimated. Ranma's newfound protectiveness of him made sense in light of what the Link had shown her.

Ryouga noticed her looking at him and returned her gaze for a moment. She smiled at him… not one of her sly, seductive smirks but just a smile which made him blush and look away quickly. She felt a little amusement at his bashfulness, accompanied by a surprisingly strong surge of fondness.

Oh my… Nabiki looked away, blushing herself. She did a rapid mental inventory; living with the constant danger of magical potions or talismans or such altering her own emotions or that of those around her had taught her to think up strategies for determining if she was suffering from such things herself. They mostly consisted of tracing back where all the feelings came from and flagging any feelings that just happened. It presumed whatever magic she was under allowed her to remain rational enough to do such an inventory but it was all a relatively normal person like herself had as a defense.

As far as she could tell, though, all of these new feelings led back to something she had sensed about him from the Link, or something once buried that the link had dredged up. The physical attraction had always been there, same as it always had been with Ranma, but that was hardly a factor. There were plenty of attractive boys around she wouldn't look at twice as anything other than an easy mark or a potential photoset for the female side of the Hentai Horde at school. She hadn't felt anything but mild contempt for Ranma until she had gotten to know him and something about who he was had stirred a response in her. She guessed Ryouga had some of the same qualities that she found appealing and that the Link had just bypassed her usual defenses and accelerated the process.

What IS it with me and strays?! Nabiki thought, somewhat bemused. I'll… have to be careful of my own feelings, though. She glanced at Ranma now, curiously examining the redhead. That's the effect of just a few minutes. Admittedly intense ones, but… Ranma and Ryouga have supposedly spent HOURS linked. What would that DO to two people?

She sighed. Nabiki already knew the answer to that. There wasn't a lot of wiggle room when you and someone else had your souls bared for the other to see, ugliness, pettiness, flaws and all. You would love them or you would hate them. But that didn't make it romantic love. That would require a component of physical attraction and… something else that Nabiki wasn't sure she could define.

Which BOTH of them have for the other, they're just too stubborn, repressed and/or afraid to acknowledge, she thought glumly. That might be for the best, actually. Ranma is right - this whole situation is PROFOUNDLY unfair to Ryouga. If anything happened between him and Ranma there
was no WAY it would stop at just a fling. And then Ryouga would either have to compete against Ranma's messed up relationship dynamics or accept the same compromise we all did - assuming the other girls would accept him as well. She sighed. And if we wanted to use the Link to stabilize the Wobbles among the Fiancées, Ryouga would HAVE to be part of it. Unless we find some other way to make this work.

It was a little frustrating. She didn't feel she had wasted her time exactly. The experience had been powerful and… comforting. But she also knew it was now influencing her better judgement specifically because it had affected her so powerfully. She had originally seen the Link as a kind of magic bullet to protect against all of the interpersonal conflicts and pitfalls she foresaw ahead of them, but now? It complicated matters dangerously. Just letting the Link fade would be the best choice, she thought firmly. It compromises my better judgement, creates dangerously intense emotional connections and experiences, and generally has the potential to ruin EVERYTHING.

She rubbed her palm again. It itched.

I could just take them home, the thought crept in - quiet - rebellious. Seduce them both. Wouldn't even be HARD. She shivered at the pleasant mental imaginings of the three of them together with the Link suffusing everything in their shared pleasure. If just a hug was such a profound experience with the Link what might lovemaking be like?

And that would destroy any trust Shampoo, Akane and Ukyou have in me, and destroy everything I've accomplished so far. She winced as the sober, cold, rational side of her dumped a metaphorical bucket of ice water over the fantasy.

She rubbed at her temples again. So now I've got to deal with a naescent 'thing' for Ryouga and the temptation of LITERALLY mind-blowing sex - balanced against the destruction of my relationships with three other people, which includes my own sister AND a girl I've managed to fall for - despite my best efforts... She sighed heavily. Shampoo is right. I'm still not factoring my own emotions into things, and it keeps tripping me up.

"You okay, Nabiki?" Ranma asked, noticing her sigh.

"Is… everything okay?" Ryouga asked at the same time.

He and Ranma glanced at each other, blushed, then looked away sheepishly. It was adorable.

Nabiki looked back and forth between them. She felt a surge of something greedy within her that had been quiet for quite some time now.

MINE.

She rubbed her temples and sighed. God damnit, not this again…

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"Well, as far as I can tell your ki is back to normal," Tofu said as he examined Nabiki. "As are Ranma and Ryouga. Your own ki should be fully re-established now but I want you to contact me if there are any lingering effects."

"Did you find out anything useful about the Link or solving Ryouga's problem?" Ranma asked, perched on a chair a few feet away.

"A considerable amount, at least as far as how the Link functions," Dr. Hirano said. "The scans are fascinating, though, granted, we focused on Ms. Tendo this time." He held up a printout of one of
the scans. "It's almost like a weather pattern, or… osmosis; a flow of high ki to low ki."

"And because there seems to be a constant current between you and Ryouga, where normally there would be no mixing, the action of the link - that 'current' - reacted with Nabiki's own depressed levels and resulted in a constant circular flow between the three of you," Dr. Tofu added. "This allowed your ki to fully suffuse her. The applications for ki-based healing are already enormous."

"If we can replicate this effect outside of Ms. Saotome and Mr. Hibiki," Dr. Hirano added, taking off his glasses and polishing them with a handkerchief. "As it stands it suggests that even if we can replicate the link, it would require a pair of healers who are emotionally committed to one another. I would be more comfortable finding a way to mechanically replicate this effect rather than push us towards making marriage a requirement for a medical license."

"You're exaggerating as usual, Masa!" Dr Tofu chided him. "This sort of process, while a profound change, would never replace the need for traditional surgery, medicine or palliative care!"

"Yes, well, forgive me for having some concern for how rewriting our understanding of the human body and physics in general might have unforeseen effects on the profession, Ono!" Dr. Hirano shot back irritably.

"You'll have to forgive us," Dr. Tofu said apologetically. "We've had this conversation over and over for the past week. I think it comes up every time we reach a new milestone."

Dr. Hirano sighed and nodded. "Please don't mistake my trepidation for a lack of determination to cure Mr. Hibiki's ailment. I am simply… unaccustomed to making discoveries on such a constant and swift basis. I am more comfortable with a steady, methodical mode of research. Continually shouting 'eureka!' gets tiring and not a little disconcerting after a while."

"But you think this is something that you'll be able to use to cure the curse?" Ryouga asked. "And apply it to someone other than me? Soon?"

Dr. Tofu patted Ryouga's shoulder. "I understand your impatience, Ryouga. But we are making rapid progress. Even if your mother should get lost again…"

Ryouga shook his head, closing his eyes tight. They're doing all of this to help me. Even Ranma and Nabiki. I hate this. I hate being a burden. But for Mom's sake, I gotta push. I gotta tell them. "No… you don't understand… if she gets lost one more time… I'll never see her again."

Dr. Tofu paused, his expression shifting. "You sound very certain of that, Ryouga."

"I didn't say anything because it's just stories," Ryouga said finally. "But… but I remember it came up when I asked my parents about my grandparents and why I'd never met them. My grandparents on my Dad's side had just passed away, but… my grandfather on my Mom's side was still alive then. He might still be alive now for all we know." He swallowed. "My Mom didn't want to tell me but my Dad felt it was important I understand, once… once he was diagnosed, and he knew he might not have a lot of time. Once someone in my family loses their Anchor, the moment they have that realization, it triggers something. The curse starts to get worse."

"It gets worse?" Dr. Hirano asked, eyes widening. "How so?"

"Right now it's just… just random, whether I can find my way or not. But… it's a curse. It was put there by someone or something that wanted us to suffer. When someone in our family loses their Anchor, they… they wander. Uncontrollably. And they can never find their way back to the people and the things they care about. It steers them away." He swallowed. "Dad told me about my
grandfather, when grandma died. He and Mom tried to keep him in the house, using a string so he could find his way, watching him carefully… even locking him in his room. One day he just… disappeared. They started getting letters from him, but the address was different every time, and by the time they sent a reply he was long gone. Dad showed me the letters, said he hoped I might be able to learn something to help me manage. In each letter things got worse and worse for grandpa. The times between them got farther and farther apart as he started having trouble even finding his way to other people. The last one… the last one he gave to a hermit to deliver for him. There wasn't anything after that." He bowed his head.

"Are you suggesting the 'curse' is sentient?" Dr. Hirano asked skeptically.

"No… it wouldn't need to be," Dr. Tofu said. "The poisoned ki causes its effect by affecting the entorhinal cortex, correct? So, as the condition worsens, it progresses from injecting random chaos to misdirecting all attempts at navigation, inverting their attempts to get to their goal. The harder the person tries, the worse the effect. And… when their desperation increases as they are gradually separated from the familiar, their desires change to focus on survival and finding less and less specific things… first a town rather than a neighborhood. Then a region rather than a town, then just any town. Then just any civilization. Then, finally, just anyone."

Dr. Hirano rubbed his chin. "You are supposing it uses the victim's own desperation to find their way against them?"

Dr. Tofu nodded. "Like a behavior-modifying fungus. Look at Ophiocordyceps unilateralis. The fungus drives the host to take very specific actions, but relies on the host's own sensory processing to ensure that the conditions it's seeking are met."

"So the victim's own cognitive abilities are set against them, working unconsciously to prevent the thing they are most trying to accomplish?" Dr. Hirano said. "Is that possible?"

"I've encountered things like pressure point techniques that can permanently alter a person's perception of temperature. That is a relatively simple, single-point change. This..." Dr. Tofu motioned at the MRI printout. "... This is far more complex; something the knowledge of how to do has been lost... thankfully. But… a diabolical enough mind, with enough knowledge and control over ki techniques..."

"Which leaves the problem of how to permanently flush this 'poisoned ki' from his system as it is self-replicating," Dr. Hirano said thoughtfully. "Perhaps if we could duplicate the 'flushing' effect on Ms. Tendo?"

Dr. Tofu shook his head. "I'm not sensing any permanent changes to Nabiki's ki. Plus Ryouga's own ki reserves are massive. The dosage of the medicine he would need to suppress his ki sufficiently for the effect to work would be... dangerous."

"Hnnnn… Still, this is progress," Dr. Hirano said finally.

Dr. Tofu turned to Ryouga, putting a hand on his shoulder. "We're going to need some more time to look over this data, Ryouga. But we're making progress, I promise you! Give us a week, and I'll have something for you."

Ryouga sighed heavily. "Thanks Doc. Just... anything you figure out that might help my Mom..."

"You'll be the first to know," Dr. Tofu said.

Ryouga shook his head. "No. Tell Ranma. Or better, tell Nabiki first. They aren't liable to be lost
Tofu got an odd expression across his face. "She knows about you and Ranma, then?"

"The Link? Yeah," Ryouga said. "She was the one who figured out Ranma was my Anchor."

Tofu frowned. "Err… yes, not exactly what I… nevermind." He shook his head. "It's not relevant. We'll be in touch if we learn anything. Likewise, contact Dr. Hirano or myself if you notice any changes in the Link or your curse."

Ranma hopped off of her chair. "C'mon, Ryo. Sayuri wants to try and get a few hours of practise in tonight and we still gotta get you home."

"I can take care of that, Ranma," Nabiki stretched and yawned. "I know the way."

"You sure, Nabiki?" Ranma asked, though her expression indicated she was eager to go.

"Watching you play is far too tiring for me right now, anyway," Nabiki said, standing up. "As long as Ryo is okay with it?"

Ryouga shrugged. "Whatever. I appreciate it either way."

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The walk back was done in silence for the most part.

It wasn't that Ryouga didn't want to talk. But small talk wasn't exactly his forte, and after what had just happened, what topic could he possibly think of that wouldn't sound like… well, exactly what it was; a pathetic attempt at small talk to fill the dead air.

He found himself studying her as she walked. He hadn't ever really bothered to look at Nabiki before. His vision had always been clearly focused on Akane or… admittedly, Ranma. The other Tendos had kind of just been there - background noise that occasionally became significant then faded back into the static. Nabiki was an ordinary girl, not a martial artist, after all.

After today, though, that was going to be very hard. Nabiki had always been cool, collected, detached, cynical and in control. And now he knew just how much of an act all that had been. As with Ranma, the cardboard cutout had suddenly popped into three dimensions, full of depth and complexity. And a very, very familiar pain.

All the Tendo sisters had echoes of what he assumed was their mother's elegance. Some sort of nobility that drew people to them and manifested in different ways. Kasumi was grace and poise, Akane was energy and expressiveness and Nabiki was control and confidence. Each of them was beautiful and each had something that made them equally unapproachable. Kasumi was too pure, a gentle, kind, understanding soul that you felt guilty looking at in anything but a detached, respectful way. Akane was competitive and quick to temper and Nabiki was cynical and manipulative.

After what he had seen through the Link, part of him wondered if that was on purpose. He wondered if Kasumi and Akane had similar wounds that they had wrapped their own defenses around. His arm twitched as he fought down the nonsensical urge to reach out and take Nabiki's hand.

The Link is gone. Doc Tofu says she's back to normal, so what would it accomplish other than making me look stupid? Worse, I'd look like the Casanova I accuse Ranma of being! He sighed and looked away.
"Ryouga, do you love Akari?" Nabiki asked softly, without looking at him.

He nearly tripped. He skipped a couple of times to keep his footing. "What!?"

She turned her head to glance at him. Instead of the usual cynical, impatient scowl or the sly smirk, there was just a smile, her expression open and honest. For some reason it made him feel nervous, like he was seeing something he shouldn't - something meant for someone else.

"Do you love Akari?" she repeated. "I mean… really love her?"

He stammered a bit, tried to dredge up a vehement affirmation of his pure and true love for Akari, but something in her eyes made it hard to just blurt out anything without thinking. It felt like what he said had weight and import that might change the course of his life depending on what he said. "Why do you want to know?" he finally managed.

She sighed, turned around and walked backwards in front of him, her hands clasped behind her back. "I don't blame you for being suspicious of me, but… I'm honestly just curious," Nabiki said. Her smile seemed almost a little… sad? Wistful, maybe. Not at all a Nabiki Tendo smile. She held up a hand. "I swear I'm not scheming anything, nor will I use what you tell me to scheme. I just want to… understand you a little better.'

"Understand me?" Ryouga asked, cocking his head.

"We barely know each other, even though we've known each other for over a year," Nabiki said. "I hardly know you as a person, despite now knowing way too much about you and your feelings. It's a paradox, and as I can't fix it by unlearning stuff, I'm trying to learn stuff - to provide some context for all of this emotional knowledge I have now."

"Can't you just ask me what my favorite food is or something?" Ryouga muttered, rubbing the back of his head. "Asking a question like that makes it sound like… like…"

"Like I'm interested in you and feeling out what my chances are or how serious the competition might be?" Nabiki asked with a hint of her old sly smirk.

Ryouga blushed. "I didn't mean… I wasn't… I mean I wouldn't actually think that…"

"... Because I am, kind of," she finished.

Ryouga *did* trip this time, and landed heavily. He managed to catch himself before he his face hit the tarmac, though. *Idiot! She's teasing you again!*

She stopped and crouched next to him, holding out a hand. "Ryouga? Are you okay?" She had what looked like a genuine look of concern on her face.

"I'm… fine," he growled and pushed himself to his knees without her help. "It was just an uneven bit of sidewalk. I thought Ranma told you to lay off with the teasing?"

She let her hand fall back to her side and looked away. "What if it wasn't teasing? What would you say?" she asked quietly.

"Nabiki, come on, I'm getting annoyed," Ryouga said gruffly, standing quickly.

"Ranma is the reason you haven't gone to see Akari, isn't she?" Nabiki asked, not moving.

Ryouga was silent for a moment. He clenched his fists then forced himself to relax them. "We should
get going. I don't want to make Mom worry."

"How do you do it, Ryouga?" Nabiki demanded, standing and stepping in front of him to block his path. She had a defiant look in her eyes which suggested that not all of the fire in the Tendo family had gone to Akane. "I was linked to you and Ranma for minutes and already I'm struggling to keep myself from doing something really stupid with you. You and Ranma have been linked for weeks. You've spent hours messing with this. How do your turn it off?! How do you… you put all those feelings you get back into the box after they've gotten out? How do you make your palms stop itching?!

"You don't, okay?!" Ryouga said sharply. She took a half step back from the vehemence in his voice.

He closed his eyes. "You don't. It doesn't go away and you just accept that no matter how much you want it, you can't. So you try and avoid it; try and stop torturing yourself - and you move on." He opened his eyes and looked into hers. They were the same hazel-brown as Akane's but, at the same time, so very different. He could see a thousand questions there. "Haven't you ever loved something or someone you couldn't have?"

Nabiki scowled slightly. "I tried it once. It didn't work out as good for me as figuring out a way to have them did."

Ryouga snorted. "Lucky you. But that doesn't always work. I've got more than a little experience in that." He moved to step around her, but she stopped him with a hand on his chest.

"Then answer my question," Nabiki said. Her head was bowed, but her posture was tense.

"What…?" Ryouga blinked, uncertain.

She raised her head, fixing him with an intense stare. "Do you love Akari?"

"Why…?"

"Because I know how much you hurt!" she growled. "I know and I have no idea how you deal with it, but you do, and I'll be damned if I just let you do that stoic walk away of yours knowing you're just going back out into an empty, cold world with nothing waiting for you! Ranma loves you. You know that as well as I do!"

"Even if she or I could deal with that, her dance card is full," Ryouga said. "I know that she loves you, and there wasn't any Link responsible for it. I know that she loves Akane because she's put everything on the line for her - repeatedly. Ukyou and Shampoo? Well… if she can say it to them, I'll give her the benefit of the doubt on that too. There isn't room."

"That isn't the question I asked," Nabiki growled. "Do you love Akari?"

Ryouga was silent. He closed his eyes and thought for a moment. "I think… before all this started… Hell, even a week ago? I'd have said 'yes' without hesitating. And… how I feel about her hasn't changed. But…" He bowed his head in shame. "... I don't know if it's really love. I want to see her again, I want to find out, but… But I ran away."

Nabiki's expression softened. "Okay," she said, her voice gentle. "Good. I can help with that."

"Help?" Ryouga said, confused.

Nabiki's fingers curled, gripping the front of his shirt lightly, her eyes dropping. "I need to make sure
you're okay. Don't ask me to justify that, I just do, okay? I think if you had been sure either way I would have been worried, because... because I felt so much confusion from you I know you're not. I know you've been through a lot, and some of it is my fault, directly or indirectly. After what just happened... I have to do something or I'll go crazy. So I want to help. And I know you can't go to Ranma with this, either."

Ryouga sighed. He wasn't sure what to think about this 'new' Nabiki. He didn't know if this was recent or he was just unaware of it. Without thinking her reached up and put his hand over hers. "Nabiki, I don't think..."

Whatever he was going to say was immediately obliterated from his mind as the Link flared to life between them.

Ryouga heard the gasp from Nabiki at the same time as he became intensely aware of just how colorful her own feelings were right now. He was surprised to find that the dark core had diminished significantly, and there were many more warmer colors

They just stared at each other a moment.

Ryouga tried to swallow, finding his mouth suddenly dry.

"Oh..." Nabiki said softly.

Ryouga closed his eyes. Naturally it did nothing to shut out the awareness of her emotions, which were swirling, changing pattern, speed and color as the realization of what had just happened sank in.

"This... complicates things a little, doesn't it?" she asked softly.

"Doc Tofu said your ki was normal!" Ryouga protested, too stunned to think of removing his hand from hers for the moment.

She took the option away from him, turning her hand and clasping his firmly. "Maybe it's not something that he can detect. He never detected the link between you and Ranma, after all." Her emotions started to swirl faster, becoming warmer and brighter. "Ryouga, don't you get what this means?"

"Akane, Ukyou, and Shampoo are going to kill me?" Ryouga said nervously.

"No... well, yes, if I don't spin this just right to them. But it means we made a permanent change to my ki. Which means we should be able to make a permanent change to yours, too, right? And your Mom's?" Nabiki started to smile. "That was always the problem, wasn't it? If you're linked to Ranma long enough it suppresses your curse, but it never sticks, but now that we know how to make changes permanent..."

"Hang on, we don't know that this is permanent yet," Ryouga said, though he admittedly felt a flicker of hope. Part of him desperately wanted it to be true, while another part of him despaired at what kind of damage it might do to his already frayed sanity to be emotionally bonded to both Ranma and Nabiki.

"I know, I know..." Nabiki said, but it was obvious she was already scheming. "... but if it is...!"

"It complicates everything!" Ryouga protested, feeling a little panicked.

Nabiki looked into his eyes and he felt the shift in her emotions even as he saw the defiant sparkle
light in hers. He felt her fingers tighten around his hand and there was a surge of warm emotion through the link as some kind of resolution was made.

"I like complicated," she said finally.

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"So are you sure you wanna try this, Senpai?" Rin asked nervously.

The dojo had been set up with a volleyball net strung across it once more, and Ranma was confidently doing some stretches to limber herself up on the opposite side of the net from Rin. The rest of the team was standing on the sidelines in their practise gear, watching.

"Gotta figure there's someone else with an arm like yours, right Rin?" Ranma gave her a wink. "I figure if we can work out counters to our best moves, it'll give us something to work from when we need to whip up a counter to someone else's best moves. Or figure out a counter to their counter."

"Or a counter to their counter of our counter?" Yuka suggested playfully. "That sounds like it could get ridiculous fast, Ranma."

"Yeah, well, after I started getting my own best moves tossed back in my face when I fought Herb, I decided I didn't want to be caught off-guard like that again." Ranma took a ready stance. "Gimmie the best Thunderbolt you can, Rin. I'll dodge if I can't figure out how to dig it out, don't worry."

"A-all right…" Rin replied uncertainly. She tossed the ball into the air, arcing it ahead of her. She skipped a few steps to get a bit of speed then leapt as the ball came down, lining up a perfect strike on Ranma.

Just as she did, Ranma felt an unexpected surge of warmth. It rushed through her, accompanied by a powerful burst of emotion that robbed her limbs of their strength and clouded her vision as she was overcome by a very pleasant sensation of heat.

And then the volleyball hit her in the head.

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For a moment… just for a moment… He was afraid she was going to kiss him.

She didn't. Quite.

Ryouga had been hugged by a girl before, of course. Usually it was enough to cause a major malfunction in his brain just from the proximity. He had gotten somewhat better over time but he still wasn't used to physical contact of any type, much less from an attractive girl.

But in this case, the deck was stacked further against him.

Nabiki smiled at him, wrapped her arms around his chest, closed her eyes, and kind of leaned into him in a way that pressed her entire body up against his. At the same time, the proximity and close contact magnified the Link, almost like it was enveloping him. She hooked her chin over his shoulder and sighed softly. He felt a surge of warmth and an almost possessive affection from her. She smelled nice, the heat of her body was comforting and she was soft in all the right places.

He didn't lock up like he normally did. His breath caught in his throat, to be sure, and he hesitated. But in the past, he had always frozen up out of fear, out of lack of knowledge of what to do or out of fear of rejection. This time he hesitated because he knew exactly what to do. There wasn't any doubt
of her feelings or what she wanted. He wanted to hug her back and she wanted him to.

He also knew that if he did that, he was going to let something take root in his heart for her - that he'd start down the road he had walked so many times before. His arms moved of their own accord and instead of wrapping around her, he put his hands on her shoulders and gently but firmly pushed her back.

"Nabiki, think what you're doing!" he said firmly. "You're Ranma's fiancee."

There was a flash of hurt and confusion in her eyes, and then a flicker of anger. "I thought that part was obvious?" she said, frowning. "It's a hug, Ryouga. I'm not seducing you! Friends hug each other."

*We have a difference of opinion there,* Ryouga thought as he struggled with the emotions she had already stirred up. "It's a little more than that to me," he said carefully. *The Link makes hugs dangerous!*

Nabiki quirked an eyebrow. "And I'm a little more than a friend now. Am I your Anchor now, too?"

Ryouga felt a cold ball form in the pit of his stomach, a gnawing sense of dread. He felt like he did whenever Ranma had fooled him with a disguise and had led him into betraying his devotion to Akane, except… he wasn't entirely sure he was ready to fully acknowledge what that feeling indicated just yet. "*Ranma* is my Anchor, and even then it's… it's…"

A slight smirk appeared. "I think the proper term for things is 'It's complicated', don't you?"

He squeezed his eyes shut and groaned in frustration. Conflicting images of Akane, Akari, Ranma… even Ukyou, Shampoo, Anna, and Nabiki herself… some happy, some crying, some looking betrayed, each emotion brought up by his situation tied to one image of happiness and ten of disaster. *"Too complicated!"* he said, shaking his head rapidly to clear it. He took a deep, cleansing breath to steady himself and another moment to get himself centered then schooled his expression into one of stern sincerity. *"Look, I appreciate you wanting to help and… and I'm happy you got what you wanted out of this. B-but… you know how easily I get the wrong idea. How much I get… get wrapped up in it. The Link makes that a lot easier, so… I need some space. I don't want to start getting the idea that you're…"* He struggled with the humiliation that came with the last part. "... *That you're in love with me,*" he finished quickly, blushing brightly.

Something like a sad smile crossed Nabiki's face. She reached up and lightly cupped his cheek, causing him to freeze. "No… I'm not… but I could get there," she said, her voice low and soft, causing his brain to seize up hard. She sighed and let her hand drop away, taking a step back from him. "And that's how I know you're making a good point. I'm sorry."

He swallowed, struggling against the lump that had suddenly appeared in his throat. "I…"

"I won't ask anything else, and I won't tease you anymore," Nabiki said softly. "I'll help you figure out things with Akari if you still want me to, and if you want me to stay away I'll do that too. Just…" she looked away, "... don't be alone, okay?"

There were probably a thousand responses he could have given. A hundred that he should have given. But he couldn't think of a single one. Instead he just nodded slowly.

"... and if you want me to help you figure things out with a certain redhead, I'll do that too," she added, her sly smile returning. "But just keep in mind - we're a package deal." She winked. "Goodnight, Ryo. Sleep well."
He stood there, blinking dumbly as she turned and walked away. Finally, the gears in his brain re-engaged and something resembling rational thought reasserted itself.

"Wait… how do I get home?" he called out to her.

She turned, continued to walk backwards away from him, smiling. She pointed casually to his left, across the street.

He followed where she was pointing and saw… his house. They had arrived without him even realizing it.

She waved and continued on her way, turned and rounded the corner, vanishing from sight.

He scrubbed his hand over his eyes. He felt shaky and disoriented, but at the same time… at the same time…

No matter what I do, the chaos around Ranma keeps dragging me back in, he thought glumly. That used to be a source of comforting rage for him - how he could trace all of his woes back to Ranma Saotome, blame them all on him. He could set aside all his guilt and shame because it was Ranma's fault, not his.

And it was true, in a sense. Bad things kept happening to him around Ranma Saotome and because of Ranma Saotome. But it wasn't Ranma's fault. He could see that now.

I cling to Ranma, he thought, leaning against the doorframe. How might things have been different if I had just gotten back in time for that stupid duel? I never would have followed him to China, right? I never would have made him my Anchor… right?

There was no answer. The concept was foreign - incomprehensible. Though all of his life since then had been strife and struggle… his mind could not conjure an alternative. Ryouga clenched his fist. Why can't I imagine my life without him?!


An image appeared in his mind, unbidden. Bright blue eyes and red hair, framing an impish, cocky smile with a sparkle in her gaze that part of him wished was for him.

Jusenkyo is cruel, he thought miserably. The curse, and Ranma's increasing acceptance of it, had robbed him of the last degree of separation between himself and Ranma that he needed to keep his life from being utterly consumed.

Trust Saotome to already be hoarding any girl I take an interest in, he thought sourly. Even herself!

He wasn't entirely sure that thought made sense but it was comforting to be able to dredge up a little of the old indignation. He reached the door and paused.

Would it really be so bad? The thought was treacherously wistful, like the fantasies he used to have around himself and Akane. There was no real concrete idea of how it would even work… there never was… Just a pang of longing for something he didn't really believe he would ever be able to have.

I wish I had a sign - some indication of what I should do. Ryouga thought glumly as he opened the door. "I'm home!" he called out, wondering if there were any leftovers from dinner. After the day
he'd had, he was exhausted and famished.

"Oh, Ryouga!" his mother called from the living room. "I'm glad you're home! There's someone here to see you!"

"Someone here to...?" Ryouga began, but he could already hear the frantic scrambling of feet on the floor. Before he could orient himself properly to see who it was, a smaller body slammed into him, pushing him back against the door. Slender arms wrapped around his waist and kept him pinned there.

Ryouga looked down to see long, greenish tinted hair with streaks of pink at each temple. The girl it belonged to looked up at him, her eyes shining with tears.

"Ryouga, I was so scared I'd never find you!" Akari sobbed. "Please... please promise me you won't leave me again?"

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Nabiki returned to the Tendo Dojo to find Ranma out cold in the middle of the living room, tucked into a futon they had brought out from storage with a cool, damp cloth on her forehead.

"You brained my fiance?" Nabiki asked sternly as Rin grovelled in front of her.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" Rin gushed as she bowed dramatically. "I didn't mean it! We were just practising, and she wanted to see if she could block a Thunderbolt, and... and...!"

"It really isn't Rin's fault," Akane said. "I saw it happen. Ranma just kind of... locked up, just before the ball hit. It looked as if something had distracted her."

Nabiki blinked. You don't think...? NAH. "Well... drat." She plopped down cross-legged next to Ranma's futon. "I had something I wanted to talk to her about!"

"You should probably let Ranma rest," Kasumi said, carrying in a tray of snacks and setting it on the table. "I'm not sure what you were doing today, but she seemed more worn out than usual. Normally she's quick to bounce back from these things, but she's been out for quite a while."

"Yeah, it is unusual," Akane said. "I mean, Rin's Thunderbolts hit hard, but..."

"What were you guys doing all day with 'Ryo', hmmm?" Yuka asked with a knowing smirk. "Did the three of you wear yourselves out playing doctor instead of going to the doctor, maybe?"

"Don't be silly, Yuka!" Akane waved her off. "Ranma doesn't swing that way and... honestly... Ryouga and Nabiki?"

"Aheh... yeah... *Ahem* actually the stuff the doctors are doing to try and fix Ryouga's directional problems involve a lot of ki." She yawned, feeling those exertions start to catch up to her as well.

"I'm surprised they involved you in this too," Sayuri said. "You're not really the person I think of when I think of 'ki', Nabiki."

Nabiki quirked an eyebrow. "Maybe I have some aspects I keep hidden, Sayuri?"

Yuka cleared her throat. "Yeah, maybe you shouldn't talk, Captain?"

Sayuri scowled at her. "And what exactly does that mean, Yuka?"
"Something about you doing something with ki when you do a trick serve that even Ranma and Ryouga working together haven't managed to figure out?" Riko asked cheekily.

"Oh?" Nabiki raised an eyebrow. "This is the first I've heard of this!"

"Mostly because we don't even know if that's what it is yet," Sayuri groused. "It's just the theory they're working with. And honestly, I think they're a little cracked."

"Is there anything else you've neglected to tell me about team developments?" Nabiki asked playfully. Secret techniques weren't exactly mission-critical knowledge but they were always fun. And they generally allowed her to massage the odds for the betting pool.

"I don't think so…" Rin said, brow furrowing as she concentrated. "Oh! Well, there was that one thing about Senpai's registration, and how it's surprising the Regulatory Commission hasn't noticed Senpai's school registration doesn't match her birth records."

"... Wait, what!?" Nabiki gaped at her.

Sayuri sighed. "We thought you knew? Yeah, according to Ukyou, the Regulatory Commission for High School level competitive team sports has cracked down on situations where a student's gender is in question. Something about schools fielding male players on female teams and dressing them in drag? Anyway, they check your registration against your medical records and your Family Register, and if one of them doesn't match, they pull the plug."

"We figured Himura must have someone on the Board in her pocket to make sure Ranma didn't get looked at too closely," Yuka shrugged. "I mean, it's not like it'd be all that tragic if Ranma did get booted out. It would mean that Himura wouldn't have any way to complete her challenge or to have Ranma play for her even if she could, and chances are they'd just disqualify the entire team for the year."

"Yeah, it'd be kind of a pyrrhic victory," Sayuri added. "I'd rather beat her at her own game, to be honest."

Nabiki frowned and rubbed her chin. "That's not like her… something like that would completely blow Himura out of the water! There's no way she would leave something like that to chance if she knew about it."

"She knows," Sayuri said. "Ukyou says she ran afoul of it when Himura tried to recruit her to the team."

"Then she must have had it taken care of before she even made her challenge to Ranma," Nabiki said, pondering. "But still… there's no way she could own the whole commission, especially not being cut off from her Grandfather's resources." She chewed on the end of her thumb. "I don't like this…"

"Why not?" Sayuri asked. "It sounded to me like a whole lotta stuff that could blow up in Himura's stupid face, but nothing that would really hurt us at all."

"That's why I don't like it," Nabiki muttered darkly.

"No offense, but you sound a little paranoid, Nabiki," Yuka said, chuckling. "There's more than enough stuff set to blow up in our stupid faces for us to be worrying about Himura messing up her own paperwork."

"Maybe," Nabiki replied, unconvinced. "I need to look into this. Ugh! Why did I have to find out
about it on a weekend!!? She sighed and rubbed the bridge of her nose then wobbled a bit. She managed to catch herself and shook her head to clear the fog. "Nhhh… How are things going otherwise? Anything else I need to know about?" she asked, trying to act nonchalant.

"Nothing that can't wait until tomorrow," Akane said, putting a hand on her shoulder. "We should get you to bed before you fall over like Ranma did."

"Can I just crawl in with Ranma?" Nabiki asked, quirking an eyebrow at her. She leaned in and added in a whisper. "I'll share."

"Nabiki!" Akane hissed, blushing and glancing toward the other girls nervously.

"I think it's best if you all sleep in your own beds tonight," Kasumi said gently. "You've worn out poor Ranma quite a bit over the last few nights - and worn out Father as well." She sighed. "I wonder how expensive soundproofing would be?"

Both Nabiki and Akane stared at the floor, beet red while the other girls all gaped at them.

"I want to judge," Yuka said finally. "I really, really do… But after thinking about the available selection of boys at school and in the surrounding area…"

"... And the fact you haven't had a date in two years?" Sayuri added sweetly.

"... And that, thank you, Sayuri…" Yuka said through clenched teeth, "... I'm starting to think you may have made the only rational choice. Which is to share the one non-perverted guy in all of Furinkan. Who also happens to be a girl." Yuka sighed and pillowed her cheek on her fist. "Being a totally straight girl with standards isn't easy."

Rin timidly raised her hand. "I haven't had a date either… if that makes you feel any better."

"You hush, you have the duck!"

"N-no I don't! I-it's not like that!"

"You bought yourself a duck plushie two days ago! It has glasses! You call it M-chan!"

"Eeeeeeeeee! You promised you wouldn't tell about that!"

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Ranma woke up with a mild headache to the smells of breakfast being prepared. She rolled over and hesitated for a moment, not having encountered the usual impediment of another body next to her own. Carefully she opened one eye.

I'm… downstairs? She blinked and sat up slowly. She was on a futon that had been rolled out in the living room. "Uh… hello?"

"Oh, you're awake!" Kasumi poked her head into the room. "Just give me a minute, Ranma, I've got to get the soup simmering and I'll be right out. Don't go anywhere!"

"Umm… okay?" Ranma said, rubbing the back of her head. She realized her hair had come out of its braid again. Ugh, don't feel like dealing with it long today, but it's getting to be a pain to braid. Maybe I should go back to a ponytail, since that stupid dragon-whisker curse is gone? Doesn't quite feel like 'me' that way though.

Kasumi stepped into the living room, walked over and knelt next to the futon. "I'm sorry for putting
you down here, Ranma, but you seemed exhausted and… as much as my sisters love you, I worry
that they might forget you're just one person and that you need your rest too. I had to shoo them back
upstairs half the night!" She smiled. "How's your head?"
"Not bad," Ranma said, rubbing her forehead. "Ugh, what happened?"
Kasumi looked concerned a moment. "You don't remember?"
"It's a little fuzzy," Ranma rubbed her eyes.
"Ranma, are you a boy or a girl?"
"What sorta silly question is that, Kasumi?" Ranma said. She gestured at herself. "I'm a girl,
obviously."
Kasumi's eyes widened. "... Oh my…"
"An' if you want that to change, you gotta wait until Monday sometime, 'cuz the soap is still good
until then." She stretched, then noticed Kasumi's agape expression. "... What?"
"It's just… well, there was that one time you hit your head…" Kasumi fidgeted. "... I'm sorry,
Ranma, I just wanted to be sure!"
"Oh… Oh! Right, that!" Ranma winced as she remembered the incident. It wasn't so much because
she'd believed she was a girl anymore, but more a matter of just how cringe-worthy a girl she had
been. She blinked, suddenly realizing that she was able to remember the details of that event from both sides. "No, no, nothing like that. If there's something wrong in my head, the volleyball
didn't do it. I just can't remember why I froze up. It felt like my sixth sense went nutso or something."
"Well, that's a relief," Kasumi said. Then after a pause, she reached out and put a hand on Ranma's
shoulder. "Ranma… forgive me, but… are you a boy or a girl? I don't mean your current form."
Ranma looked into Kasumi's calm, brown eyes for a time, then looked down to contemplate her own
hands. "I woulda freaked out if you had asked me that even a week ago," Ranma said. "Two weeks
ago I'd have shouted the answer 'I'm a man!' from the highest rooftop." With a heavy sigh her voice
dropped to a near whisper. "Now? It… depends on the day. It depends on the company. It depends."
She chewed on her lower lip. "When I'm centered, it feels like I'm somewhere in-between." Pulling
her knees up to her chest, she draped her arms over them. "I'm sorry… I know that isn't an essay
question. The first thing I did this morning was obsess about hair, so… I guess I'm on the girl side
right now?" She offered a weak smile.
Kasumi clucked her tongue and hugged the redhead. "Ranma, we already talked about this. I don't
honestly believe anyone who really cares about you is overly concerned about the matter."
"Well, except for my parents," Ranma said, a little glumly.
Kasumi pointedly did not amend her statement. "You said you were worried about your hair?"
Ranma nodded and reached back to pull a handful over her shoulder. "Kinda felt like having it in a
braid again, but it's such a pain to do up."
"It's not that bad if you have help," Kasumi said brightly. "Here, turn your head and I'll do it.
It is good to see you taking better care of your hair. I know it's more difficult, but it really is better to
let it out of the pigtail now and then."


"Yeah, well, Kodachi'll be cross if I let it get bad like it was before," Ranma said, leaning forward a bit to allow Kasumi to draw her hair back.

"You've made friends with Kodachi now too?" Kasumi asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Yeah. As a girl, if you can believe that. She still thinks me'n the curse are two separate people," Ranma said, closing her eyes.

"You… mean you and your male side," Kasumi corrected carefully. "You're currently in your cursed form."

"... Hmmm? Oh, yeah… What did I say?" Ranna frowned, then shrugged it off as unimportant.
"Anyway, 'cuz she thinks I'm Ranma's sister she's gotten all buddy-buddy… 'cept, I think she was lonely 'cuz she hasn't really been using it to get an advantage in the omiai like she said she was planning to. She's… well, she's still kinda out there, but… She's been serious about trying to take care of me. Girl-me, I mean."

"That's good," Kasumi said. "I imagine a family like hers leaves a mark. I remember her brother used to be quite different in the past, when he and Nabiki were still friends in Middle School."

"'Tachi', right?" Ranma asked. "Actually… He's kinda back. Turns out their Dad was messing with his medication. He's a lot more like how Nabiki described him in Middle School now."

"Oh? Well then… if I remember correctly, he was quite a little charmer at that age. Perhaps you should be careful?" Kasumi teased playfully as she divided Ranma's hair into strands and began to weave them.

Rather than get offended or indignant, Ranma just chuckled. For some reason, the idea didn't seem so threatening anymore. "I can actually see that. But he knows I'm taken and he seems kinda mortified about how he's been behaving. I dunno how long it'll last, but…"

"He knows about you and Nabiki?" Kasumi asked, sounding startled.

"Oh, no, I… uh…" Ranma blushed as she realized that she hadn't kept Kasumi in the loop about a number of things. She swallowed nervously. "Actually… he thinks me'n Ryouga are engaged."

Kasumi paused in her braiding for a beat, then continued. "... I see. Should I start setting a place at dinner for him, then?"

"No, no…!" Ranma said quickly, fidgeting in embarrassment. "It was ploy that got outta hand. I told Kuno that I was engaged to Ryouga to get him off my back, then Ryouga told the hospital I was his fiancee so I could bail him out, and then that got back to the people at school and…" she sighed. "It kind of snowballed. It hasn't gotten back to his Mom yet, thankfully…"

"You've met Ryouga's parents?" Kasumi asked, surprised. "I thought he lived alone?"

"He did. It's complicated. His Mom has the whole sense of direction problem too. Dr. Tofu thinks it might actually be a legitimate curse, something passed down through his family. She only just made it back to town, an' now we gotta find a cure for the curse, because his Dad died recently and…" Ranma trailed off, realizing she was getting into Link territory. "... Umm, it's complicated, but her curse is getting worse, and if she gets lost again, it'll probably be the last time he ever sees her, unless we find a cure."

"Oh my… and this is what you have been doing with him every weekend?"
"Yeah!" Ranma said. "We met this Neurologist named Dr. Hirano who figured out some stuff about his problems, and got him in touch with Dr Tofu, and between 'em they figured out most of how the thing works."

"Nabiki said it involved using a lot of ki?" Kasumi asked uncertainly.

"Yeah… Ryoga's got a mess of bad ki in his noggin that causes the problem. We've just been trying to find ways to flush it outta him." She glanced at her hand, feeling the palm itch. 'Cept instead we keep making the Link between use stronger and having freaking THERAPY SESSIONS. An' even dragged Nabiki into the last one. I wonder… I wonder if what they were talking about… about the Neko-ken is true? Could the Link be a way to cure that? Would it be worth taking the risk, even?"

"You got quiet," Kasumi said, startling Ranma out of her reverie.

"Oh, uh… Sorry," Ranma said sheepishly. "Just thinking about the Neko-ken. My own mess of badness in my head. Wondering if there might be a way to fix that, too."

"Emotional trauma and curses are usually two separate things," Kasumi said gently. "But… I suppose it's hard to say." She finished up the braid and wrapped the end with a red ribbon and tied it off neatly. "There… that's not quite how you usually wear yours, but your hair has gotten longer and fuller and this is fairly unisex."

Ranma reached back and felt her braid. It was somewhat thicker than she was used to, tapering more gradually from the back of her head rather than the nape of her neck. It didn't pull nearly as tightly, but it felt secure. "I think this'll do just fine."

Kasumi handed her a mirror. "I thought you might appreciate a more mature look this time."

Ranma examined herself in the mirror. It was definitely less of a pigtail and more of a braid. And Kasumi was right - she could easily imagine it looking good on her male side as well - almost like something you'd see on a wandering samurai in some manga.

Hold on.

"Wasn't there a manga about a samurai with red hair in a style like this?" Ranma said, giving her a smile.

"Rurouni Kenshin?" Kasumi asked. "Oh no, his was in a ponytail."

"O-oh…" Ranma deflated a little.

"This is more Duo Maxwell." She winked. "I preferred mecha and spaceships to samurai growing up."

Ranma giggled. "I guess the samurai stuff was a little too close to home, huh?"

There were footsteps out in the hall they both turned to see Nabiki stumble blearily into the living room.

"Nabiki? Why are you up so early? It's Sunday," Kasumi said, cocking her head curiously.

"Nnnf… Boyfriend," she muttered. She cracked one eye open, then closed it. "…Girlfriend," she corrected. "Whatever. Make tongue flappy noises… language… thingie…"

"Oh, you want to talk with Ranma?" Kasumi nodded and stood, brushing off her skirt. "All right.
"Shall I make you some coffee?"

"Mnnn… Black stuff…" Nabiki nodded. She stumped her zombie-like way over to Ranma, who was still sitting on her futon, grabbed her by the back of her shirt and tried to drag her into the back yard.

"H-hey! Okay, okay, I'm coming!" Ranma got up, though Nabiki didn't stop trying to drag her. Ranma hastily adjusted her tank top and boxers; She had picked up a little feminine modesty, despite her best efforts.

"You okay, Nabs?" Ranma asked, peering at her.

"Mornings… suck," Nabiki mumbled, managing some level of coherency. "Gotta tell you sum'n tho."

"What?" Ranma cocked her head.

By way of a reply, Nabiki reached out and grabbed her hand.

Ranma sucked in a breath as she felt the Link flare to life. She snatched up Nabiki's hand in both of hers and held it as she stared at her. "You still have it!?"

The ghost of one of Nabiki's signature smirks crossed her face and she nodded. "Yup. Found out last night. Came home to tell you, but you were out. Got up early instead." She yawned and started to walk back towards the house, towing Ranma along by the hand.

"Wha…? Wait, where are we going now?" Ranma asked, confused.

"Back t'bed. It's Sunday."

"Umm… but I'm not tired, why'm I…?"

"Because cuddles," Nabiki growled in a tone that told Ranma she should probably just shut up and accept her fate for the next little while.

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*Poor Ryouga.*

*Spoiler? It kinda gets worse from here for him.*
(Three years ago)

Ryouga hadn't been having a good day at school.

School had never been fun for him. It was hard to get into it when three times out of five he couldn't even make it in time for the first class and would spend the first half of the day out in the hall holding up buckets of water. He didn't mind that so much; after a while he'd realized it was good strength training and he didn't even notice the weight of them anymore - even if he held them up all morning.

But it was boring and it was frustrating when he missed half the classes and had to sit there without knowing what was going on. The teachers had him written off as a delinquent and the rest of the his classmates avoided him and whispered things behind his back. About the only good thing about school had been getting a regular hot lunch but even that had been messed up now that this new kid had arrived and started beating him to the curry bread.

Now? Now he had to share the hallway with that same bread-stealing jerk! He couldn't even have a punishment to himself.

"The world hates my guts..." Ryouga muttered. Getting afternoon detention was bad because it meant he might not make it home before nightfall.

"Nah... Pretty sure the teacher ain't a fan, though," the boy standing next to him said.

Ryouga ground his teeth and didn't look in his direction. "This is all your fault, you know," he growled. "If you hadn't stolen my bread...!

"Yeah, you almost got it that time!" the boy grinned at him. "You're a lot stronger than you look! Still a bit slow, though. But you're way better than any of the other guys around here." He held out his hand. "Hi! I'm Ranma. What's your name?"

Ryouga stared at the boy incredulously for a moment. He seemed totally oblivious to the fact that Ryouga didn't like him. His uniform jacket was done up improperly and the collar was open. His dark hair was slick and had an odd sheen to it - almost greasy-looking - and didn't look like it had been washed recently. His face was clean enough but there was grime just below his neck that indicated washing his face was probably the extent of Ranma's daily cleansings and even that was obviously rushed and haphazard. Ryouga could see a couple of spots of what he assumed were grime on his cheekbones. His eyes were a bright, crystal blue and had an odd, guileless sort of sparkle to them.

"My name is for my friends," Ryouga growled and looked away.

"Okay! Then let's be friends!" Ranma said brightly. "You're the only guy here who's any fun to spar with anyway."

"I wasn't sparring," Ryouga snarled at him. "I was trying to get lunch."

"Yeah! That was crazy, right?" Ranma said. "Everybody was just going nuts. Was that just today, or is it always like that?"

Ryouga gaped at the boy. How was he not getting this? He sighed and decided that the annoying jerk just wasn't going to stop. "They don't have enough for everyone. Budget cuts," he muttered at
"Oh," Ranma said. He put down his pail of water and dug into his pocket, pulling out a cellophane wrapped melonpan. "Here, I wouldn't feel right if you went hungry."

Ryouga stared at it. "You took the bread then didn't eat it?!" He felt his ire rising at the thought of the wastefulness, even as his stomach growled in response.

"Yeah, I was gonna save it for dinner, in case there wasn't anything else," Ranma said, again oblivious to the dangerous look in Ryouga's eyes. "You want it?"

"What do you mean 'in case there wasn't anything else'?" Ryouga asked, his ire fading.

"Pops is pretty good about scrounging up stuff, but school is expensive and sometimes there ain't nothin' t'eat when I get home," Ranma replied. "If I'm only gonna get one meal a day it's easier to sleep if I have it before bed, y'know?"

Ryouga was silent a moment. His parents often weren't home when he was, owing to the family curse, but there was always something to eat in the house, even if it was just instant ramen and crackers. His parents kept the house well-stocked with non-perishables just in case. Ryouga felt a small pang of guilt for the times he had complained about that. "Keep it," he said finally.

"Really? Thanks!" Ranma tucked it away.

"Ryouga," Ryouga grunted gruffly.

"What?"

"My name. Ryouga Hibiki," Ryouga clarified. "But we are not friends."

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(Present Day)

Ryouga slowly opened his eyes. The familiar tiles of the ceiling of his room greeted him, the detailing and slight imperfections instantly familiar to him. For a moment he mused about how it was nice to have a ceiling be so familiar, rather than the inside of an old battered tent.

He sat up and rubbed his eyes. He had been dreaming about… something, but it had slipped away as soon as he opened his eyes. It didn't feel all that important, though. At the very least there wasn't the same guilt associated with some of his more usual recent dreams.

There was a quiet knock at his door.

"Ryouga? Are you awake?" Akari's voice was tentative… hesitant.

"Akari?" Ryouga felt a lurch in his chest at the memory of the previous night. Most of the evening had been spent during an awkward dinner as he and Akari answered his mother's questions but they never actually got a chance to talk about things between them. "Yeah, I'm up…"

Akari opened the door and peeked in. She blushed, seeing he didn't have a shirt on and slapped a hand over her eyes. "I'm sorry! I just…" embarrassed, she shifted her pinkie, to peek at him from behind her hand. "... May I come in?"

"Sure…" Ryouga replied. Under other circumstances he'd probably have been over the moon to have Akari in his room but things had happened to ground him lately, especially with respect to what
she likely wanted to discuss. Mostly he just felt uncomfortable and anxious about what was going to happen next.

Akari stepped in and closed the door behind her, still with her hand over her eyes. She walked in, pulled up a chair next to his bed and sat down.

Ryouga chuckled in spite of himself. "Akari, you can uncover your eyes. You've seen me without a shirt before."

"I know, but… that was always due to the curse or… some other situation where it couldn't be helped," she replied, though she did timidly lower her hand. Her eyes went wide when she got a look at his back and she bolted out of her chair and moved immediately to the side of the bed. "Ryouga! What happened to your back!?"

Ryouga winced. "Right… that… sorry, forgot to mention that. There was… ah… an explosion. They had to pick a lot of rock fragments outta my back at the hospital. Seems to be healing okay, though."

Akari continued to stare. Her lip quivered a bit and she sat back down in the chair. "I'm… sorry…"

"You're sorry?" Ryouga asked, stunned. "Akari…"

"Please let me finish, Ryouga," she cut him off softly. "I've been rehearsing what I wanted to say to you when I found you again, ever since what happened in Ryugenzawa…"

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Akari stumbled on the path, limping as fast as she could. Blood was running down her left leg and her arms were wrapped desperately around an unconscious black piglet. The forest behind them shook with a roar.

"Please leave us alone! Please!" she cried out as she stumbled again. "Somebody help us!"

Several smaller trees were forced apart as a large reptilian creature pushed its way through the foliage behind them. It looked like one of the lizards that people kept as pets - specifically a bearded dragon - but it was much, much larger, its stature emphasizing the 'dragon' part of that name as it loomed over them.

Akari tripped and fell to the ground. She rolled onto her back to face the monster, shivering in fear and cradling the piglet protectively. "I won't let you hurt him!" she screamed at the monster.

The bearded dragon, however, seemed more than content to take them both. It opened its mouth wide and lunged forward. Akari threw up her free arm and screamed as darkness descended.

Then cleared.

She blinked, shielding her eyes as the bulk that had been blocking the light was suddenly pushed aside. There were sounds of a battle - blows landing and roars of pain. She squinted and could just make out the form of the great dragon as it scuttled rapidly away, looking somewhat ragged.

"What are you doing here? Don't you know it isn't safe?" a gruff voice demanded.

Akari turned her head to see the silhouette of someone wearing a long overcoat.

"H-help…" she managed to gasp before she passed out.
"It's good you brought her here, Shin m'boy. That gash on her leg could have been nasty if not treated properly."

"Well, it's not like I was just going to leave them out there. And... who are you again?"

"I'm your Grandfather, you doh!"

Akari could hear voices as she gradually returned to consciousness. She opened her eyes and looked around. She was on a cot in a largish room - the space that she occupied set apart from the rest by a white sheet hung to make a divider of sorts. She could see the silhouettes of two men sitting on the far side of it.

"H-hello?" she said timidly.

There was a scrabbling sound from the other side of the sheet, and it was pushed aside to reveal an old man - balding but with a long grey beard - and a young man with brown hair and a white headband.

"Oh, you're awake young miss!" the old man said. "You had us quite worried there for a while!"

"What were you doing this deep in the forest? Didn't you see all the traps?" the boy demanded.

"Shinnosuke, mind your manners!" the old man said gruffly. "Please forgive my boy Shin. He is unused to people. We've lived alone in this forest all his life."

"Mostly because other people have enough sense to stay out!" Shinnosuke said, folding his arms.

"Megaton punch!" The old man drove his fist into Shinnosuke's face, silencing him. "Though Shin does have a point, Miss. How did you wander so deep into the forest?"

"Oh, you're awake young miss!" the old man said. "You had us quite worried there for a while!"

"What were you doing this deep in the forest? Didn't you see all the traps?" the boy demanded.

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Akari's eyes flicked from one back to the other as she tried to process what had happened. Suddenly, a more urgent concern came to mind. "Ryouga...!" She started looking around the bedroll she had been lying on. "Ryouga? Ryouga!" She became more frantic as she realized the small black piglet wasn't there. She turned back to them. "Please, there was a small black piglet with me! Please tell me you found him!"

"Oh, yes, yes, of course. Your pet piglet is fine. I just put him somewhere quiet to rest," the old man reassured her. He stood carefully. "I used to work as a keeper at a petting zoo in these parts, so luckily I still remembered some basic animal first aid. The poor thing was quite battered, but he should be fine with some rest." He lead her over to a cage enclosure in the corner of the room where the piglet lay on a folded blanket. For a moment she felt a surge of horror as she feared the worst, but then she saw that his sides were rising and falling steadily. She knelt and opened the cage, reaching in and gently examining him, putting aside her own needs for the moment and drawing on her experience as a pig breeder. Nothing seemed broken or dislocated, but she knew he would do much better in human form.

"You seem to have some skill with this yourself, miss...?"

"Akari," she said, laying Ryouga back on the blanket. "I breed sumo pigs. It's my family's profession. I've been treating injured pigs since I could walk." She turned to him. "Could I ask for some hot water and a blanket, please?"

"Pardon me?"
"I'll explain once I have them. They're for Ryouga."

He quirked an eyebrow, but motioned to Shinnosuke to fetch the requested items. After a minute the young man came back with a kettle and a folded blanket.

Akari carefully took the piglet from the cage and put him on the floor, laying the blanket over him carefully, leaving his head exposed. Then she poured the hot water on his head.

The change was immediate and dramatic; the tiny piglet suddenly replaced with the form of a young man. Ryouga's eyes snapped open and he gasped as the change thrust him back to consciousness. "Akari…!"

Akari put a calming hand on his shoulder. "I'm here. I'm here, Ryouga," she said, turning his head so he could look at her.

He sighed in relief, sat up slowly and carefully drew the blanket around himself. He reached out for her, putting a hand on her shoulder. "Are you okay?! I… I don't remember much of what happened after we fell off that cliff…"

Akari smiled and took his hand, holding it to her cheek. She sniffled as the tears she had been holding back started to flow. "You… you took the brunt of the landing… we fell in the river. You almost drowned…! We were chased by a… a monster, and… and…"

He pulled her into a hug, closing his eyes tight as he held her. "I'm sorry…! God, I'm so sorry, Akari!"

"Well… now that is a new one. I've never seen that trick before," the old man said, then leaned closer. "But you boy… you look familiar… Wait, I remember you! You were one of the three who were here last year, who helped us subdue the Orochi and save Shin's life!"

"What are you talking about, Grandpa?" Shin asked, crossing his arms and giving Ryouga a skeptical look. "I've never seen this guy before! And I think I'd remember someone saving my life!"

The old man sighed. "As you can see, Shin's memory hasn't improved any since the last time you were here."

Akari turned her head a bit, though she stayed close to Ryouga. "You've met?"

"Yeah… I ended up here a while ago, while I was looking for Akane," Ryouga said.

"Akane? Akane Tendo?!" Shin leaned forward. "You know her? Where is she? Is she okay?!

"Akane Shin remembers," the old man grumbled. "Shin! We've been over this! Akane went home! To Tokyo! She's fine!"

"He's right. She's at home at the Tendo Dojo in Nerima," Ryouga said. "I… haven't seen her since the wedding…"

"Wedding?!" Shin yelped, going white. "N-no…"

Ryouga sighed. "I guess I should get you up to speed…"

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Akari stepped out of the small house holding two cups full of hot tea in her hands. She walked over to the bench where Ryouga was sitting.
He had changed into one of Shinnosuke's spare outfits, blue shirt and dark pants with a darker blue zookeeper's overcoat overtop. He was staring out into the forest with one of those distant stares he sometimes got.

"Here. I made this with something Shinnosuke called the 'Water of Life'. He said it would help us recover faster," Akari said, slipping onto the bench next to him and handing him a cup.

"Akari, you shouldn't be walking around on your leg..." Ryouga said, but she put a finger to his lips.

"I'm fine. Really! It was just a scratch. Plus walking around keeps it from getting stiff." She took a sip of her tea. "You look good in blue."

"No I don't," Ryouga said, blushing slightly.

"You do!" She punched his shoulder lightly. He was still quiet though, which worried her.

"Ryouga...?"

"I... need to go away for a while, Akari..." he said softly.

"Ryouga, no! We talked about this!" Akari protested, grabbing his arm.

He closed his eyes tightly. "I've already made up my mind!" he said sharply. "I can't... I can't keep you safe with both curses. I have to cure one or the other, or... or..."

"No..." She shook her head in denial and grabbed his sleeve. "No, Ryouga! I don't care about your directional problems! I like your Jusenkyo curse! This was my fault! I was the one who wasn't paying attention...!"

"Akari, if something had happened to you...!" He shook his head. "That's why your Grandfather said only someone who could defeat Katsunishiki could be with you - so you'd be kept safe!"

"And you beat Katsunishiki! Easily! You're the strongest, most noble, most pig-like man I've ever met!" Akari gushed, then covered her mouth. "I'm sorry, I forgot you don't like the pig comparisons..."

Ryouga chuckled then sighed heavily. "But what good is it if I can't protect you when it counts? If I'm the one who put you in danger in the first place?"

"I'll... I'll get stronger so you don't have to worry!" Akari said, clenching her fist. "I'll train with Katsunishiki every day, and... and..."

Ryouga put a hand over her fist. "Akari..." He shook his head. "You aren't a martial artist, and you shouldn't force yourself to be something you're not. This is something I need to fix."

"Then let me help you!" she said. "Fix it here. With me."

Ryouga looked down, then nodded subtly. "All right. I'll try."

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Akari's grandfather met them at a nearby parking lot. He had brought a pickup truck with Katsunishiki in the back and, before the truck even came to a stop, the giant sumo pig leapt from the back of the truck and began charging towards them.

Akari knew he was just rushing to see her, his protective instincts kicking in from being separated too long - but, in hindsight, she realized it probably looked like an attack to a bystander.
Ryouga knew him well enough to not react. But Shinnosuke, long trained to subdue the giant animals of Ryugenzawa, reacted before Akari could warn him off.

The boy darted forward, moving with impressive speed, his pushbroom gripped in both hands. Akari called out, but it was too late. Seeing the threat, Katsunishiki swiped at him with one meaty foreleg in a strike that was liable to take his head off.

Shin ducked under the strike with surprising dexterity, then leapt upwards in a somersault over the giant sumo pig, letting Katsunishiki's momentum carry him forward under him while he spun and twisted in mid-air, putting his entire body mass into a precision strike across the back of the sumo pig's skull with the head of the push broom.

Katsunishiki grunted, stumbled forward and crashed to the ground, unconscious, as Shin landed lightly behind him, shouldering his broom.

"Weird. I don't remember that boar from the forest," he said, frowning. Apparently Shin's memory of each of the giant animals for which he and his grandfather were stewards was near-perfect - unlike just about everything else.

"Katsunishiki!" Akari cried, running forward to to her favored pet and gathering his huge head into her arms.

The giant sumo pig grunted, his eyes unfocused. There was a nasty bump on the back of his head, but a quick check told her nothing was broken, and no serious damage appeared to have been done. He had just been stunned.

"Is he alright?" Ryouga asked, crouching next to her.

She nodded and sighed in relief, stroking Katsunishiki's forehead. "Silly boy was just trying to protect me."

"Oh, he was your giant animal." Shinnosuke walked up, rubbing the back of his head and looking sheepish. "I'm really sorry! I tried not to hurt him, just stun him. Is he okay?"

Akari nodded and smiled reassuringly at him. "It's okay. Katsunishiki is a sumo pig. He's taken worse hits and gotten back up. That was still very impressive how you defeated him so quickly, though!"

"Yes. Yes it was," a voice familiar to Akari said. Her grandfather got out of the truck and walked towards them, rubbing his chin. "Are you the boy who saved my daughter's life?"

Akari felt more than saw Ryouga wince next to her and curl into himself a little more. She put an arm on his shoulder sympathetically.

"That's right! My boy Shin is quite the fighter when it comes to the local oversized wildlife!" Shin's grandfather said boisterously. "Your daughter is very lucky he found her and her boyfriend when he did. This is a dangerous region to be in."

Akari's grandfather's eyes fixed Ryouga with a harsh glare. "Yes. I imagine it is." His eyes narrowed, then he looked away, smiling in a more friendly manner as he turned to regard Shin. "It seems I have much to thank you for! And... It appears you have proven your worthiness by defeating Katsunishiki."

Akari's eyes widened. "Grandfather!"
He raised an eyebrow at her. "What? It's true. I'm merely pointing out a fact, Akari. There is no need for you to get riled up. You were so concerned not long ago that you would never find any young man who could defeat Katsunishiki, and now we have stumbled across two!"

Akari glared at him. "Grandfather, I've already made my choice about that! Ryouga is who I wish to be with. You know that!"

His gaze fixed on Ryouga again, who couldn't meet his eyes. "Yes… Of course. Still… I think that the courage and hospitality that Shin and his grandfather have shown deserve something in return!" He turned to Shin's grandfather. "Would you and your grandson be willing to come be our guests for dinner?"

"Hmmm…" He stroked his beard. "It has been quite a while since Shin and I have had a meal we didn't cook ourselves. And it would be good for Shin to socialize and get out of the dark forest. Yes… yes, we would be happy to accept such a generous offer."

On the ride back to the farm, Akari's grandfather drove, with Shin's grandfather sitting next to him in the cab. The two old men quickly struck up a lively conversation, finding that they apparently had much in common. Akari, Ryouga and Shin rode in the back with Katsunishiki. Shin was a bit wary of being in a small space with the huge pig, but once Akari had introduced him formally to the sumo pig, the giant accepted him good-naturedly.

"Pigs are really quite friendly and loyal," Akari said, settling on her favorite topic to fill the time as they bounced down the road in the old pickup.

"I've actually never met a friendly pig," Shin admitted, scratching Katsunishiki behind the ears. The large sumo pig grunted and closed his eyes, enjoying the attention. "My only experiences have been with the boars in the forest. The Water of Life tends to make all the animals more aggressive and they were wild boars to begin with. I didn't think pigs could get this big outside of our forest, though."

"Katsunishiki is special," Akari said, beaming. "He's from a long line of sumo pigs. He's got excellent genes; all of the best qualities of pigs. He's never been defeated in the ring!"

"And he listens to your commands?" Shin asked, focusing on her. "How do you get such a big animal to listen to you?"

She smiled. "A lot of love and patience. Plus my family has been doing it for generations. We have a lot of techniques that we use to tame and train pigs that we start with right from birth."

"That would actually be useful in the forest - if we could tame some of the animals there and train them to help us out." Shin rubbed his chin. "Do you think you could show me when we get to your farm?"

"Sure!" Akari beamed, happy to have someone see the value in her family's profession and knowledge. She noticed that Ryouga was quiet, however, sitting in the corner of the truck bed and not saying anything. "... Perhaps Ryouga could show you? He's spent a lot of time on the farm, and I've shown him a lot."

Ryouga shook his head. "I'm… actually not that good with the pigs," he said. "I just spar with Katsunishiki sometimes."

"And that's been a huge help!" Akari insisted. "You've done more for his training than I ever could
Ryouga glanced at Shin. "Didn't help much."

Akari winced. *Don't tell me he blames himself for that too?*

"I'm used to fighting big animals," Shin said, oblivious. "It's all about using their momentum against them. I could show him a few things to watch out for against smaller, faster opponents if you like?"

Akari sighed in defeat, watching as Ryouga closed himself off from her even further. "That… would be much appreciated, Shin."

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Akari's grandfather and Shin's grandfather continued to be in good spirits that evening, chatting amicably over dinner about animal husbandry, then breaking out the sake. Akari could see her grandfather was happy to meet someone his own age who shared a lot of the same interests. Shin also seemed fascinated by the farm and the idea of 'friendly' animals - especially of training them. As promised, Akari showed him several of the techniques she used, and he watched, fascinated, pausing frequently to take detailed notes.

"That's amazing!" he exclaimed as Akari led several of the smaller show pigs through some of their acrobatic routines. "I never knew pigs could be so clever!"

"They're very smart animals," Akari replied, again enjoying being able to go on about her favorite subject. "They're very social and they're not dirty like people think. It's just the opposite! They tend to wallow in mud as a way to keep cool and to keep their skin from being sunburned, which I think is actually quite clever of them, don't you?"

Shin nodded and closed his notebook. "I wonder if maybe I can get some of the boar piglets young enough that I might be able to train them to help me keep the other animals corralled? Grandpa hasn't been able to help as much the last few years and my traps aren't working as well as I might have hoped."

"It's certainly worth a try!" Akari smiled. "We have a few manuals on pig rearing that I can loan you."

"I'd really appreciate that, Ms. Akari, thank you!" he said brightly. *Such a difference from our first encounters with him! I guess he's just gotten used to being gruff because he constantly has to shoo away unwise people from the forest?* She cocked her head as she realized something else. "You remembered my name!"

"Yeah, um… about that…" Sheepishly he rolled back his sleeve to display his arm, where he had written her name several times in marker.

She giggled in spite of herself which just made him blush and look more bashful.

"Umm… y-you're a very good cook, Ms. Akari." he added. "Thank you again for dinner. Your cooking reminds me of someone else's… kind of."

"Oh! You're quite welcome, Shin!" Akari said. "Ryouga has always raved about my cooking, but it's just regular farm fare."

"Ryouga? Who's that?" Shin blinked, confused.
"Ryouga? My boyfriend?" Akari said gently. By now she was well aware of the boy's pervasive memory problems.

"You have a boyfriend?" Shin looked stricken. "O-oh… I… I didn't know." He turned quickly. "I'll… I'll go see how Grandpa is getting on. Sorry to be a bother!" He quickly ran back towards the house.

"Shin, wait!" She called out to him but he had already almost reached the house. She sighed and glanced around only to realize that Ryouga was nowhere to be seen. She felt the cold grip of dread in her heart, fearing that he had wandered off and gotten lost again - but then she heard sounds from behind the shed - the hollow resonance of an axe striking wood. She walked over and peered around the corner of the small building.

Ryouga was there chopping logs with his bare hands - striking them with a knife edged chop that split them cleanly. He had accumulated quite a pile of ready firewood.

"Ryouga, there you are!" she said happily. "What are you doing over here? We have enough wood chopped for a few days yet."

"I needed to do something useful for a bit," Ryouga said quietly, placing another log and expertly splitting it with a sharp, controlled strike. "It helps me think."

"Would you like a drink? You've been working hard all this time…” She fidgeted, uncertain what to say. She felt oddly guilty, having spent so much time with Shin, oblivious to what Ryouga was doing.

He gave her a wan smile. "Nah, I'm okay. I think I might turn in early, though." He stood and started walking in what she presumed was supposed to be the direction of the farmhouse… but was the exact opposite way.

"Ryouga…" she said timidly, then pointed in the correct direction. "... That way?"

Usually it was something Ryouga laughed off or made some lame, silly excuse about. This time, however, he just closed his eyes as a pained expression crossed his face. He turned in the right direction. "Of course… thanks Akari."

She watched him go, feeling that awful ache growing in her heart and wondered what else she could do to make things better.

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Akari had never been one to have trouble sleeping, but that night was an exception. If it hadn't been, she might never have overheard the conversation.

"Ryouga, you must understand that I have to think of my granddaughter's welfare and her future. You are an admirable young man, but…"

Akari crept to her door at the mention of Ryouga's name and peered through the crack as she listened. Ryouga and her grandfather were down the hall, in the small kitchen.

"I understand," Ryouga said. There were rustling sounds. "You want to be sure who she's with can protect her."

"I have concerns about your ability to do that, yes. You are undoubtedly strong but your curse and your inability to find your way are… crucial weaknesses. Neither of which are your fault, of course!"
But… an excuse will not protect my granddaughter."

"I agree totally with you. That's why I'm packing. I'm going to find a cure… for one or the other at the very least."

Akari gasped softly, covering her mouth. No! He PROMISED!

"Good. Good, that is what I hoped you'd say. And I hope you find it quickly and return to make my Akari happy. But… understand that I am an old man, and I must ensure my Akari is taken care of before I go."

"... of course."

"I have already discussed the matter with Shinnosuke's grandfather. He will stay with us for the time being to help with the farm and to learn animal husbandry from Akari for use in the forest. If you return before his training is complete, then that is where the matter will end. But… should you not have found your solution by then… Shin's grandfather and I will… make arrangements."

Ryouga's voice sounded dead; defeated. "They get along well. I'm… sure he would make her happy."

"She would be happier with YOU, son. Take this as a motivator to complete your quest quickly - not as disapproval?"

"I swear to you I'll come back a whole man for your granddaughter's sake… or not come back at all," Ryouga replied grimly.

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"So you overheard that…" Ryouga sighed heavily.

"Why didn't you talk to me first, Ryouga?" Akari asked. "I know it's a difficult thing for you to talk about, but… I can help!" She clasped his hand, leaning in to give him an earnest, tearful look.

He stared at her hands holding his, trying to sort out what he was feeling from the complex jumble. He curled his fingers around her hand and closed his eyes. "I… don't know if you can, Akari. I know you want to, but… People… smart people… smarter than me… have spent their whole lives trying to solve the problems I've had and failed. Curses aren't easy things."

"Then I'll spend my life with you looking for a solution," she said fiercely.

"And give up pig training?" He opened his eyes, giving her a skeptical look. "Give up the farm and leave your grandfather behind for a life of aimless wandering and constant danger?"

"Yes! Absolutely!" Akari said firmly, her eyes flashing.

Ryouga sighed. "Akari… you tried this before, don't you remember? When you thought I hated pigs? You tried to train yourself to hate them and you couldn't do it. The pigs, the farm… they're your whole life because you love them."

"I love you," she said firmly.

Ryouga felt a lump in his throat. "How could I possibly say the same thing if I made you give up the life you love for a life I hate? Akari, I almost got you killed…"

"You made a mistake. We made a mistake," Akari said firmly. "We learn from it and move on. That's
what a pig does. A pig doesn't dwell on the past. A pig just does better next time. I'll be more careful to always take the lead when we go for walks, remember that I have to take responsibility for navigating. And keep a thermos with me just in case. That's all."

Ryouga couldn't meet her gaze anymore. "And when I get lost going out to chop wood, and disappear for six months?"

"We'll get you a cell phone. I'll get my driver's license, and if you get lost I'll come and pick you up," she said. "It's not as bad as you or grandfather make out to be! Just… just come home!"

"Your grandfather said…"

"Grandfather will change his mind if I have to deny him dinner for a week!" Akari said gruffly, puffing her cheeks out.

"I can't," Ryouga said, then quickly held up a hand to forestall her protests. "Not for me. For my Mom." He covered her hands with his free one. "My 'getting lost'? It's a curse. An actual curse. Maybe from a demon, sometime long ago. It's meant to make us gradually unable to find the things we love or need - until we die, afraid and alone. It gets worse over time."

Akari's eyes widened. "That's horrible…" she breathed.

"My family has survived because - once in our lives - we can choose a person to be an Anchor for us - someone we can always find our way back to. I wanted you to be my Anchor, but I… wasted my chance making Ranma my Anchor back in Middle School so I could have a stupid fight over bread."

He blushed as he realized that it sounded even stupider out loud than it did in his head.

"That's okay… that's good, right? Ranma is a good friend to you! He understands the Jusenkyo curse and he worked so hard to bring us together!" Akari said, sounding relieved. "So, if you have Ranma as your Anchor, you're safe, right?"

"I'll always be finding my way back to her. Always linked to her. Always part of her life," Ryouga answered. "But… yeah. I'm safe… relatively. But… but my Mom… you have to promise to not talk about my Dad around her, okay?"

"Of course, but… why not?" Akari asked, concerned.

"Dad was… is Mom's Anchor. But… but he died not too long ago."

Akari's eyes widened. "Ryouga… I'm so sorry…!"

"He was very sick for a long time," Ryouga said heavily. "But without him, the only way Mom has been able to keep the curse from progressing is to delude herself into thinking he's still alive. Just… that they keep missing each other. So you mustn't mention him, because if we break her concentration, she'll lose the link forever and her curse will start to worsen. She won't be able to find her way home and eventually she won't even be able to find other people. So… I have to find a cure for the curse soon. And until then, I need to stay here to keep her safe."

"Can you find the cure for it here?" Akari asked.

Ryouga nodded. "Me and Ranma met a Doctor who thinks he might have found a way to figure it out, but… it's probably going to take time. Years, maybe. I can't ask you to wait that long."

"You don't have to," Akari said, smiling again. "If your cure is here, then this is where I belong too! I can help you while you work towards it and help keep your Mother safe so you don't have to"
"What about your grandfather?" Ryouga asked. "He's terrified of dying before he's made sure you're taken care of. Are you really okay with just leaving him alone out there on that farm?"

"Grandfather is as healthy as a pig. He's not going to die anytime soon, no matter how much he wails about it," Akari said firmly. "Your Mother really will die if you don't do this, though. Even if you weren't my boyfriend I'd want to help if I could!"

"And the sumo competitions?" Ryouga asked.

"I'll retire Katsunishiki and focus on raising a new champion once your problems are solved," Akari said. "It'll be good to let him retire while he's still young and if we let a new champion rise it'll give me a goal to work towards. It'll be fun to be the challenger again!"

Ryouga chuckled and shook his head, but he found himself smiling. "You're not going to give up, are you?"

"I'm competitive like a pig," Akari said. "I don't train champion sumo pigs by being a quitter!"

Ryouga took a deep breath. "All right. Thank you... thank you. Please forgive me for being so weak."

She shook her head. "Ryouga, you're the strongest man I've ever known. But even the strongest pig can't be strong all the time. I want to be there to cheer you on when you're strong and to help you up when you're not." She squeezed his hand and let go. "I'll let you get dressed and have a bath. I'll have breakfast ready for you when you come down." She got up and gave him one last smile before she slipped out of his room.

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"So, you sure you don't want me to come along? I mean, I am kinda involved..." Ranma asked as she walked next to Nabiki. She had borrowed some of Nabiki's clothes, a pair of jeans that were just a touch too small for Nabiki (though Ranma had learned enough diplomacy by this point to know not to comment on that) and a loose long-sleeved shirt. Wearing non-school clothes that actually fit as a girl, without fear of hot water causing her to shred them, was a precious luxury.

"I want to break the news of the link to them without their favorite target of aggression present, at least until I de-escalate them," Nabiki said. She had selected her favorite blue sweatshirt with the two hearts on it, opting for comfort over style for the moment.

"You think they're gonna flip out?" Ranma asked worriedly. Nabiki had sent Akane off ahead to get the other fiancees for this 'Fiancee's Tea' meeting they regularly had, but hadn't told her sister anything of what had happened, even after dragging Ranma back to bed to cuddle with them until Nabiki felt like facing the morning, which was nearly afternoon at this point.

"I know they are," Nabiki said nonchalantly. "And if there is a martial artist to serve as a target for their aggression, they will probably beat the crap out of them. I don't qualify yet and I think Jiro's rules about nonviolence should hold things together until I can talk them down. But it might be best if you laid low and took Ryoga with you. Go to the mall or something for the day. Just make it somewhere you or he wouldn't typically be found - just in case one or more of the girls needs a bit more time to cool down. I'll ring your cell to give you the all clear."

"I shoulda come clean about this right at the start," Ranma sighed, rubbing the back of her head.
Nabiki shook her head. "No, the timing was terrible when it happened. Akane was still being hypersensitive about you and Ryouta spending time together and I told you not to. This is on me if it goes bad, but I still think this is the first really not terrible opportunity to come clean. This should go about as well as it possibly could."

"So… it'll go good then, you think?" Ranma asked hopefully, brightening a bit.

"Oh, no chance of that. This will suck something fierce," Nabiki replied dryly.

"O-oh," Ranma said, hanging her head guiltily.

"But… I've negotiated my way through worse situations," Nabiki said. "You didn't actually do anything wrong. This wouldn't even have happened if Akane hadn't pushed Ryouta over the edge. And the two of you haven't actually done anything. You've done more eyebrow-raising stuff with Ryouta before the link, honestly." She frowned and rubbed her chin. "... Hnnnh… Maybe that is something to worry about. Maybe you should put on a disguise and try and convince Ryouta you're his long-lost lover or something just to dispel any suspicion?"

"Har har," Ranma muttered. "I had good reasons for doing that every time I did it!"

"Because he's cute when he blushes?" Nabiki said with a smirk.

"No!" Ranma protested, blushing brightly. "There was always a scroll, or… or waterproof soap or… or a map, or…"

"... He was paying attention to Akane instead of you?" Nabiki suggested.

"Yes! I mean No! I mean… Damnit Nabiki!" Ranma stomped in frustration, blushing even harder and looking unintentionally adorable.

Nabiki raised an eyebrow. "Should I hold your hand to see if you're telling the truth?"

"Don't you dare!"

Ranma could see Ryouta's house down the street. Nabiki stopped walking and Ranma gave her a questioning look.

"I should part ways here, if just to avoid 20 questions about what I'm off to do and why," Nabiki stretched.

"You sure? Probably make Ryo feel better knowing he doesn't have to hide this stuff anymore," Ranma said, then paused and added. "Or… y'know, that he should be ready to run for his life."

Nabiki gave her a smirk. "Yeah, but I'd have some explaining to do to his Mom if I did this out front." She suddenly swept the redhead into her arms, dipped her and gave her a kiss that brought the color back to Ranma's cheeks and left her panting and unsteady.

Nabiki grinned at her, looking a little dishevelled herself. "This is one advantage of you being small and cute in this form. I don't think you'd let me get away with this if you were a guy."

Ranma grinned and winked at her. "You'll never know unless you try, right?"

Nabiki giggled and brought her back up to her feet. "I'm gonna hold you to that, Saotome. No getting mad at me if I dip you during the graduation ceremony."

"Only if you don't get mad when I sell the pics," Ranma retorted.
"Ooooh, that's not bad!" Nabiki replied, suitably impressed. "You're getting the hang of this blackmail thing!"

"Learned from the best," Ranma winked at her, then skipped off towards Ryouga's house, feeling her step considerably lighter.

This will work out. I trust Nabiki and the girls and we've almost got the hang of this. This is gonna be a good week, I can feel it!

She walked up to the front door, rang the bell and waited. You know what? I don't even mind if his Mom thinks this is a date. Ryouga's my friend and I'll just let Nabiki handle the mess for once and enjoy a day with a buddy without any complications!

She closed her eyes, pondering if she could sweet-talk Ryouga into a trip to the ice cream parlor on his dime, since she had treated last time. The place at the mall had a few items she had never tried before. She heard the door slide open and beamed. "Hey Ryo! I was wondering if you wanted to hit the mall with me and get some ice cream?" She opened her eyes, expecting to see Ryouga, or perhaps even his mother.

Instead she was met by a pair of hazel eyes, framed by green-tinted hair with a swath of pink running from each temple like a pair of ribbons.

Ranma blinked. "Oh… Hi, Akari…"

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Jiro, of course, had their table prepared for them with his usual efficiency, though he seemed uncharacteristically scattered. He never actually got anything wrong, but he did seem to be dropping in and out of sight a bit more frequently than was his custom and his normally calm and low-key demeanor seemed somewhat more harried.

"Is everything all right, Jiro?" Nabiki asked as he poured her a cup of her preferred blend. "You seem a bit flustered.

"Hmmm? Oh no, not at all," Jiro said, smiling. "It's just a bit busier today than normal."

Nabiki glanced around the tea shop. It was totally empty aside from them, as usual. "I… see," she said politely.

"A lot of decisions being made today! There's a young Chinese girl trying to decide if she should run away with her lover, a young man pondering his military career, another young man debating proposing to a young woman, several parties planning celebrations for newly minted Captains, with all the requisite Naval tradition and planned visits to the Captain's Table and all that, and a young German painter trying to decide if he wants to continue with his craft or… oh bother, he's walked out! Please pardon me." Jiro turned and slipped off someplace that for some reason Nabiki's eyes couldn't follow.

Nabiki shrugged and chalked it up to the oddness of the place. She had already accepted that the Tea Shop was just one of those weird things one found in Nerima.

"So… Nabiki have something she want talk about, or just come for tea?" Shampoo asked, sipping her own quietly.

Nabiki put her teacup down, leaned back in her chair and crossed her legs. I need to present this carefully. If any of them get mad and storm out, it'll be bad. "It concerns Ranma and Ryouga. More
specifically, it's about the aftermath of Ryouga's meltdown and the shi shi hokodan."

She saw Akane wince slightly and the others put their cups down to listen. *Good. Akane still feels guilty about that, so it'll modulate her response, but if I push too hard she'll push back and retreat into anger. I need to be careful.* "Ryouga apparently has had a lot of stuff going on beyond just the discovery that Akane knew about his Jusenkyo curse. His father died recently after a long illness and now his mother's situation has become extremely precarious as a result of his family's directional problems… which are, as it turns out, the results of an actual curse in their own right. There are also some issues with Akari stemming from an incident where the combination of his curses left him helpless to protect her when she really needed it… Let's just say it hasn't been a good month for Ryouga Hibiki. I think that a meltdown was probably inevitable given the way things have been going and Akane was just unlucky enough to be the straw that broke the piglet's back."

Ukyou's head bowed, indicating she had probably known about some of this already, and even Shampoo looked subdued.

*Good. Sympathy,* Nabiki thought. *I hate being so manipulative with them but I need my girls on MY side on this.* "After Ryouga had his meltdown, he and Ranma met a doctor at the hospital who's been working with them to try and figure out the directional curse. They've enlisted Doc Tofu's help as well, and brought me along this last Saturday. I've learned a lot about how it works, and it's not pretty. The curse is supposed to gradually isolate the victim and eventually render them unable to find other people at all - leaving them to die slowly and alone. But the Hibiki family has a special quality - one they've used to fend it off to a degree. It's an ability to choose another person as an 'Anchor'; someone towards whom they have a strong emotional connection and to whom they can always find their way back… eventually. They can form this bond only once in their lifetime." She closed her eyes. "Ryouga's father was his mother's Anchor. With his death…"

"She's going to get lost and never find her way back…" Akane said softly.

Ukyou and Shampoo's eyes widened.

"She such nice woman…" Shampoo said, exchanging a look with Ukyou.

"Is there something we can do to help?" Ukyou asked Nabiki, leaning forward. "We had no idea her situation was that bad! No wonder she's tied herself to the house with a string!"

"Be understanding," Nabiki said. "Because… the next part is going to make you mad. But I needed for you to know Mrs. Hibiki's situation because her welfare has been the driving force behind everything Ryouga has done recently." She closed her eyes. "Ryouga has an Anchor too. Someone here in Nerima."

There was a moment, then both Ukyou and Shampoo turned to look at Akane.

Sheepishly, Akane pointed at herself. "... Me?"

Nabiki shook her head. "You probably would have been. He certainly would have prefered you to have been, but… no. Ryouga chose his Anchor two years before he met you - back in middle school."

Ukyou gaped at her. "Ranma!? Are you telling me Ranchan is his Anchor!?"

Nabiki nodded held up a finger to forestall the explosion. "All it takes is a really strong emotion. It doesn't have to be positive emotion. Ryouga was very, very angry at Ranma and had
an intense desire to find him. From how he tells it, he wasn't even fully aware he'd done it until recently. But it's the reason he always seems to show up wherever Ranma is." She turned to face Akane. "Ryouga himself believed you were his Anchor since you were almost always where Ranma was. It's apparently a very subtle, subconscious effect."

"So... what made him think different?" Ukyou asked. "I mean, it makes logical sense given Ryouga tracked Ranma halfway around Asia, but Ryouga's hardly the logical sort. There's no way he'd suss that out on his own."

Nabiki took a deep breath. And here we are at the moment of truth. "Because... saving Ryouga from the shi shi hokodan had consequences for both of them. One of which was a change to the nature of the Anchor. A change that might actually lead to a cure for the family curse - which is why they kept it hidden until now - on my advice."

"Hidden? Why?" Shampoo asked, frowning. "What be so bad that need be kept from us?"

"Not from you. It was just easiest to keep it from everyone until we had a better handle on how it worked and what the effects were," Nabiki said. "If Ranma's mother found out about this... this Link, it could possibly be grounds for her to call in the seppuku contract, or push her into making a snap decision on the omiai. Not to mention how others might seek to use it against them." She steepled her fingers. "Ranma and Ryouga are now synced. Which means that the ability to find one another is much more pronounced in both of them, but more importantly... whenever they make physical contact with each other they become aware of each other's emotions."

"What? You mean like... like something out of a sci fi novel?" Ukyou asked.

"Shampoo hear of such things before. Very rare... very rare. Is form of ki sharing. Only possible if ki in perfect alignment." Shampoo frowned, concentrating as she dredged up the memory. "Only ever hear of from old legend of..." She set her jaw and gave Nabiki a hard look. "... Story of two warriors who become lovers."

Nabiki held up a hand again. "I'm sure the situation in that story was rooted in feelings they already had that led them to form a link. In this case the link came first."

"That's still awfully intimate!" Ukyou said. "Both of them have been acting weird. Ranma has been going all girly, Ryoga has started to do that stuttery, stupid, goofy routine he used to do around Akane, and they get all quiet when they're around each other."

"You don't think this 'link' is what's making Ranma change?" Akane asked, looking worried. "Ranma said something to me about how she goes back and forth, but how some people 'push' her one way or another." She glared at Nabiki. "How do we know it's not because of the Link?!"

"Because the Link doesn't work that way." Nabiki replied, keeping her tone calm and even. One of the tricks of de-escalation was to keep your tone level, even and calm even as the person who was getting upset got louder and more agitated. It worked to ground them, whereas raising your own voice would only make the situation worse.

"How would Nabiki know?" Shampoo asked.

"Because... just yesterday... we figured out how to add me to the Link," Nabiki said quietly. She picked up her teacup and took a sip as she waited for the explosion.

It didn't take long.

"You what?!" Ukyou yelped, gaping at her.
"No wonder Nabiki suddenly so interested in Pig Boy!" Shampoo said.

Akane was aghast. "Nabiki, why would you even do that?! What if something had gone wrong? What would that have done to you? To Ranma?! Even to Ryouga!"

"You know, you've asked us to trust you, that your 'Ice Queen' days are behind you, but playing stuff like this close to the vest until you get what you want is an awful lot like the 'old' Nabiki," Ukyou growled.

That one stung but Nabiki focused on her tea until she could be sure she could keep her calm demeanor. She finished the cup and set it down. She studied her nails carefully as she spoke. "What do you suppose happens to Ryouga if, say, we break the Link between him and Ranma?"

Ukyou's anger faded a bit. "It'd... he'd end up in the same boat as his Mom..."

"Doomed to wander alone until he eventually died from sickness, injury, or just succeeded in blowing himself up," Nabiki replied. "What do you suppose happens if, instead, we leave things as they are? Ranma goes with us, the Link remains and Ryouga goes his own way?"

"He'll... always be finding his way back to Ranma," Akane answered in a soft voice. There was a flicker in her eyes, the start of recognition.

"To Ranma. Not to Akari, or his family, or the people he loves and wants to be with, but to the person he can't be with. Always showing up on the doorstep, haggard and worn. How long do you think that could go on before it strained his own relationships beyond the breaking point? I would certainly think he was having an affair. How do you think Ranma would feel - forever being the 'other woman', even if nothing ever happened?" She planted her hands flat on the table and leaned over to look each of them in the eyes. "I did this because it's a way out. Right now? I'm Ryouga's Anchor as well as Ranma. Think about that. That means we can make someone else his Anchor too - like Akari, maybe. And we can figure out how to break the link without risking his curse progressing." She paused, swallowing hard as she moved to the last point, and the most potentially contentious one. "But most importantly... we can have that Link with Ranma now... and each other."

The stared at her silently for a moment, then exchanged glances with each other.

"Whyyyyy would we want that, sugar?" Ukyou said carefully, giving her an uncertain look.

"Isn't that just going to make the situation worse?" Akane added.

"Think about it," Nabiki said. "This... this relationship we're trying to build here. We're not the first to try something like this. And... granted our circumstances are unique, but... I've not found any references to anything like what we're trying to do succeeding in the modern day and age. A few lifelong threesomes - where they kept quiet, kept the third person on as a 'housekeeper' or something and it didn't come out until they were safely dead and buried... but even if that option was still available to us, there's no way we'd pull it off with five of us. We need an edge... something to help hold us together when things are bad and the whole world is trying to wedge us apart."

"Many conqueror kings have harems. No one question them," Shampoo joked weakly. "Maybe just need to conquer world?"

"That's later in the plan. Better to have something immediate," Nabiki said with absolute seriousness, though she couldn't prevent a small smirk getting through.
"Yeah, but... you're talking about linking our minds together," Ukyou said. "Like... like a collective consciousness thing?"

Nabiki shook her head. "It's nothing like that. It's only when you're in physical contact, and it's... it's more like you can hear their feelings. You have to intentionally listen, and learn how to understand what you're 'hearing' for it to really make sense. It's not like the sci-fi books where suddenly it's thrust into your brain. It's more like..." She struggled for words. "...Like a really accurate mood ring. It's a language we have to learn, but it's a way to get across all of those things that we're all terrible at. Every one of us." She fixed each of them with a stern look. "How many times have we struggled just to say the words 'I love you' to someone we desperately loved? Simply because we were too afraid they might not feel the same? How many times did we say it only for it to not be understood?"

"Sometimes there are times it would probably be a bad thing if you knew exactly how I was feeling," Ukyou said darkly.

"Not for us," Nabiki insisted. "It can't be that way for us. We don't have that luxury of holding things back and letting them fester like that, Ukyou.

"So... you think we need this?" Akane was tentative. She glanced at Ukyou and Shampoo nervously.

"I think we need to consider it," Nabiki said. "Right now breaking the link isn't an option, not until a cure is found, because the Link is the key. So... why not turn it to our advantage?"

"Pintou leaving something out," Shampoo said quietly, giving Nabiki a searching look. For once, Nabiki wished the Amazon wasn't more perceptive than people gave her credit for. "If Nabiki part of Link, then Nabiki see Ranma and Ryouga feelings. Know for sure what happening."

Nabiki closed her eyes. "Nothing has happened between them," she said carefully. "The worst thing they've done is hold hands and talk."

"Not asking if anything happen anymore," Shampoo said. "Asking if anything could happen. Asking what they really feel."

Nabiki grit her teeth. "I've had the Link for less than a day... and I've only had contact with them for maybe an hour, and for half of that I was dopey from the pill I had to take to make the Link possible. I can't be 100% sure what it is I'm seeing exactly." She quickly held up a hand to forestall protest, opened her eyes and looked into Shampoo's. "Yes... there's something between them - a lot of 'something' - and neither of them is willing to acknowledge it - or they just don't realize what they're seeing because they can't see both sides. It doesn't necessarily mean that it's romantic."

"Also doesn't mean it not," Shampoo said. "That why Pintou feeling out Pig boy. Think might someday need to join us. Yes?"

Nabiki sighed. "I think... it's a possibility we need to acknowledge."

"You can't be serious, sugar!" Ukyou protested. "What, are we just gonna bring anyone Ranchan shows an interest in into this? 'What's that? You were promised to marry Ranma when you were kids? So were we! C'mon, there's plenty of room!'"

"No, but these are extenuating and exceptional circumstances," Nabiki said firmly. "Think about it; not one of us was chosen by Ranma. We were pushed together by circumstance. He accepted us and confirmed his feelings for us, but I know our relationships with him would be far different without the engagements or Amazon law..."
"Speak for yourself, sugar," Ukyou replied, narrowing her eyes. "He was my best friend as a kid. My Dad suggested the engagement because of that."

"And Ranma thought you were a boy at the time," Nabiki retorted. "He was obligated to us first, and the feelings came after. I'm not suggesting they're any less valid, but Ranma has never, ever chosen someone to care about on his own." She leaned forward, lowering her voice. "And then along comes Ryouga… a rival in martial arts, a rival for the girl they both loved, an enemy, another guy. They had every reason to hate each other's guts, but they didn't. It's like they continually had to remind themselves to be in conflict. There's always been a bond between them that had nothing to do with engagements. Then suddenly Ranma isn't exactly a guy anymore and, at the same time, that bond becomes something far more tangible." She steepled her fingers. "I think we need to understand that this isn't a small thing - that if something does happen, Ryouga is the first person Ranma has ever chosen on her own."

"Are you saying… Ranma might choose Ryouga over us?" Akane squeaked, the blood draining from her face.

"I'm saying… Ranma has always resented being forced into things," Nabiki said carefully. "She's not had any control her entire life - from her parents predetermining every aspect of her life right up until old age, to Amazon laws, to magical curses and afflictions to multiple engagements. She's had to fight for every inch of her freedom at every turn and it's clear that anytime anyone tries to take something from her, she will fight back… even if it's something she's not sure she even wants. If we dig in our heels on Ryouga and try and force them apart - try and force Ranma to choose - Ranma will fight us out of that reflex. Worse, we've given Ranma a taste of understanding and acceptance. If we take that away now, it will be a betrayal of trust our relationship may never recover from. And Ryouga, for his part, doesn't give up on attachments easily. If he's gotten attached to our little redhead and he had any notion that she felt the same, he'll fight for her."

"Hatred… love… change from one to another too too easy sometimes…" Shampoo said quietly.

"I noticed how the pronouns you used to refer to Ranchan changed partway through, sugar," Ukyou said, giving Nabiki a searching look.

"Well… This all started when Ranma started exploring her girl side more, right?" Nabiki said.

"Having to spend more time as a girl, getting comfortable with it, even accepting it. Even if the effect is just psychosomatic, Ranma is more comfortable dealing with these sorts of feelings as a girl. More than that though… there's a definite divide there. Ranma's mentioned it and what I feel through the Link… well… It doesn't feel like it's a new thing." She looked at Ukyou. "You know what I'm talking about, right Ukyou?"

Akane glanced at Ukyou. "What does she mean?"

Ukyou's jaw tensed. "She means that Ranma's gender identity isn't stable. The fact that once the pressure to be a 'man amongst men' every second was taken off, she started… wobbling." She sighed and closed her eyes. "I don't know how Jusenkyo curses work, but…"

"Some curses affect mind, like Fushannichuan, but those rare cases where mental quality of one who drowned what magic imprinted on, rather than just physical," Shampoo jumped in. "Most springs bring instincts that come with form… ability to walk with four legs, groom self, fly if bird. All that nature rather than nurture. But mind stay same. Never hear of curse causing effect to degree Airen have."

"... So this… fluidity is old," Ukyou said softly. "It came before the curse. Maybe it was even the reason making Ranma into a 'manly man' needed such extreme measures as sending Ranchan
away with his idiot father for fourteen years."

"So… Ranma has always been… bi?" Akane asked, confused.

Ukyou shook her head. "Gender identity and gender preference are two different things, sugar. You should know that." Ukyou poked Akane's shoulder. "But… I guess in this case that'd also be true? Are you suggesting Ranchan has had a 'thing' for Ryouga since middle school?"

Nabiki shrugged. "It would explain why Genma was so eager to get him away from Ryouga. And from you, since Ranma apparently thought you were a boy."

Ukyou blushed at the notion. "That's… that's a weird thought. That Ranma might have been interested in me as a boy…"

"He was six. I doubt he was thinking of things that way," Nabiki said. "Not that Genma would have realized that, given how bizarre his ideas on romance, love and the female gender are."

"So… what do we do?" Akane asked timidly.

"Ranma and Ryouga are going to be together regularly because of the search for the cure for Ryouga's directional curse. There's nothing we can do about that; Ryouga's mother's life is on the line, which makes it about as much a matter of honor as anything can be for Ranma," Nabiki said. "I think all we can do right now is let things be and… just try and be supportive if Ranma starts asking questions or wanting to talk about her feelings." She closed her eyes. "I've already talked to Ryouga about this. He denied anything was going on, or that anything ever would or could, but…"

"Pig boy idiot," Shampoo finished for her.

"So… we just let this happen?" Akane asked, scowling.

"Akane, do you remember how you felt those times you got kidnapped by some Prince, or some other kook who wanted you to marry him? Remember how it felt having someone… even a very handsome and otherwise nice someone... trying to compel your feelings?" Nabiki asked. "We can't control how Ranma feels. Her Dad has tried that for her entire life, and it's backfired about as spectacularly as it possibly could. We can't force Ranma to love us… you all know this. But Ranma does love us and we need to trust that. That's why we did this." She narrowed her eyes. "That's why I did this. Because I knew that as much as I wanted to just snatch him up and run, he'd never willingly abandon any of you. That hasn't changed… and honestly I'm really really glad I gave this a chance." She gave Shampoo a meaningful look which actually earned a blush from the Amazon. "So… let's let Ranma and Ryouga sort out where they stand with each other on their own and go from there?"

Ukyou sighed, closed her eyes and leaned back in her chair. "Here I was thinking that this was going to make things simpler."

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Awkward situations were nothing new to Ranma Saotome. The past couple of years of her life had been nothing but, honestly.

But experience did nothing to make them easier.

After showing up at the Hibiki household and more or less inviting Ryouga out on a date right in front of Akari, Ryouga's mother had decided that it would be a wonderful idea for him and Akari to get out of the house and pick up a few things for her. From her stern looks towards Ryouga, Ranma
suspected there was some expectation for him to mend his two-timing ways, though there was some mirth in her eyes too. *She's intentionally making him squirm. Poor Ryo… he didn't actually do anything wrong. All of the downsides of being a Casanova, without any benefits.*

She snorted. *Gee, THAT sounds familiar.*

"Do you have a cold, Ranma?" Akari asked innocently. She was walking on Ryoga's right while Ranma was on his left. She had taken his arm almost immediately, which Ranma had momentarily irrationally seen as a challenge of some sort, but she had wrestled the impulse down. Ryoga was Akari's boyfriend, after all, and she had every right.

… Right?

"No, just thought of something funny." She glanced at Ryoga, who looked about as hangdog and guilty as she had ever seen him. "Oi, Ryo… cheer up! Aren't you happy to be at the mall with two pretty girls?" She leaned against his shoulder and batted her eyelashes at him.

She realized immediately that it had been a mistake. In the past Ryoga would generally have either yelled at her or shoved her away, or possibly bopped her on the head - which was honestly what she had been going for. Angry Ryoga was better than Depressed Ryoga in her book.

Instead he blushed and gave Akari a quick, panicked then looked back at Ranma. She caught a flicker of intense guilt and shame through the link.

Ranma sighed and straightened, but she could already feel Akari's eyes on her. *Well… crap. That's gonna be another explanation. Maybe I should just shut up until we get to the food court…*

"Ranma, I understand you've been looking after Ryoga for a while?" Akari asked, smiling politely.

"Ye-No! Wait! What did you hear? *Whatever it is I can explain!*" Ranma said nervously, glancing from Ryoga to Akari.

Ryoga clapped a hand over his eyes and groaned while Akari just giggled.

"Has he been eating well? I worry that all he eats sometimes is instant ramen. I felt it was a little rude to ask while his mother was there, but I know how hard they find it to keep fresh food in the house…" Akari asked quietly.

"Huh? *Oh!*" Ranma sighed in relief. "Uh… yeah, his Mom is a pretty good cook, even with the canned stuff. And we drag him back to the Dojo for a hot meal from Kasumi now and then too."

"Oh good," Akari nodded approvingly.

"Heh… anything else you need to know?" Ranma asked, folding her hands behind her head as they reached the staircase going down.

"Well, you two bathe together, right? Is he washing properly?"

For Ranma, it was like that top step wasn't even there. But as she pitched violently forward, she was able to personally verify that every step from the fifth on down was very real and solid.

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After tea they split up into pairs and headed to their respective restaurants. Akane unconsciously took Ukyou's arm, no longer really caring about who saw her or judged her for it. She was lost in thought,
trying to figure out how she felt about the idea of Ryoga and Ranma having feelings for each other.

I used to hate it when they fought. But I didn't understand half of it. All of that referencing 'P-chan'...
All because Ranma thought she was warning me, even though she trusted Ryoga enough not to do more... Was that all it was? When Ryoga paid attention to me she got jealous, but rather than just challenge him to a fight like everyone else, she'd try and woo him away. Granted, she did that with Kuno too, but Kuno was actually AFTER her and it always seemed to disturb her. But Ryoga... Even when she wasn't fooling him she would tease him about it. She got just as mad at me for all the attention I paid Ryouga or P-chan... was she so jealous because she liked us both?

She was content to let Ukyou lead as her mind ran along odd, speculative paths. Was this really because of the shi shi hokodan and the Link, or was it always there? Would it have come up eventually anyway? Ten years down the road, when Ranma and I were married, and Ryoga kept showing up over and over... Would that version of 'me' be able to be understanding? Would I?

She glanced at Ukyou a moment, then back down at the sidewalk and blushed.

I'd be a hypocrite if I WASN'T, wouldn't I? She hugged Ukyou's arm a little more tightly as the idea of being forced to give up her relationship with the chef raised its ugly head. It was something she would likely never have explored without the kind of realizations about herself that the struggle around Ranma had given her, but she was surprised at how strongly her mind recoiled from the idea of losing Ukyou.

"Something wrong, sugar?" Ukyou asked, glancing at her.

Akane swallowed but didn't look at her. "Would you give me up?"

Ukyou stopped and turned to study her. "What?"

Akane took a deep breath. "If... Ranma demanded that you give me up. If it bothered him, or he didn't like it and he wanted to keep us separate... Would you do it?"

Ukyou turned and took Akane by the shoulders. "Akane, Ranchan would never ask that!"

Akane looked up at the taller girl. Her own vision was slightly blurry and she knew that she was dredging up some uncomfortable fears and emotions in herself. "Why not? Wouldn't we be doing the same if we split Ranma and Ryouga up?"

Ukyou sighed. "That's different, 'Kane..."

"How?" Akane demanded. "You and me... that wasn't part of the whole deal we made with Ranma. We didn't ask... and when he found out it hurt him but we didn't give it up even then. He even apologized to us! What if that had gone differently? What if Ranma couldn't handle us being together?"

Akane could see the conflict in Ukyou's slate grey eyes. Defiance, Fear, Uncertainty, Guilt, Anger... Akane didn't need a Link of any sort to read those there.

Ukyou wet her lips. "... Would you?" she asked softly, uncharacteristically timid.

Akane had to look away. Her hand came up to Ukyou's shoulder, gripping the fabric of her shirt, her fingers balling up.

"I think I would..." she finally whispered, feeling the shame tear at her. "I'd hate myself, and I'd regret it, and it'd hurt every time I looked at you... and... and I'm scared that I would start to hate
Ranma, too."

Ukyou wrapped an arm around her, tucking Akane's head under her chin. She just held her like that for a bit.

"... Damnit, Akane," she murmured.

"I'm sorry," Akane sniffled. She closed her eyes tight and burrowed her face against Ukyou's collarbone. She felt Ukyou's fingers stroke her hair and relaxed a little.

"... If Ranma wasn't here... and we had met some other way... do you... Do you think we would have ended up together?" Akane asked tentatively.

Ukyou's fingers stopped as she considered. "What, you mean if I had just transferred to Furinkan one day?"

"Yeah."

Ukyou's fingers resumed running through Akane's hair. She felt Ukyou's other arm go around her. Her own arms slipped around Ukyou's waist as the comforting hug became a snuggle.

"Me as a boy, or me as a girl?" Ukyou finally asked.

"I think I'd have fallen for you either way," Akane murmured softly. "Probably have taken longer if you went as a girl because..." she swallowed, "... Oh god... I'd still be angry and in the closet, wouldn't I?"

Ukyou chuckled. "And I'd still be determined to live my life as a man."

"I'd have long hair still..." Akane mused as she started to picture things.

"You used to have long hair?"

"It got cut in the first fight between Ranma and Ryouga. I was too busy yelling at Ranma and wasn't paying attention to Ryouga's bandanas."

Ukyou's fingers trailed to the end of Akane's short hair, as if Ukyou were trying to imagine it.

"How long?" Ukyou asked.

"Down to mid-back, about," Akane replied. "Why, you like girls with long hair?"

"Just curious. Trying to visualize you with long hair," Ukyou replied.

"It wasn't me. I was trying to be more like Kasumi to impress someone I had a crush on," Akane replied. "So you'd show up one day... see this mousey tomboy having to fight off a horde of boys every day because of Kuno's idiocy..."

"I still can't believe you did that every day... I'd definitely have called them out on it. Though I might let you have your fun first," Ukyou replied.

"That's what Ranma did. You'd probably get in a fight with Kuno over that."

"I have absolutely zero problem with that."

Akane giggled. "It'd have taken me a while to come around, I think, but... you'd have been so
different from any boy I'd met…"

"Well, that goes without saying," Ukyou muttered, earning another giggle.

"You'd have been lonely… wouldn't you?" Akane asked softly. "Running your restaurant all alone… hiding who you really were."

"Yeah," Ukyou replied. "I like to think I hid it pretty well… lots of casual friends, but…"

They were both quiet. Akane visualized a path this alternate version of her life might have taken. It was scary how easily she could imagine it. I'd fall for her for all the same reasons I fell for Ranma, Akane realized. Maybe more. There'd be no engagement to fight, no other fiancees to compete with… and… falling in love with the boy would force me to face that I really want the girl… just like with Ranma…

"You're awfully quiet, sugar," Ukyou noted with concern. "Everything okay?"

"I'm just… pondering what might have been," Akane said, subdued.

"... Same here," Ukyou replied after a moment.

Akane swallowed. "Would you have?" she asked. "Fallen for me, I mean?"

"Yeah," Ukyou breathed. "I think I would. I'd… probably have screwed it up, though."

Akane smiled and hugged a bit tighter. "Couldn't have done worse than Ranma and I did. We did screw it up."

Another long pause.

"Does that mean you love me?" Ukyou asked. The question seemed unconscionably loud in the quiet of the moment.

Akane pulled back a bit to look up into Ukyou's eyes. It would have been easy to snap out an answer, of course, but she took a moment to weigh her feelings. She imagined Ranma's face, remembering the feelings that had come up in the alleyway behind the dance club and compared them to what she felt now.

"... Yes," she said, sounding a little surprised even to her own ears. Ironically she suddenly felt closer to the redhead as she now found herself in the exact same position. One love doesn't diminish the other, does it, Ranma?

On impulse she slipped her arms around Ukyou's neck and pulled her into a kiss. It was the most public kiss they had yet shared, but after being open about her feelings at the club, Akane found she was tired of hiding. She felt a little hesitation from Ukyou, but only a brief moment, and quickly swept away in the emotion of the kiss. It wasn't tentative or timid or an explosion of pent-up feeling. It just felt natural - like she belonged there in her arms.

They finally broke, both a little breathless. Ukyou was smiling at her and she could feel the smile on her own face.

"Wanna run away and elope?" Ukyou joked.

"Yes," Akane replied, completely seriously.

Ukyou's eyes widened. "W-wait, Akane…"
"Not right now," Akane clarified. "And not never to return, but… I'd like to go away for a while. Just the two of us. Find out what we are to each other on our own."

Ukyou raised an eyebrow. "And get married?" she asked with a smirk.

"I… y-yeah? Maybe?" Akane replied hesitantly, realizing what she had just done. Oh God, Ukyou is male on her family register, we actually COULD… She swallowed and set her jaw determinedly. "... Yes. Yes, and get married."

Ukyou blushed a little. "... Wow… you're serious…" She swallowed nervously but she was still smiling. "Ms. Akane Kuonji', huh?" she said shyly.

"It has a ring to it," Akane replied.

"Actually, legally married?" Ukyou said again.

Akane nodded. "Nabiki will probably marry Ranma legally in Japan. The Amazons will likely have some ceremony for the rest of us and I know we'll all have our own thing with Ranma, but… This could be just ours."

Ukyou swallowed visibly again. She ducked her head and chewed her lower lip as the smile gradually spread. "... A-alright," she giggled, "Yes. Yes! I will marry you, Akane!" She picked Akane up and swung her around, earning a startled yelp and a giggle.

Ukyou set her down and kissed her again, the two of them melting together. There was considerably more passion this time and it lasted quite a bit longer, leaving them both breathing hard by the end of it.

"I think… I'll be closing the restaurant for today…" Ukyou whispered, flushed and smiling. "What do you think?"

"Definitely. One day flu. You'll be stuck in bed until tomorrow," Akane purred.

Ukyou giggled and took Akane's hand, taking off running down the street in the direction of Ucchan's.

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"I had no idea martial artists could be so clumsy!" Akari said as she dabbed at the scrapes on Ranma's face with a little antiseptic. "Oh! I'm sorry, that came out rude!"

"No… no… I kinda got it coming this time," Ranma mumbled. She was perched on the counter next to the sink in the girl's bathroom while Akari administered a little first aid using the kit they had bought in one of the mall stores.

"Ryouga was telling me about what you and he have been up to," Akari's ministrations were gentle and sure. "He said you and he were working towards finding a cure for his directional curse… and about how there was an explosion that scarred up his back… And he said you were his Anchor?" She cocked her head curiously.

Ranma felt a cold ball form in the pit of her stomach. She closed her eyes and sighed. "Okay… okay yeah… it's probably better he told you about that up front. Look, I know it sounds bad, but honestly it's just… awkward. It's not like anything is actually going on. It only happens if we make actual skin contact or are really close and, once we get his curse fixed, we can figure it out more. But it's mostly just a lot of people seeing stuff that ain't there… I-I mean I've kinda been relying on him a lot more
because of the omiai and all the problems with my parents and school, and I know he's struggling a lot too, so it's kinda mutual, but that doesn't mean…!" She opened her eyes to find a very confused Akari looking back at her.

"... I… you have no idea what I'm talking about, do you?" Ranma said, feeling that ball of dread grow, prosper and spawn a whole extended family of uncomfortable that moved in.

"Ryouga… just said that you being his Anchor let him find you," Akari said. "What… what are you talking about?"

Ranma winced. "You know… He's going to kill me for this, and for once I'm gonna agree with him that I deserve it." She swallowed. "All right, but you gotta promise me you won't break up with him or anything over this, okay? He's been all torn up about you since he got back to Nerima, and… and I've been fighting real hard to keep him outta that dark place."

"Dark place?" Akari asked softly. "I… I was worried you were going to say it was another woman, but…" Her eyes widened. "Does this have to do with the scars on his back?"

Ranma nodded. "I'm hoping he'll forgive me for blabbing all this, but… Look, just listen, and I'll try and explain it as best I can." Ranma hopped off the counter, leaned back against it and took a deep breath.

"It started when Ryouga showed up in Nerima, all primed for a fight…"

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The fall day was cool enough that, even after a few hours of energetic lovemaking, the warmth of another body was a welcome comfort under the covers.

Akane was dozing lightly in Ukyou's arms, head tucked under her chin. It was far too early to sleep yet but they had worn themselves out enough to justify an afternoon nap.

Or at least Akane had. Ukyou found herself kept awake by her thoughts as she ran her fingers idly through Akane's hair.

This isn't where I thought I'd be by now, she thought. Though… I don't know if I ever really thought about it. Where was I going before I caught up to Ranchan? What was I going to do with my life, living as a man?

She closed her eyes and sighed. The truth was there never really had been any plans, aside from the nebulous idea of making the 'Best Okonomiyaki in Japan'. I suppose I was just going to live my life as a charade, too stubborn to commit to being one or the other or do anything that might MAKE me commit. She looked down at the girl in her arms. Would I really have had the guts to tell you? After what happened with Akkiko? Or would I have just pushed you away and kept you at arm's length until you drifted away on your own? She felt a lump in her throat and an ache in her chest at that.

No wonder Ranchan got so twisted up over you, Ukyou thought fondly, brushing a few hairs from Akane's face. There was an innocence and peace in her expression that was compelling. And everyone else, too, I suppose. Without Ranchan there I probably wouldn't have lasted long either. Would you really have chosen me, though?

Akane stirred, blinking her eyes. She looked up as the fog cleared and smiled. "Hi…"

"Hi yourself, sugar," Ukyou purred. "Have a good nap?"
“Mnnnh… I don't actually have to get up, do I?” Akane mumbled plaintively.

“Nope. No reason to get out of bed until tomorrow, unless you want a shower."

“Might do that later…” Akane shifted and settled herself in more comfortably against Ukyou. "You didn't sleep?"

“Well… You kinda gave me a lot to think about,” Ukyou admitted. "I never really considered 'What if…?' much before."

“Really?” Akane cocked her head. "I can't seem to stop. Ever since I met Ranma…" She sighed. "... I guess that might be part of my problem. I'm always wondering what might be."

"... And with Ranchan that leads to wondering what he might do, and since he's always surrounded by pretty girls…" Ukyou smirked.

"Still not sure I totally believe nothing happened ever," Akane muttered darkly. "Nobody has that much self control."

"I'm pretty sure a big part of it was trauma, sugar," Ukyou replied. "Anytime he ended up in any situation that might even had a remote chance of something happening, he panicked hard. Trust me, I tried. I'm still not sure how Nabiki defused him."

Akane scowled. "Gonna have a panda-skin rug for the nursery."

Ukyou blinked. "Nursery?"

Akane blushed and ducked her head. "... I… sorry, was dreaming about… Y'know…"

"Not sure Ranchan would want his Dad's corpse as decoration in his kid's room," Ukyou noted.

"It wasn't…" Akane started, but trailed off. "... Nevermind, you're right."

"We'll sell the rug and buy something tasteful," Ukyou said confidently. "Pandas are endangered so I imagine a rug would fetch quite a high price from a collector."

Akane giggled then sighed. "What are we going to do about Ranma's parents?"

"I'm sort of hoping Nabiki has a plan," Ukyou said. "Otherwise… As soon as we're clear to travel without Himura making Ranchan a suspect in a felony case, maybe we should just disappear for a while?"

"What, to China?" Akane replied. "Genma would know to look for us there."

"Then somewhere else. Go north or something," Ukyou suggested. "Between all of us I'm pretty sure we could make a living wherever we went."

"But then we'd be leaving Kasumi and Dad behind, and you'd be leaving Konatsu, and Shampoo would have to leave Cologne and the Nekohanten. Why should we be the ones who have to leave!?!" Akane protested.

"Because we don't have a signed document that says we can demand one of them commit suicide if they piss us off," Ukyou said sadly. "I'm not sure Ranchan is ready to face them down on that yet."

"We'll have to eventually," Akane sighed. "Why do they always have to make this so hard? Half of the problems Ranma and I had getting together came from their attempts to force us together! If they
had just left us alone, everything would have worked out!"

"I get customers like that occasionally," Ukyou said thoughtfully. "They lean over the grill, micromanage the toppings, how long I cook each side, how I pour the sauce… nearly burn themselves getting in my face, making me redo it because it didn't 'look right'," Ukyou snorted. "The okonomiyaki comes out like crap every time. I don't think it's about the result, it's about controlling how it's done."

"I'm surprised you put up with that," Akane said.

"I do once," Ukyou said. "Some of 'em taste the 'yaki, realize their mistake and shape up. Most don't and try and blame me for it. That's what the big spatula and the disclaimer hung by the door are for," Ukyou winked.

They were quiet for a moment, Akane nestling back in against Ukyou's shoulder and relaxing.

"What were we talking about that ended up with us in bed chatting about Panda skin rugs and awful okonomiyaki?" Akane finally asked.

"Ranma and Ryouga, I think," Ukyou said after a moment. "You were pointing out I was being a hypocrite about it, basically."

"Sorry. I wasn't trying to do it in a mean way…" Akane replied.

Ukyou chuckled. "If I wanted to be mean, I could point out that you, Akane Tendo, are lecturing me about being patient and understanding about a romantic rival and to give Ranma the benefit of the doubt. You are obviously a pod person. What have you done with the real Akane?!"

Akane punched her shoulder in irritation. "Do you want me to get mad!?"

"Now that sounds like something you'd say to Ranma!" Ukyou giggled.

Akane's expression softened. "Yeah… well… Maybe it's just something I'd say to my baka inazuke."

Ukyou opened her mouth, then closed it again. "Yeah… we did kinda do that, didn't we?" She smiled and cupped Akane's cheek. "You think… in that alternate world where Ranma wasn't here… we would have ended up here like this?"

Akane closed her eyes and leaned into her hand. "Doesn't matter. We're here now."

Ukyou opened her mouth, then closed it again. "That's a small step in the right direction.

Ukyou nodded and leaned in to give her a gentle kiss.

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Akari’s head was bowed by the time Ranma was done talking, a stunned expression on her face.

Ranma swallowed nervously, mentally reviewing everything she had said, wondering if she had left anything out or left anything unclear. Akari hadn't listened like anyone Ranma was used to - neither jumping to conclusions like Akane nor interjecting her own observations like Nabiki, or a mix like Ukyou or Shampoo. She had simply listened quietly, nodding and making small noises of understanding as Ranma told her the story of how Ryouga had nearly killed himself and the lasting effects the shi shi hokodan had had on both of them. Ranma found herself sharing more than she had
intended, going into her own romantic problems, the struggle for acceptance with her parents and even touching briefly on the challenge with Himura. She had been so sure Akari would jump in with something that she was a little surprised when she finally just ran out of things to say.

"L-look, Akari… Umm… if there's anything I messed up or isn't clear…" Ranma said nervously.

"... Thank you," Akari said softly, raising her eyes to look at her. Ranma could see they were damp. "Thank you for saving Ryouga…" She sniffed, then closed her eyes and shuddered and it was clear, even to Ranma's poor ability to read people, that she was only just holding it together.

"Woah, woah! Akari, d-don't…" Ranma stepped forward, but was abruptly uncertain what to do.

Akari balled up her fists. "I… I knew he was struggling with things… B-but I let my grandfather say those awful things to him… I let him leave…" She shuddered again. "I don't deserve to… to…"

"No no no no no no no no!" Ranma quickly stepped forward, grabbing her by the shoulders as the prospect of finally finally stabilizing Ryouga teetered on the brink of evaporation. "I know what you're gonna say, 'cuz it's exactly the sorta thing Ryouga would say and it's just as wrong when he says it! This isn't your fault, Akari!"

The green-haired girl blinked at her and sniffed, looking surprised.

"Look, I ain't always had the most selfless motives for trying to get you an' him together, but, for once in my stupid selfish life, I managed to stumble into doing a good thing! You an' him belong together. He's crazy about you… and when he's crazy about someone he does dumb things sometimes."

For a moment Ranma thought she had successfully defused the situation. She smiled as Akari sniffled quietly. Then she saw her eyes start to tear up and her lower lip quiver, and a surge of panic gripped her as she realised immediately what was coming next.

"... H-hang on, wait, lemme get…" Ranma said nervously, releasing Akari's shoulders to step back, but it was already too late.

The pig-loving girl burst into tears and glomped her, burying her face against Ranma's shoulder as she started sobbing hysterically.

Ranma stiffened and started looking around frantically for the mallet or enraged rival or camera flash or ninja sleeping dart or whatever. "Ah… ah… I… Ummm…"

But for once nothing came and they were left alone - possibly because Fate had decided it was far more amusing these days to force Ranma to actually deal with emotions rather than giving her an easy out.

Tentatively Ranma put her arms around the girl and even managed a timid pat on the back. "... L-look, Akari…"

But Ranma couldn't think of anything to say and Akari wasn't giving her much else to latch onto, so she gave up and just stood there, letting the girl cry. She felt a detached sense of guilt, but for once it wasn't something so simple or clear as having said or done something stupid, where she could easily see where she had erred. She got the unsettling feeling that this was something that she couldn't do anything about. Most of the time when girls cried she either did what was needed to fix it or they ran off and resolved it themselves. Just being there while someone cried themselves out was a new and somewhat uncomfortable experience for her.
Eventually, Akari did wind down. Sheepishly, she released Ranma and wiped at her eyes with the heel of her hand. "Ranma, I'm so sorry…!"

"No, no, it's okay!" Ranma waved her hands placatingly. "J-just… I'm really glad Ryouga didn't see that. He'd probably think I was trying to steal you or something."

Akari giggled. "That's right, you are a boy, aren't you? It's easy to forget sometimes. Especially when you dress up." She cocked her head. "Did you do that for Ryouga's benefit?"

Ranma's eyes widened and she blushed, quickly shaking her head in denial. "What!? No way! I'm just…" she sighed. "I've had to use this waterproof soap to lock myself as a girl occasionally and it lasts for a few days so I'm still stuck. Since I ain't gonna change back if I get splashed, I figured I might as well wear stuff that fits."

"I suppose a side benefit of your curse is you can always borrow clothes from one of your fiancées," Akari said with a smile. "I'm amazed you managed to find a way to balance four fiancées like that and still have time to be such a good friend to Ryouga."

"I don't deserve any credit…" Ranma said awkwardly. "Nabiki and Shampoo are the ones who came up with the plan and the girls did most of the work. I'm just kinda freeloadin', like always."

She felt a small pang as her own self-deprecating comment struck a tad too close to a bit of buried insecurity.

Akari shook her head. "No… you're honestly amazing. You've…" she sighed. "You saved Ryouga's life, you've helped him go back to school, you've reunited him with his mother, and you're helping him find a cure for his directional curse. You've been a better girlfriend to Ryouga than I have been. I thought for a moment it might have been intentional."

Ranma's eyes widened. "Woah, hold on, I'm not…! Me'n Ryo aren't…!"

Akari giggled. "No, of course not, you're a boy!" She cocked her head. "But I know you're a good friend to Ryouga. I know boys are sometimes awkward with being supportive to each other that way, especially with that Link making you aware of each other's emotions. I can see how pretending to be a girl, even just outwardly, would make it a little easier - at least for Ryouga. He's always been so chivalrous!"

Ranma's eye twitched as she remembered several occasions where Ryouga had mercilessly beaten the crap out of her as a girl. "Yeah… sure… chivalrous as a pig."

"Exactly!" Akari clapped her hands. She reached forward and took Ranma's hands in her own, her expression turning serious. "Could… could I ask a huge favor? Could… could you keep it up for just a bit longer? So I can see how you do it? I want to learn how to… to be strong and supportive for him like you are!"

Ranma blinked owlishly. "You… want me to pretend to be Ryo's girlfriend?"

Akari nodded, a determined look on her face. "If it was anyone else I'd go out of my mind with jealousy and worry but if it's you it's fine! I want to be the best girlfriend I can be for Ryouga and you know him better than anyone. If I watch you, I know I can get better!"

Ranma closed her eyes. She was starting to feel one of those headaches coming on. "Akari… you know being a girlfriend isn't the same as just hanging out, right? Boyfriends and girlfriends… do stuff together…"

"Y-you mean like h-hand holding and… and…" Akari blushed and fidgeted nervously, poking her
fingers together. "... K-k-k-k-k-k-k-k-kissing?"

"Among other things, yeah!" Ranma said, feeling a bit of a blush of her own as she was now more than a little educated about those 'other things'.

Akari shook her head and slapped her cheeks, the determined look returning. "I'll endure it! Hand holding… h-hugging, a-and… and even kissing!"

"What!?" Ranma gaped at her.

"You probably kn-know how Ryouga likes to be kissed better than me, right? Because of the Link? If… if I see how you do it, then I'm sure I can make our first kiss the best he's ever had!" Akari clasped her hands and gave Ranma a pleading look. "Please, Ranma! I'm begging you!"

Ranma massaged her temples. That headache had decided to settle in for a long stay now. "I am not kissing your boyfriend!"

"Then at least the hugging and hand holding? You've done that with him, right?" Akari asked, chewing her lower lip.

"I… w-well, technically..." Ranma stammered.

"Help me, Ranma, you're my only hope! I'm desperate! If I can't become more like you are for Ryouga, I'm afraid I might lose him for good!" Akari looked about ready to start crying again.

"Okay, okay!" Ranma held up warding hands and glanced nervously at the door, not trusting her luck to last through a second crying session. "I'll… I'll do what I can, okay? Just… just don't expect too much. I'm not really doing anything special."

"Thank you!" Akari hugged her abruptly again, causing another lockup. Fortunately, this hug was brief.

After releasing Ranma, Akari composed herself quickly and sketched a formal bow. "I look forward to learning from you, sensei."

Ranma sighed. "Please don't call me that. I'm already senpai to a girl in my class who seems to think I'm a good female role model. I don't wanna deal with the possibility of this becoming a thing."

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Ryouga sighed as he got a concerned stare from a couple of mall goers as they passed by - the latest in a long series of concerned stares he had received. He smiled at them and laughed weakly in an attempt to show them that everything was all right.

"Maybe it's some kind of S&M thing," one said in aside to the other, though still quite audibly.

"We shouldn't stare. Let's just go."

The pair quickened their pace as they left the food court.

Ryouga's weak laughter trailed off and he hung his head. Was it REALLY necessary to tie me to the chair, Ranma?!

He tugged his bonds lightly. Ranma had used several of Ryouga's bandanas to bind his ankles to the chair, and tie his hands behind him. Akari had only barely talked Ranma out of adding a gag as well.

Naturally this had attracted a bit of attention. Including several mall goers, a couple of concession stand employees, and one mall security guard. Each time the explanation had gotten more awkward...
and cringy, especially when it came out it was two girls who had tied him up. The knowing looks Ryouga had gotten from a few people made him seriously consider snapping his bonds and using his bakusai tenketsu to drill his way down to the center of the earth.

He caught a flash of crimson out of the corner of his eye and turned to see a familiar redhead walking towards his table with Akari in tow. Why are they coming from that way? I thought the girl's washrooms were... He glanced back in the direction he had been watching, the door he had been sure was the right one. It opened, and a janitor stepped out of it with a wheeled mop bucket. It was then that he noticed the word 'Utility closet' emblazoned on the door.

I HATE this curse, he thought miserably, slumping down in his chair as he waited to be released.

"Sorry for keeping you waiting!" Akari said brightly. "You know how girls are."

"Yeah, but what does that have to do with Ranma?" Ryouga quipped.

"Ha hah, funny, pig breath," Ranma grumbled, unexpectedly subdued as she started undoing the bandanas.

"I'm so sorry for having to tie you up, Ryouga," Akari said as Ryouga's rubbed his freed wrists. "Ranma thought it was best though..."

"I don't know why my hands needed to be tied," Ryouga grumbled, glaring at the redhead over his shoulder as she worked on his ankles.

"Do you remember your first date with Akari?" Ranma asked grumpily.

Ryouga rubbed the back of his and laughed nervously, stealing a glance at Akari and wondering if he was going to be quizzed on something. "Of course I do, ahahahahaha!"

Ranma rolled her eyes and stood. "You were supposed to meet Akari by a statue near the pond in the park?"

Ryouga scowled. "I remember that! There wasn't any statue! That's why I got lost!"

"I tied you to the statue, dumbass!" Ranma growled. "You ripped it out of the ground and never actually noticed you had it on your back!"

Ryouga folded his arms and huffed. "Well... maybe you should have picked a sturdier statue."

"It was a statue of an elephant. A life-sized statue of an elephant. Made of concrete," Ranma said crossly.

"Ooooh, I see! Applied knowledge of his needs and habits!" Akari said, drawing Ryouga's attention. She was hastily writing in an old, dog-eared notebook that bore the title 'Pig Training Records'.

"A-Akari...?" Ryouga asked uncertainly.

"Oh, don't mind me!" Akari beamed at him as she snapped the book shut. "Just keep on with what you were doing!"

"Can we just go get some ice cream now?" Ranma asked plaintively as she returned Ryouga's bandanas to him.

"Sure, I uh... I guess?" Ryouga stood and started following the redhead in the direction he assumed would lead to the ice cream shop.
"*Ahem*," Akari cleared her throat. 

Ranma and Ryouga both glanced back at her. Akari beamed at Ranma, then motioned towards Ryouga while looking her in the eyes.

Ryouga frowned, unsure what was going on, but he noticed the redhead's shoulders sag. Before he could ask what was wrong, she unexpectedly took hold of his arm, looping hers around it and resumed leading him towards the ice cream shop.

Ryouga's eyes widened as he turned back and gave Akari a panicked look, then back to Ranma. "Akari, this isn't what it looks like… I can explain! Ranma can explain! Ranma, explain!" He gave the redhead a desperately pleading look.

"Calm down, pork butt," Ranma sighed, sounding tired. "This is Akari's idea. I'll explain later. Just roll with it for now, okay?"

"Hmmm… pig-theme pet names… I thought he didn't like those?" Akari said behind them, followed by the sounds of furious scribbling. "I'm learning so much!"

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Konatsu sighed as he walked through the market. He kept his head bowed, his demeanor demure. As a proper young lady should. The thought came unbidden into his mind.

He felt a twinge at the thought that caused him to pause, his hand to move and clutch at his kimono, just over his chest. He covered the momentary lapse by feigning a slight readjustment of the garment before continuing.

He continued to thread his way amongst the market stalls. They didn't have any great need for produce, but when Ukyou and Akane had returned and instructed Konatsu to put out the 'closed' sign for the day, he knew it was best he find something to occupy himself elsewhere.

*How ironic. I cannot be what I was raised to be and I do not know how to be what I was born as. And neither is what the one I love wants.*

He paused at a vegetable stall, examining the radishes. He gave the shopkeeper a smile, which was returned, the man more than eager to answer any questions Konatsu might have.

"Oh hey, you're Konatsu, aren't you? From Ucchan's?"

Konatsu raised his head and smiled at the familiar face of the girl who walked up. She was one of the few who was a regular on Sundays - when Ukyou seldom worked. Konatsu had come to develop a special relationship with what he considered his regulars. "Mineko! Yes, I come here now and then. Not often on a Sunday."

"I noticed Ucchan's was closed. Everything okay?" the girl asked, looking concerned. She was an athletic girl, obsessed with making it to the Olympics - so much so she had dyed swaths of her short dark hair in the colors of the Olympic rings (Though Konatsu had originally mistaken it to mean something else. Thankfully, the girl had not been offended.)

"Lady Ukyou had… personal business to attend to. So I thought it a good time to pick up a few things," Konatsu said. He looked down at the paltry number of items in the basket.

Mineko sighed sympathetically. "More romantic troubles?"
Konatsu straightened his posture unconsciously. "Oh, no… my relationship with Lady Ukyou has never been romantic, so…"

Mineko rolled her eyes. "Please, girl. I know you better than that. Want to grab a cup of tea? Since we both seem to be free?"

"You don't have practise today?" Konatsu asked, aware of how seriously the girl took her training.

Mineko sighed. "That was part of the reason I was coming by Ucchan's."

Konatsu winced. He had been privy to quite of bit of the girl's woes and taken it as a point of honor to keep her confidence. "Come… I know a good place."

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The procession of Ranma leading Ryouga, followed by Akari taking notes and making the occasional comment continued up until they got to the ice cream parlor. Ryouga offered to pay for Akari, but she declined distractedly, smiling and insisting he pretend she wasn't there. Ranma just looked even more weary, to the point of selecting a comparatively ordinary sundae as they sat down. Akari took the booth behind theirs, writing furiously. Ryouga kept trying to ask Ranma questions, only to get more of the 'I'll explain later'.

"Oh! I need a pencil sharpener!" Akari said, finally having worn the graphite down to a nub. She bounced out of her seat and leaned over Ryouga's shoulder. "I'm just going to to the stationary store really quick, Ryouga. If any date stuff happens that might be important, write it down for me, okay?" She kissed him on the cheek, then left the shop, almost running towards the stationary store.

"Okay, now can you tell me what's going on?" Ryouga demanded once Akari was out of earshot.

Ranma stabbed at her half-eaten sundae with her spoon, looking almost depressed. "She… wants me to pretend to be your girlfriend. So she can watch."

Ryouga blinked. He rewound the comment and replayed it in his brain a few times until he was fairly certain he had completely misheard it. "I'm sorry… what?"

Ranma sighed heavily. "I… kinda spilled the beans to Akari about… everything."

Ryouga blinked again, then his eyes widened. His hand twitched. "Everything?"

Ranma nodded miserably.

Ryouga held up his hand and pointed to it. "Everything everything!?"

"Yes!" Ranma said tightly. "When she started talking about me being your Anchor I thought you already had!"

Ryouga flushed, then ducked his head, rubbing the back of his head. "I… guess we should have compared notes on what story we were telling."

Ranma heaved another sigh. "Well, now she knows everything. Everything everything. Y'know… except the…" she blushed. "... the stuff I only know because of the Link. So she's not thinking I'm actually interested in you or anything. She knows I'm really a guy, so she doesn't think…”

"... the stuff literally everyone else we know thinks?" Ryouga finished for her dryly, pillowing his cheek on his fist.
"Yeah," Ranma grumbled. "Anyway… she still thinks I've been doing something right, an' somehow my pretend girlfriend routine is doing better than her actual girlfriend routine, so… She wants to watch me and you and try to learn what it is I'm doing differently."

Ryouga frowned skeptically. "That's… that's…"

"Insane?! I know!" Ranma exploded.

Ryouga glared at her. "Don't call my girlfriend insane!"

"I'm not…!" Ranma cut off, clenched her fists and forced herself to take a couple of deep breaths to get her frustration under control. "I'm not, Ryouga, but I don't think she totally grasps how this 'pretend girlfriend' thing works! She wants to watch us do all the relationship stuff!"

"All'? What do you mean…?" Ryouga replied, confused.

"I just barely talked her out of you and me kissing so she could get pointers!" Ranma hissed in a low voice. "I mean she's expecting everything! Dates, hand holding, hugging, all of the little… things couples do just being couples."

"I… I…" Ryouga stared at her. "W-wait, you… you're good at faking this stuff, right? S-so, all we gotta do…"

Ranma shook her head. "I'm good enough to fool Kuno, Ryouga. And nebbe you on a bad day, but normally once you process 'cute girl' your brain switches off. Do you really want one of my 'fake fiancee' routines as your girlfriend? Because that's what you'll get! Akari is gonna watch us like a hawk, and then use that as a basis for how she acts with you."

Ryouga hung his head, eyes staring sightlessly as his expression twisted with horror. "Oh, god…"

Ranma gave him a tired look. "So… this is the part where you fly off the handle, yell about how I've ruined your life, start a fight that causes enough property damage to get us banned from the mall, and then Akari gets the idea that your ideal relationship involves lots and lots of domestic violence until you finally sit down and talk things out with her." She spooned up some of her melting sundae and popped it into her mouth. "D'ya think maybe we could just skip to the part where you fix this instead? I kinda like this mall. I don't wanna have to go through getting measured for bras again anytime soon."

"... Fix it?" Ryouga repeated dumbly, only half-processing her words.

"Yeah, it is kinda your fault, with you running off and making her think she's not good enough an' all." Ranma said offhandedly, twirling her spoon in her fingers.

"Yes… of course… That's it…" Ryouga muttered quietly. He raised his head, leaned forward and put his hands on Ranma's shoulders, looking into her eyes with a determined gleam. "That's what we have to do!"

"'We'? Why 'we'? Where is the 'we' in this?" Ranma asked, not liking the particular mad gleam in his eyes.

Ryouga started babbling, "We just need to show her the ideal relationship! The one I've always wanted to have with Akari! All we need to do is act it out together, and…" he giggled occasionally, a manic look crossing his face. "... It doesn't matter how horrible it is, if it's for the sake of Akari's future happiness with me!"
"Horrible…?!" Ranma yelped outraged. She brought her hands up and slapped them on either side of his face, forced him to look in the eyes and brought the Link to bear, to make sure he couldn't ignore her as the full force of her annoyance hit him.

"We are not doing that, you idiot!" she growled. "I'm done with the 'wacky hijinks' method of fixing things! Nabiki taught me that how you fix this sort of thing is you talk with the person. So you need to sit down with her and talk!"

Ryouga blinked and seemed to snap out of his manic episode. His eyes refocused on her. "You… think that'll work?"

Ranma sighed then gave him a wan smile. "Ryouga… it's what every problem we run into eventually boils down to. That, or beating up someone so bad they stay outta your life for good, and I don't think 'Option B' is really appropriate in this case. I went through this… well, a bunch of times with the girls, and I'm finally cluing in. So… mebbe lemme help you shortcut it a bit with Akari, okay? I don't want you to hafta go through the stuff I've gone through just to figure this out."

Ryouga opened his mouth to reply, then closed it. He could sense the shapes and colors of what he had learned was concern from the redhead. She was being sincere and genuine and suddenly he felt a little self-conscious about the madness he had started spouting a moment before. Ranma's right… ugh, what was I THINKING? Was I really going to try and force Ranma to act out the perfect relationship with me, just to try and make Akari act that way?

He dropped his gaze and looked away, ashamed. "I am an idiot."

"No, you don't gotta be embarrassed, Ryo. You just panicked a bit, is all," Ranma said, giving him a reassuring smile. "I've… been doing a lot of it myself lately."

He felt a sense of warmth from her through the Link and looked her in the eyes again. It was reassuring to think that someone else understood. He found himself smiling back, though he wasn't entirely sure why.

The moment lasted just long enough for them to realize they were far too close to each other, and in a pose that would and could be easily misconstrued. They each sat quickly back in their seats, glancing away from one another self-consciously.

"S-so how do we handle this?" Ryouga asked, trying to get past the awkward tension in the air.

"For today we should probably play it straight until you and Akari get home," Ranma replied thoughtfully. "And… we should probably hash out what you're gonna say. I know from experience that this sort of thing can be misinterpreted real easy."

Ryouga groaned and dropped his head onto his arms. "Tell me about it. Do you have any idea how long I spent while I was wandering trying to figure out the words to tell Akane how I felt? And I never managed it! Even when I thought of the perfect words, I made hash of it when I talked to her!"

Ranma patted his arm sympathetically. "Tell you what, we'll ask Nabiki for help. She's good with words an' stuff."

Ryouga lifted his head a bit. "She did offer to help…"

"There, see!" Ranma scooped up the last bit of her sundae triumphantly. "Ain't nothin' wrong that ain't fixable. If Nabiki can sort out my mess of a lovelife, I don't think there's anything you can throw at her that'll faze her."
Ryouga sat back up and gave the redhead a sincere smile. "... Thanks."

Ranma blinked at him, spoon still in her mouth. "Whaffor?" she mumbled around it.

"Just… not giving up on me, I guess," Ryouga replied.

Ranma looked away, a little color on her cheeks. "S'not like ya gotta make a big deal out of it," she muttered.

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Just outside of the ice cream shop, scooched down on the floor outside the window, Akari scribbled feverishly in her notebook after having watched the entire exchange.

I KNEW making them think I wasn't there would be a good idea! she thought happily. Her book was filled with notes and little sketches of each situation as it came up. Ryōga was about to do something impulsive and she snapped him out of it… was that the Link? No, I think it was more than that. Sincerity, I think. She knows how to talk to him. That makes sense, right? They’ve been friends since middle school.

She remembered the look the two had exchanged that had looked almost like it might become a kiss. Akari felt a pang in her heart but closed her eyes and shook her head.

No! I-I said I’d endure, even if they do! Besides…

Her fingertips brushed idly over a sketch she had drawn on the page of the two of them, Ranma cupping his face and looking into his eyes, and the almost captivated expression Ryōga had worn.

… If she really wanted to keep him, she wouldn't work so hard to give him away, would she?

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Introducing others to Clara’s Leaf was a rare pleasure for Konatsu. He was still somewhat cross that he had missed Akane and Ranma’s introductions to the place. It was always fascinating to watch how people reacted to Jiro-sensei’s ‘routine’.

Tradition and mystique bred interest and investment, not only making the odd little Tea Shop seem special and unique beyond the kitsch of the decor, but it made the customers themselves seem unique. Jiro might not get many customers, but Konatsu was sure they were lifelong and loyal. It was a technique he dearly wished to learn from the man, though Konatsu’s commitment to Lady Ukyou precluded any sort of apprenticeship.

Still, it was a pleasure to watch the master at work as the kimono-robed man swept in, guessed Mineko’s drink of choice with flourish and earned that same shocked surprise he always did when he delivered something they had never tried before, yet which suited them utterly. It was a mesh of an encyclopedic knowledge of his craft and product, a keen eye and an ability to read people at a glance that bordered on the telepathic.

"I've never been to a tea shop quite like this," Mineko said, sipping tentatively at her tea.

"Jiro-sensei is a master at what he does. I hope someday to approach his skill," Konatsu said. He sipped delicately at his own drink. "So… practise is not going well?"

Mineko sighed and fidgeted a little. "Practise is fine, but… that seems like all we do," she groused. "Our Captain has our back-benchers playing more than us. I know she said we’d play more mid-season, and she doesn't want to wear us out early, but…” she looked down. "... Sometimes…"
sometimes I think she just picked us because we made her look good - that we're there to be her 'gang', not her team."

"I know your Captain has a contentious history," Konatsu replied carefully, "but she's also very successful, which is why you joined the team, yes?"

"I joined the team because I wanted to play volleyball - because I want to go to the Olympics - more than anything." Mineko started playing with a lock of her dyed hair. "I don't care about going pro, or the scouts, or…" She squeezed her eyes shut. "I just want to \textit{play}! I want to play against players who are good; who are \textit{better} than me, even. I don't mind losing as long as I can learn, but…"

"Your Captain feels differently on the matter," Konatsu replied, seeing the conflict. As a kunoichi, he was groomed to serve, even if he didn't agree with those he served. It had taken extreme and continual mistreatment at the hands of his stepmother and stepsisters for him to rebel.

"Himura wants to win, no matter the cost," Mineko said. "A loss - even one that she learns from - is \textit{intolerable} to her. So… she stacks the deck. Not just against her opponents, but…" she sighed. "… She has ways of making \textit{sure} the people on her side can't change their minds."

"So you chased your dream… and have ended up someplace you didn't expect. And now you feel trapped between," Konatsu said softly. "I… can sympathize with that."

"I always thought you got out of your bad situation?" Mineko asked, cocking her head inquisitively.

Konatsu smiled and shook his head. "It's not a 'bad situation' as such. Just… a dream I chased that seems to have led nowhere."

"You mean your 'Lady Ukyou'," Mineko said. "What's the problem? I know me'n all the rest of your regulars have been rooting for you! Didn't you say you were gonna have a talk with her?"

"I was too late," Konatsu said, his voice heavy with regret. "I hesitated, and… she has another who can be what I cannot."

"What, \textit{Ranma}?! Come on! That Casanova's been with, like, half the girls and a quarter of the guys at school! There's no \textit{way} that's gonna last past…" Mineko scoffed, her hackles rising.

Konatsu held up a hand. He appreciated the girl's ire on his behalf, but he felt it misplaced. He knew many of the rumours about Ranma were untrue and undeserved and didn't wish to see them repeated. "Not Ranma. Another. A woman," Konatsu said finally.

"What? \textit{Seriously}?" Mineko scowled. "Konatsu, look, I know what you're thinking, but… I mean, I don't \textit{care} what you were born as, you're \textit{twice} the woman anyone…"

Konatsu held up his hand again. "It isn't \textit{what} I am that's the problem. If I thought for a moment that changing my gender would please my Lady Ukyou, I would do it in a heartbeat. I once thought being the gender I was born into would please her, but… she has never asked nor wanted anything of me but that I be myself. The problem…" a pained expression crossed his beautiful features, "… is that I am simply not the one she loves."

"So… what are you going to do?" Mineko asked.

Konatsu smiled sadly. "Carry on? I never held out much hope that I would win Lady Ukyou's heart. It's not the reason I am loyal to her. As long as she is happy… I am content. I have a place and a purpose. It is enough to see how happy she is now that her own dreams are coming true."
"Don't you have any dreams of your own?" Mineko asked, leaning forward. She gestured at the Tea Shop around them. "Like... what you said about studying to be like Jiro here."

"I can do that at Ucchan's," Konatsu said. "It's not what is served that's important, it is the style and panache that goes into that service. The point where the line between ninjutsu and customer service is blurred." He gestured towards Mineko's cup. "Your tea cup, for instance, has been refilled twice while we've been chatting."

Mineko blinked and looked down at her teacup. It was nearly full.

"And even I couldn't tell you how Jiro-sensei did it," Konatsu said with a smile. "He is nowhere to be seen, except..."

"... When called upon?" Jiro replied, stepping smoothly into view at the side of their table. It wasn't jarring or startling like he had just apparated; there was a certainty that he had simply walked over and had clearly been seen approaching the whole time, yet before that moment Konatsu had no memory of him being anywhere near them.

"I... see your point," Mineko conceded, wide-eyed.

"The best customer service is when the customer is not aware they're being serviced at all - their needs are simply met," Jiro said with a smile. "So, before you leave, I have one last tradition to inflict upon you, if you would humor me." He produced a large box of tea cups, seemingly from nowhere. "Please, pick one that strikes your fancy, and that will be your teacup."

Konatsu held up his own and showed her the flowing pattern around the rim of her cup, like a vine dotted with small images of pumpkins.

Mineko nodded, then looked in the box for a moment before making her selection, proudly drawing forth a cup with a bold symbol of a lantern on it.

Jiro smiled, found the matching saucer and paired them. "It will be washed and ready for you on your next visit, my dear."

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Ranma glanced at her phone as they walked. There hadn't been any calls all day. I hope that means good news? Kinda wish I had clarified with Nabiki if she was going to call if things went WELL or not.

"Everything okay?" Ryouga asked, having noticed her looking at her phone. Akari was walking a few paces back, as had been her habit for the day, scribbling notes in her book and occasionally watching what they were saying and doing - which really wasn't much of anything.

Ranma shrugged. "I think so? Nabiki said she'd call if things went bad."

"Things? What things?!" Ryouga asked suspiciously, giving the redhead a searching look.

Ranma tucked the phone away. "Ummm... she was meeting with the fiancees today to tell them about the Link."

Ryouga's eyes widened. He straightened and took a deep breath, then looked off in a random direction. "Yeah... well... Good luck with that! I'm just going to walk in this direction for the rest of my life..."
Ranma sighed and caught the back of his shirt, holding him back by the collar as he continued to try and walk, feet slipping uselessly on the sidewalk.

"Stop being dramatic, dumbass," Ranma growled, annoyed. "If they were gonna come kill us, we'd be dead already."

"Safer to be lost for a few months," Ryouga replied, still trying to pull away.

"Ukyou held a grudge against me and pops for ten years," Ranma said dryly. "She could teach you a thing or two about patience and revenge, an' I'm pretty sure what Shampoo and Akane lack in that department they make up for in determination. You think even with your curse they wouldn't find you eventually?"

Ryouga continued to struggle for a few more seconds, then slumped and sighed. "... You're right. We need to face our deaths like men."

Ranma released his shirt, letting him overbalance, topple forward and crash to the ground.

"Oh, Ryouga!" Akari called out, but she seemed to wrestle down her urge to rush to his side, opting instead to watch and see what Ranma did.

Ryouga bounced back to his feet quickly. "What did I do to deserve that!?"

"Technically nothing, but that's just in case you were thinking of slipping a crack about my manliness in there somewhere," Ranma said. "Look… Nabiki is taking care of it and I trust her to sort this out."

Ryouga clapped his hand over his eyes. "Ugh! And Akane had finally stopped hating me, too…"

Ranma scowled. "If they should be mad at anyone, it's me. You didn't do anything wrong!"

Ryouga paused and peeked at her through his fingers. He was giving her an odd look, like Ranma had just done something weird.

Ranma felt a warmth rise in her cheeks that for some reason she couldn't identify. "What?" she asked testily. "What's with the look?"

Ryouga dropped his hand and looked away quickly. "Nothing…! Just… weird that you're taking my side in this."

Ranma folded her arms and huffed. "Not like I'm doing it for your sake!" she said quickly. "It's just… It's true. Getting mad at you and beating you up for something you had no control over isn't fair."

"Yeah, but it'd get you off the hook with your fiancées," Ryouga pointed out.

"Well… you've had me over a barrel like that a few times but you saved me instead, so…" Ranma muttered, fidgeting a little. Why's he gotta make this so weird?

Ryouga looked uncertain. "If… this is about that stupid koi rod…"

"I was talking about the weakness moxibustion, when everyone an' their idiot ninja minion was trying to beat the crap outta me while I was too weak to do anything about it!" Ranma said quickly, glaring at him in annoyance. She looked away after a moment, feeling a surge of uncertainty. "... A-and I guess the Koi rod thing counts too, maybe. I don't really remember much about that."
Which was a lie. Ranma remembered *everything* about that incident.

"R-right, sorry!" Ryouga muttered. "I… I appreciate it anyway. Thanks."

"Yeah… just… don't read too much into it," Ranma said, pushing past him as she resumed the walk to Ryouga's house.

Akari continued to write furiously in her notebook. "Ryouga… prefers… tsunderes…"

Ranma whirled on her "I AM NOT TSUNDERE!"

Dropping off Ryouga and Akari had been a little awkward; Akari was still avidly taking notes, and seemed confused when Ranma was content to leave with just a wave, asking Ranma if there shouldn't be a hug or a peck on the cheek or something. Ranma had tried to deflect while Ryouga looked ready to start using the breaking point technique to tunnel his way to the center of the earth. Akari had been adamant that she wanted to see Ranma's 'Girlfriend Routine' for that part of a 'Date'. In the end, Ranma had caved and managed to satisfy her by giving Ryouga a quick hug.

The best part, of course, was that Ryouga's mother saw the whole thing. Ranma could feel the questioning look from the older woman.

It didn't help that the Link made hugs… *complicated*. As soon as her arms had gone around Ryouga, the Link had flared to life with the usual flood of confusing perceptions. It had only lasted a moment, but it had been disorienting.

When Nabiki had dragged her back to bed after revealing she was part of the Link, simply snuggling with her had been a surprisingly intimate experience. In such close proximity, the emotions of the other person became almost like physical sensations. There was a perception of *presence* of the other person and a sort of constant current that flowed between them. With them both relaxed, it had been soothing and comforting… anxieties seemed to melt away as they were shared. It made getting *out* of bed extra-difficult, but the benefits of it had lingered; the knowledge that there was that warmth out there was comforting.

Ryouga, though… his emotions had been spiking, chaotic, disturbed. What felt like Guilt and Anxiety shot through everything. But there had also been a kind of *rush* as soon as she touched him that seemed to surge just after she made contact which, for a moment, obliterated all but the most intense of the other emotions. It wasn't anger or panic - it was a burst of warm red-gold, but shot through with sickly dark that seemed to well up from the core of him.

*Is that what I do to him now?* Ranma wondered, feeling a twinge of guilt. *When I wore those disguises so he wouldn't know it was me in the past, was that what happened in his head? I gotta find a way to fix this,* she thought finally. *I don't wanna hurt him just touching him! I gotta ask Nabiki what to do…*

She had been walking lost in thought for so long that it was a bit of a shock to realize she had arrived at the Dojo. She shook her head to clear it and put the Ryouga problem aside for the moment. *I wonder if anyone is home right now?* She checked her phone nervously. *Still no calls… I hope that's a good sign?*

"I'm home! Anyone here?" Ranma opened the front door, stepped in and slipped off her shoes.

"RANMAAAAAAA!"
There were at least two female voices in perfect sync and the sound of feet pounding the floorboards as someone started running from the family room.

"WhoopsSorryWrongHouseMyMistakeGOTTAGO!" Ranma turned, threw the door back open and started to bolt. She came up short when Ukyou skidded to a stop in front of her, having come around the house from the side door to intercept her.

"Oh no you don't, sugar!" Ukyou said with a determined look on her face.

Ranma drew back but another body slammed into her from behind and catapulted her forward. She tried in vain to stop herself but she was already off-balance and couldn't prevent herself pitching forward into Ukyou, her face getting mashed into the taller girl's chest.

\textit{Ucchan smells nice,} Ranma thought as she prepared for inevitable death. \textit{At least this can be a pleasant final memory before I die.}

She waited for the mallet to land. Akane was right up against her back; any minute she'd regain her footing, pull out some bludgeoning instrument made out of depleted uranium and permanently imprint Ranma's face on the paving stones.

Any minute.

\ldots

\textit{Hold up.} Ranma peeked tentatively up at Ukyou when Death missed his cue, followed by Pain and Suffering missing theirs, as things started to feel less like the brief and awkward moment before oblivion and more like she was being intentionally sandwiched. "Ummm… hi, Ucchan?"

Ukyou smirked at her, eyebrow raised. "You done motorboating me, sugar, or should I get you a snorkel?"

Ranma blushed. She felt Akane hook her chin her her shoulder and turned her head cautiously, checking for the usual outrage.

Instead she felt Akane's arms slip around her waist and the youngest Tendo grinned at her. "Gotcha."

Ranma deflated, slumping against Ukyou as she sighed heavily in relief. "Kane, you can't \textit{do} that to me! I thought I was in major trouble!"

"You \textit{are} in major trouble, sugar," Ukyou said.

Ranma swallowed, realizing that she had allowed herself to be thoroughly grappled by both girls and that escape was now impossible. "Ummm… had that chat with Nabiki, huh?"

"Uh huh," Akane replied. "\textit{Rannmaaaaaa...} why did you keep something like that from us?"

Ranma squeezed her eyes shut. "Because… Because I didn't know how to explain it! I was afraid you'd kill me, or kill Ryo, or… or think I didn't love ya, or…"

Akane put a finger to her lips. "It's okay, Ranma," she said, cutting off the redhead's frantic babbling. "We're not mad."

"We were mad," Ukyou huffed, but her stern glare faded. "Well… we were concerned."

"Nabiki explained it to us and after we talked it out and thought about it, I think we understand a bit better," Akane said. She paused. "… Is \textit{that} why you've been scarce all day? Nabiki told you to
vanish for a bit?"

"Uh… yeah," Ranma said, deciding to leave out the bit about taking Ryouga with her.

Ukyou rolled her eyes. "I'm still not sure how I feel about the lack of trust there."

"She kind of has a point, Ukyou…” Akane said timidly.

Ukyou sighed. "Yeah, I know… but just because she's right doesn't make it sting any less that she doesn't trust us."

"Shall we go inside?" Akane asked, releasing Ranma and stepping back. "I've got a lot of questions… and dinner is almost ready!"

Ranma blinked. "Did you…” she pointed at Akane.

Akane beamed and nodded. "Uh huh!"

Ranma gave Ukyou a nervous glance. "Is it…?"

Ukyou smirked playfully. "Well, that I don't know Ranchan. It's my first time trying to teach her something that isn't okonomiyaki."

Ranma went pale. "... Oh."

"I can't wait for you to try it! I even tried that spanakopita recipe Shampoo's grandparents gave us!" Akane gushed as she took Ranma's hand and practically dragged her into the house.

000 (Chapter 25 End: Adventures in Pig-training)

_I apologize sincerely for the delay in posting. A miscommunication on my part lead to me sitting idle while I waited for my editor to work through this Chapter... while he had already done it and was working through the subsequent chapters. Expect more chapters to be posted in the next few days!_
(Three years ago)

Ryouga sighed as he stared down the seemingly endless, unfamiliar stretch of road. His pack was already weighing heavily on his back and his feet ached from walking. The sun was already starting to set over the horizon, casting long shadows that only made everything more unfamiliar and strange.

*I thought I had it this time,* he thought miserably. He pulled out the hand-drawn map he had made on the way to school to help him find his way home. It had been an exceptionally good morning - only needing a couple of hours to make the trip. He had been certain he had found a route even *he* could follow, but now his own map seemed incomprehensible to him.

*Maybe I should find a place to camp for the night...* he thought miserably. He had been looking forward to a hot bath, sleeping in his own bed and a clean change of clothes, but all of those things seemed so far out of reach now. He just hoped he didn't start getting comments about how he smelled again. *I think there's a vacant lot over there...*

"Whatcha reading?"

Ryouga's head snapped up to find two very blue eyes staring into his; eyes that belonged to a familiar (If upside down) face.

"Yaaaaaugh!" He threw himself backwards dropped his map, stumbled back and landed on his butt. He pointed at the pigtailed source of his aggravation. *"What the hell do you think you're doing!?"

"Just asking," Ranma said nonchalantly as he swung down from the lamp post he'd been hanging from. He scooped up the map and looked at it curiously, turning it over in his hands a few times. *"What's this... a treasure map or something?"

Ryouga got up his feet, stomped over and snatched it away from him. *"It's none of your business!"

"Hey, hey, I was just asking!" Ranma said, holding up his hands defensively. *"I was just wondering because you've been wandering around the neighborhood for hours!"

"How would you know?" Ryouga asked suspiciously. *"Have you been following me!?"

"Nah, I live around here," Ranma said. He pointed back in the direction of the empty lot that Ryouga had been considering as a campsite.

Ryouga squinted. *"... What, that white house further back?" He frowned.

"What? No! Right there!" Ranma grabbed his head and turned it squarely towards the empty lot.

Ryouga shoved him off, but then realized where the pigtailed boy was pointing him. He squinted, spotting a small, ratty-looking tent that he had initially mistaken for a pile of detritus.

"You live in a tent?" Ryouga gave the boy a skeptical look. *"You're homeless?"

"I ain't homeless!" Ranma said testily. *"I just toldja, home is right there!" He waved at the lot. "I mean, maybe it won't be there next week, but nothin' wrong with that, is there?"

"I... guess not?" Ryouga admitted. He *had* spent his fair share of time camping out in empty lots and parks himself, though that wasn't exactly by *choice.*
"That's what you got in the pack, right?" Ranma glanced behind him. "You're like me'n Pops, right? Looking for a place to set up?"

"I'm not like you!" Ryouga said gruffly, turning to jerk his pack out of view of the boy's scrutiny. "I have a real house! I... just have trouble finding it sometimes."

"Really? Like, with a door and roof and stuff?" Ranma asked. "I've lived in those a few times when I was a little kid. Pops used to rent these places sometimes while we were in the city, but he says I'm too old for that now. Says it makes you soft."

"You mean he lost his job and now he can't afford it, and he doesn't want to admit it," Ryouga replied, a nasty smirk on his face.

"No! Pops could get a job if he wanted! He just... he's got more important stuff to focus on!" Ranma replied hotly. "He's a martial artist! He's gotta focus on the Art over everythin' else!"

"Which just happens to look exactly like being a bum," Ryouga replied, folding his arms and giving the pigtailed boy a challenging look.

"Hey, you take that back!" Ranma snarled, dropping back into a ready stance.

"So, you wanna fight now, huh?" Ryouga said, slipping his backpack off and dropping into a stance of his own. *If I can't sleep in my own bed tonight, I'll settle for wiping that smug grin offa this jerk's face!*

"*Ranma! Where the hell are you boy?! GET OUT HERE RIGHT NOW!*"

Ranma's eyes widened. "Crap! I forgot I was tryin' to be scarce!" He glanced back at the empty lot with a panicked look. He turned back to Ryouga. "Look, lemme see that map...! C'mon, we'll finish this at your house, okay?"

"What?! I don't want you coming over to my house!" Ryouga replied, not budging.

"Look, Pops has been drinkin', an'... an' he's pissed that I swiped some rice crackers he had stashed away for later, an' he keeps talkin' 'bout makin' me dig a trainin' pit an'..." The pigtailed boy swallowed. "Look, it's just best if we weren't here for a while, okay? I don't care where!"

Ryouga paused. As much as he just wanted to cave the annoying boy's face in, he could see a flicker of genuine fear in his eyes. He cautiously relaxed his stance. He shot a glance to the empty lot, spotting an older man in a dirty off-white gi and equally unclean headkerchief stumbling around.

"Fine. See if you can find it," He handed over the map, not looking at the boy. "The address is on the bottom of the page. Probably too far to walk at this point, though..."

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"Shut up," Ryouga snarled as he looked at his front door.

"How long were you walking around?" Ranma asked, checking the address on the sheet.

"I said shut up!" Ryouga growled.

"It's right behind the lot me'n Pops live at!" Ranma said. "You even pointed at it and asked if it was my house!"

"It was a weird angle, okay!?" Ryouga snapped at him. "Also, SHUT UP!" He stomped towards the
door. "You coming in or what?"

"I… sure," Ranma said after a moment's hesitation, noting the overgrown lawn and the mailbox stuffed to bursting. "You… uhh… you aren't home much?"

Ryouga slid open the door. He really didn't want to reveal his biggest weakness to the bread thief of all people. "Nobody in my family is. It's…" He sighed and bit the bullet. "… It's a family problem. Everyone in my family has a terrible sense of direction. My Mom manages to make it home occasionally, though lately she and I aren't usually home at the same time."

As soon as the door opened, a black and white blur tackled Ryouga, knocking him onto his back. Ranma yelped and leapt out of the way.

Ryouga's sour mood was momentarily forgotten as he laughingly tried to fend off the young dog's affections. "Ahahahaha!… Shirokuro, that tickles! *snort*… Easy girl!" Ryouga grinned and scratched the young dog behind the ears as she wriggled in joy at his return. "I missed you! How's the house, girl? Keeping the place safe for us? Who's a good girl?"

"You have a dog?" Ranma asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Yeah, Mom brought her home one day. She's still a puppy, really. I feel bad that she gets left alone so much, but she's a smart girl. She already knows how to feed herself. We just gotta leave enough kibble for her." Ryouga sat up, still embracing the dog. He noticed Ranma was crouching nearby, looking uncertain. "Go ahead, she doesn't bite or anything."

Ranma blushed and looked away, then tentatively reached out towards the dog. He nearly jerked back his hand when Shirokuro turned towards him as his fingers brushed her coat, but it was already too late. The black and white dog quickly pounced upon her new playmate and showered him in slobbery exuberance.

Ryouga chuckled as the pigtailed boy laughed and tried in vain to fend off the pup's affections. He stood and stepped inside the house.

"Mom? Dad? You home?" He peered inside the darkened house, but was already sure of the answer. He saw a note pinned to the wall near the door and took it down.

Dear Ryo,

I'm going to be spending the next while in the hospital for tests. It's nothing to worry about, but they want to keep me here a few weeks to make sure my platelets are good. Your mother is coming with me for now, but she'll try and get a cab home once they've got me settled. They think they might have a donor for me, and if they do I'll be here a bit longer, but I'll try and call every day. Take care of Shirokuro and keep up your studies, and I'll see you soon, okay?

Love, Dad.

Ryouga crumpled the note in his hand. This wasn't the first time his father had suddenly left for a 'checkup'. He knew it was more serious; that his father had probably collapsed again. He wished his parents would just be honest with him about the situation.

"Everything all right, man?" Ranma asked from the doorway as he peered inside. Shirokuro stood next to him and whined plaintively.

"Yeah… " Ryouga breathed. "Just a note from them telling me they'll be gone for a bit is all. The house is pretty well stocked, so it's not a big deal." He stuffed the crumpled note in his pocket. "You
coming in or not?" He stepped inside, flicking on the lights. It was a bit of a relief to see them come on. *Good, power bill is paid. Won't have to sit in the dark.*

"Uh, sure…" Ranma stepped inside, looking around as if it was unfamiliar to him to be inside a house. "You got anything to eat?"

Ryouga rolled his eyes. *Of course.* "Yeah, but I need to check the storeroom first. Whatever's here has gotta last me a couple of months, and I *really* need a bath first." He glanced over his shoulder at the pigtailed boy, noting he didn't look any cleaner than yesterday. "Furo's big enough for two if you wanna join me."

"Wha…? No, no, I'm fine!" Ranma said quickly, looking suddenly panicked.

Ryouga rolled his eyes. "Seriously? That's what you have personal space issues about? No wonder you're filthy! Haven't you ever been to a public bathhouse?"

"I… when I was little I went with Pops a few times," Ranma said nervously. "Mostly I bathe in streams and lakes an' stuff."

Ryouga just shook his head and motioned the boy to follow him. "*Fine.* You go first then. Furo's upstairs, you can clean yourself up while I check the larder." Ryouga pointed at the stairs as he walked past them towards the kitchen. "Towels are on the shelf on the left when you enter. *Don't* make a mess!"

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Thankfully the Curse hadn't progressed so far that Ryouga couldn't find his way in his own house yet, though he had a few false starts and ended up in the garage once or twice. Thankfully, the storeroom was well stocked with plenty of non-perishables. The kitchen was stocked as well, and Ryouga decided it would be better to eat what he could of the food in the fridge, as chances were good that it might spoil before the next time he was home. Once he was satisfied there was enough to afford some generosity to the bread thief, he decided to check on him.

*I suppose it would be just my luck if he drowned in there,* Ryouga thought sourly, tromping up the stairs. He reached the door and paused for a moment, listening, but not hearing anything. For a moment he considered just throwing open the door, but decided that was poor form, even if the rotten jerk deserved it. He knocked on the doorframe. "Oi, you alive in there?"

"Wha…?! Yes! I'm fine!" Ranma's voice was high-pitched with surprise.

Ryouga snorted. "Fell asleep in there, didn't you?"

"NO!... Maybe… yeah…" Ranma admitted guiltily. "*It's been a long time, man!*"

"Whatever," Ryouga said dismissively. "I'm gonna start dinner. You need anything in there before I do?"

"*Ummm… Do you have any cloth bandages?*" Ranma asked timidly.

"What, like… gauze?" Ryouga asked.

"Like the stuff you'd use for around your… umm, mid-section."

"Sure, I think so. Why, you hurt or something? You're not bleeding all over the tile, are you?" Ryouga felt a sinking sensation as he wondered what sort of hidden problems the pigtailed boy might
have that were now stewing in the furo. *I better drain and scrub the thing before I take a bath…*

"No, no… it's for… y'know, SUPPORT. You know, how martial artists wrap bandages around their mid sections? To avoid injury an' stuff," Ranma said quickly. "Mine kinda came apart when I was takin' em off, and…"

Ryouga sighed. *This is turning into a charity case!* "Yeah, yeah, there should be something like that in the cabinet in there. Just don't touch any of the medications, okay? Those're for my Dad."

"Okay."

"I'm serious. None of it would be worth anything, and he needs that stuff when he gets home. I'll be checking it when you get out," Ryouga growled.

"Okay! Sheesh, I get it!"

"Okay…” Ryouga said, feeling a little guilty for being judgemental. "Don't fall asleep in there again or I'll have dinner without you. Fifteen minutes, twenty tops."

"Got it."

Ryouga frowned, wondering if there was anything else he should say. He wasn't exactly used to having houseguests, after all. He shrugged and decided it wasn't important and headed back down the stairs.

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(*Present Day*)

The next morning was bright and sunny with just a hit of coolness in the air as Fall took hold. The sky was clear, the birds were singing and the day seemed full of possibilities… for those who weren't doomed to spend most of it in a classroom learning how to make numbers do things that only made sense in terms of other numbers. For them, the shining promise of the day was transmuted into a cruel taunt that made crawling back into bed and staying there seem the preferable course.

In other words, it was a typical Monday.

Akane and Ukyou had made the prospect of playing hooky tempting for Ranma. Nabiki had returned to the *Nekohanten* to resume her training with Shampoo and Ukyou had elected to come over with Akane to meet Ranma.

Ranma had naturally been nervous about how their discovery of the Link had gone, but the two girls seemed more curious about how it worked (though Akane *did* growl out a warning about 'staying faithful'). Ukyou also seemed rather peeved that Ryouga hadn't confided about it to her, though grudgingly had to concede the matter when Ranma had pointed out it was something of a conflict of interest.

In fact they had been in a *surprisingly* good mood. Whatever it was that had made them so agreeable, Ranma hoped it happened more often.

Akane's attempt at dinner had been a mixed result; Akane's vegetable stir fry had included sauteed bits from the rubber band she had forgotten to remove from around the broccoli when she was chopping it up, and it was pretty obvious the few dashes of 'soy sauce' she had added to the recipe had, in fact, been chocolate syrup.
Oddly enough, the much more complex *spanakopita* recipe had come out perfectly. Despite the recipe being hand-written in a mix of English and Greek, and Kasumi insisting that the kitchen didn't stock several of the necessary ingredients. Ukyou had taken a modicum of offense at the success of the recipe over her effort to coach Akane through the stir fry.

They had just slept that night, so Ranma hadn't bothered to change back. A good night's sleep had done wonders for her mood and Ukyou and Akane had teemed up to give her a pretty decent spar in the morning. The combination of Ukyou's restraining and mobility limiting techniques with Akane's direct application of force actually got them a few solid hits in. Ranma noticed them trying a few new things that didn't work as well and paused the exercise to help them work out the bugs. She found that she was enjoying it a lot more than sparring with her father, which tended more to the 'figure it out yourself if you want the hurting to stop' kind of training.

Which brought her to the furo and an odd thought as she reached for the regular soap for a scrub before she rinsed off and changed back to a guy. The waterproof soap caught her eye in its little case next to the regular soap.

*If I used the soap NOW, I'd be safe up to the game on Wednesday. Then I could be a guy for the SECOND half of the week for a change...* she thought.

She blinked and stared at the soap for a moment. *Is that the point I've gotten to now? I'm SCHEDULING when I get to be a guy?* She huffed and reached for the tub of warm water to dump it over her head and end the matter, at least for the duration of her bath.

She hesitated before grabbing the tub.

*Am I deciding that I'm OBLIGATED to be a guy until I absolutely HAVE to be a girl?* she thought, drawing her hand back and examining it for a moment. *Am I only a girl because I HAVE to be?*

*If There wasn't any stupid challenge that required it, no Palm-tree topknot idiots trying to make my life difficult, no psychotic Yakuza princesses, no worries about my parents disapproving... if I was just choosing what I wanted to do each day... would I go to school as a guy?* She stared at her hand.

*I think you're starting to LIKE being a girl all the time, boy!*

Ranma scowled at the echo of her father's voice in her head.

*It's unacceptable for you to attend school as a girl! You are a Man amongst Men, and if you refuse to act like it, then you know the consequences! When I find out what you have been doing...*

She winced a bit at the threat from the echo of her mother, feeling a shiver at the memory of seeing her mother's carefully schooled mask of control and calm slip, and the glimpse she had caught of the contempt in her mother's eyes.

Her jaw tensed. She reached for the waterproof soap and dumped out the tub, refilling it with cool water as she started to lather up. *I decide when I'm a guy and when I'm a girl. Not Pops, not the Pineapple brain, not Himura and not even Mom. If I gotta be a girl for school, it's 'cuz I CHOOSE to follow the rules. No one gets to MAKE me. And... I'm choosing that I wanna be able to change back to a guy in the SECOND half of the week. 'Cuz it's MY curse, an' I'm allowed to decide how to manage it!* She smiled in triumph at that last bit, feeling better about the sense of control that thought gave her.

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Walking to school brought with it the odd sensation of *routine*. 
Sayuri and the team met Nabiki, Shampoo, Hiroshi and Daisuke at the gates of the dojo to wait for Ranma, Ukyou and Akane to emerge. This time they didn't have to wait - the three of them having been up uncharacteristically early. Shampoo naturally gave Ranma one of her flying glomps but the embrace was accepted and returned enthusiastically this time, and with no protest from the others. Ranma in particular had the brightest smile Nabiki had seen on her in some time.

*We might just pull this off yet,* Nabiki thought wryly.

Kasumi came out with a large sack. She had taken to making one large feast for the group to share at lunch rather than individual bento, despite the protests from the volleyball team that they had their own lunches. Kasumi insisted that this was a small way she could feel like she was a part of things.

"You're all making me wish I was still in high school with all your adventures!" Kasumi said brightly, though there was a hint of wistfulness in her voice.

"You're making it sound like you're an old maid, sis. You're only twenty!" Nabiki chided her.

As they walked away, Nabiki and Akane exchanged glances, then glanced back at the dojo as Kasumi retreated back inside to continue on with her daily routine.

"We gotta find her someone exciting," Nabiki said.

"You guys know plenty of exciting people," Yuka muttered as she dropped back to join them.

"Yeah, but all the exciting people *we* know are kinda…" Akane started, trailing off weakly.

"... 'Damaged,'" Nabiki finished for her. "Trust me, I've scouted Nerima for a good match for her and turned up nil. Finding someone who might be able to spice up her life and who doesn't have some kind of disqualification and also isn't a complete ass is harder than you'd think."

"Yes, well 'exciting' and 'well-adjusted' don't tend to go together," Yuka commented.

"Hey!" Akane shot her friend an annoyed look. "Was that a crack?"

"Yes?" Yuka shrugged. "Akane, you're a good person and a great friend but let's be real here - you and Nabiki are both completely insane."

"And you hang out with us. What does that make you?" Nabiki asked, smirking and raising an eyebrow.

"I'm the plucky normal human sidekick who tags along and eventually gets rich writing the memoirs of your adventures," Yuka said without hesitation. "Y'know, *after* society rebuilds."

"Yuka, I know we're bad, but I don't think we're *apocalyptically* bad…"

"I already know what I'm going to name my pet Deathclaw."

"What's a 'deathclaw'?"

"I'll tell you, but it'll cost 50 caps," Nabiki interjected.

"... caps?" Akane cocked her head, looking more confused.

Yuka sighed in disgust. "You'll *never* make it in the Wasteland."

"Maybe we should look into importing when it comes to Kasumi's future boyfriend," Nabiki said
"Yeah... from *space* maybe," Yuka quipped. "Face it, *you lot* probably shouldn't be the ones playing matchmaker. Let Kasumi find someone on her own."

Nabiki sighed in frustration and crossed her arms. She hated that Yuka had made a good point. "I don't like the idea I *can't* do anything."

"You've been on the sidelines lots before," Yuka said, giving her a skeptical look.

"I *chose* not to do anything," Nabiki said. "I *always* had an intervention strategy ready to go."

Yuka rolled her eyes. "Yeah? Like picking a fight with the *Yakuza*, abusing the legal system of a scary Chinese warrior tribe to make a group marriage work and hanging out in a tea shop straight out of one of those old sci-fi shows with the creepy narrator? I think I liked it better when you stayed outta things."

Nabiki shrugged and studied her nails. "Really? Well, if I'm not working on Kasumi's relationship problems, I could always help out you and Daisuke..."

"Spaceman dating it is!" Yuka said quickly. "Maybe we could fix Kasumi up with one of Jiro's customers..."

"Jiro isn't a spaceman, he's just... *weird,*" Akane replied, sounding exasperated.

"I never said *Jiro* is a spaceman, I'm just saying he's the kind of guy who has space aliens as *customers.*"

"Yuka, stop being overly dramatic."

"I am applying only the bare *minimum* of dramatics, thank you! Unlike you, I manage my drama carefully!"

They neared the Hibiki residence to pick up the last member of their little troupe. Shampoo had explained to Nabiki the 'fake girlfriend' plot she and Ukyou had come up with to deflect Ryoga's mother from worrying too much about him. Nabiki could see Shampoo was mostly doing it because she enjoyed being a flirt and using the smokescreen of 'cultural ignorance' in order to make people squirm. Nabiki thought it was all a bit overly complicated and liable to backfire, but it seemed harmless enough. She elected to stay out of it for now and to pull the poor boy out if it got too rough for him.

Nabiki hung back a bit as Ranma made her way up to knock at the door. Things seemed to be relatively normal as Ryoga came out, dressed in his school uniform. He seemed a little more sheepish than usual as he said goodbye to his mother...

Nabiki caught the movement out of the corner of her eye - a purple streak as Shampoo executed a textbook perfect Amazon Glomp on the poor Lost Boy.

"*Wode Shagua!*" Shampoo said in a cutesy voice as she wrapped herself around her victim in a move that was part-hug and part grapple, with all the devastating strengths of both.

"I... *ack*... Shampoo, what are you...?" Ryoga flailed ineffectually. Even his tremendous strength was useless against the Power of the Glomp, as he quickly discovered.

"Oh, hello, Ms. Shampoo!" Mrs. Hibiki said, raising an eyebrow.
"Shampoo, what the hell are you doing!?" Ranma said with a mixture of shock, outrage, and panic. Whoops! We forgot to warn Ranma! Nabiki thought, though she opted to watch, curious about the redhead's reaction.

"Shampoo is just greeting her Shagua," Shampoo said sweetly to Ranma, cuddling the struggling Lost boy more tightly. "If act so jealous, people might get wrong idea."

"Ryouga, who's this?"

Nabiki blinked as a familiar-looking girl with greenish hair stepped outside. She had a plaid skirt and a sweater, and was holding up a wrapped bento, apparently intending to give it to Ryouga.

Akari? Uh oh… Nabiki's eyes widened as she started rapidly considering a range of intervention strategies.

"A-Akari, I can explain…!" Ryouga stuttered frantically, a wild panicked look in his eyes.

"Shampoo is Pi-Ryouga's girlfriend!" Shampoo said brightly. "Who is you?"

"I'm Akari…" the green haired girl gave Ryouga a questioning look. "... And I thought Ranma was supposed to be Ryouga's girlfriend this week?"

"What?!" Ranma yelped, then got that same panicked look, glancing at Shampoo, then at Mrs. Hibiki. "Akari you're not supposed to just announce that!" Ranma hissed at her, then laughed nervously, glancing at Mrs. Hibiki.

"What," Akane said flatly.

Nabiki quickly glanced at her sister standing beside her. Even with her untrained senses she could see Akane's aura starting to flare visibly. That's not good!

"Akane, hang on a sec…" Nabiki said quickly, trying to head things off before they snowballed out of control.

Too late! Nabiki thought with growing concern as Akane stomped her way up to Ryouga.

"Ryouga, what is all of this!?" Akane demanded hotly.

"A-Akane…!" Ryouga yelped, eyes going wide. He was sweating visibly now as his eyes darted from girl to girl.

"Oh, is this Akane?" Mrs. Hibiki asked, cocking her head. "The one you were writing all those lovely poems and letters to, Ryo?"

"You… wrote her poems?" Akari asked, cocking her head and giving Ryouga a questioning look. "I don't think you ever wrote me any poems…"

"I trusted you, Ryouga!" Akane snarled, starting to get thoroughly worked up. "I thought you were different!"

"Akane, wait, it's not what you think…!" Ranma said, frantically trying to de-escalate the youngest Tendo before critical mass was reached.

"You stay out of this, Ranma!" Akane snapped at her. "This is between me and your boyfriend!"
"He's not my boyfriend!" Ranma replied hotly.

"Yes he is… Yes he is!" Akari insisted, grabbing Ranma's arm. Her eyes started filling with confused tears. "Ranma, you promised!"

"I… I… I…" Ranma's expression started to mimic Ryouga's as she started to look around frantically as well.

"Airen maybe has some explaining to do too?" Shampoo said, giving the redhead a hard stare. "What Pokemon trainer girl talking about?"

"I'm a Sumo Pig trainer!"

"Same difference."

"It is not!" Akari huffed. "Honestly, I have to have this argument every time I go into town!"

"Oh god…" Nabiki muttered, massaging her forehead as she tried frantically to figure out a way to pull at least some of the volatile factors out of the fire before the explosion that was brewing became inevitable.

"Ummm, excuse me?" someone asked in english, tapping Nabiki on the shoulder.

Nabiki turned, her train of thought momentarily derailed. Behind her was a young girl about Akane's age. Her wavy, shoulder-length hair was the color of straw and her eyes were a much deeper blue than Ranma's. Dusting her cheeks were a few freckles and the style of her simple skirt and blouse practically screamed 'farmer's daughter'.

The girl opened an "English to Japanese" phrasebook, squinting, then read out in halting fashion, "'Desolation… Can you say that it is Hibiki residence?'"

Nabiki frowned, then asked in english, "Do you want to know if this is the Hibiki residence?"

The girl sighed in profound relief. "Oh thank mah stars! Y'all speak english! I'm such a dummy when it comes to foreign languages! My name is Anna. Thank you so much for your help!" She nodded. "Yes please, could you tell me if this is it? I'm looking for Ryouga Hibiki."

Nabiki's eyes widened. No… no way… She couldn't be…! "Uhhh… Nabiki Tendo. It's nice to meet you. Yes, this is the right place but… right now might be a bad time…"

Unfortunately, it was too late. Anna glanced past her and spotted the Lost Boy. "JOE!"

Ryouga looked up and over at her. His eyebrow twitched. "A-Anna…?!"

The girl skirted around Nabiki and ran up to him, nearly tackling him with a hug. "Joe! I missed you so much! I've been looking for you for so long!"

Akane stepped back. From her expression, Nabiki could see that critical mass had been achieved and the point of no return passed. Akari looked shocked and possibly even a little heartbroken. Shampoo looked confused, and Ranma was clearly panicking.

But Ryouga…

Nabiki felt a bit dizzy. She could feel his panic. He wanted to run… needed to run, but he was frozen and unable to move… He was overloaded, it was too much…!
Nabiki noticed Ranma shake her head too as it hit her as well, and realized it wasn't her imagination. And if they were picking up on Ryoga's feelings this far from him…!

*Oh crap! Shi shi Hokodan!* The boy was having a panic attack, and he had unfortunately taught himself to channel overwhelming negative emotions into a literal explosion. She needed to defuse the situation or get him out!

The girls were arguing now, demanding answers from a mostly unresponsive Ryoga, and generally escalating far too fast to bring them down with words. A bucket of cold water might do it, but Nabiki neither had one, or was sure it wouldn't make things worse with Shampoo's curse and Ranma's ailurophobia.

*Get him out it is,* she thought. She shot Ranma a look that she hoped conveyed the message *'Back me up!'* before she ran over to Ryoga and grabbed him by the shoulders to make him look at her.

Her plan was to fake illness to snap him into his protective instincts. She didn't *have* to fake it. The wave of heavy chi that suddenly surged through the Link was overwhelming. Her eyes went wide and she nearly doubled over, staggering against him.

"Nabiki…!" He yelped and caught her, her sudden seizure successfully interrupting the impending explosion.

"*Hospital…!*" she managed to croak out as her world spun. She felt him scoop her up into his arms and the rush of the ground suddenly dropping away as he began a headlong rush towards what he thought was the hospital. He leapt up onto a nearby lamppost, then a roof, then broke into a run as the shouts of the surprised and outraged girls behind him faded.

Okay… okay… *Got him out…* Nabiki squeezed her eyes shut and struggled with the overload from the Link that was making the world spin and her stomach churn. Now… *just don't pass out… don't… pass out…*  

... *don't*...  

... *pass*...  

... *out*...  

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Ranma felt the sickeningly familiar wave while she was in the middle of trying to calm Akane down. Her eyes went wide and her gaze snapped to Ryoga. Waves of heavy ki were surging from the boy as his emotional state rapidly cascaded into failure. *Oh crap!*

She caught motion out of the corner of her eyes and saw Nabiki starting to move. Their eyes locked, and Nabiki's expression told her that the Middle Tendo had a plan, and she needed Ranma to support it. A slight nod was all Ranma had time for before everything went down.

"*Ranma listen to me when I'm talking!*" Akane grabbed the redhead's collar to wrench her attention back.

Ranma didn't have a chance to reply before she heard Ryoga choke out "*Nabiki…!*" and there was a chorus of shouts of surprise as he suddenly leapt away, apparently carrying Nabiki in his arms.

"*Wha…? Wait…!*" Akane blinked and looked around. "*Nabiki…!? NABIKI!*" Her gaze snapped to track Ryoga's fleeing form and she coiled to pursue, the flames of murderous rage in her eyes.
Ranma tackled her and pinned her shoulders to the ground.

Akane's breath left her in a surprised wheeze, not having expected the attack. Her eyes widened with surprise, betrayal and a flicker of anger that promised to flare into a full inferno of rage directed at the redhead herself any second.

"Akane, Shi shi hokodan!" Ranma hissed tightly and kept her pinned, holding her gaze until she was sure the youngest Tendo understood.

After a second understanding blossomed in Akane's brown eyes, followed by a horrified expression. "Oh no… Nabiki…!"

"She interrupted it before it was too late," Ranma said, wishing she was as sure of that as she sounded. "But if you go after him right now, it could set it off and she'll be ground zero. Stay down, Akane."

"What just happen?" Shampoo asked, crouching next to them.

"Why did Ryouga leave, Ranma?" Akari asked, crouching on the opposite side.

"Maybe Shagua not as interested in Pokemon as Pokemon Trainer girl hope?" Shampoo suggested with a smirk.

Akari scowled at her. Her lower lip trembled. "That's it!" She stood up and pointed at Shampoo. "Katsunishiki! Kachi-age!"

There was a rumbling from the backyard which rapidly grew louder as something huge started to charge around the house. The massive sumo pig rounded the corner, his eyes locking onto the person Akari was pointing at. He adjusted his course slightly and picked up speed. Shampoo's eyes widened, without enough time to properly react or dodge as the massive animal bore down on her.

And stopped dead.

Not for a lack of trying. His hooves dug furrows in the earth as he struggled to fulfill his mistess's command, but a delicate-looking hand placed almost casually on his forehead was holding him back, seemingly without effort.

Anna stood in front of the pig, facing the group and rubbing the back of her head nervously with her free hand. "Sorry to interrupt, but… I don't suppose any of y'all speak english and could explain to me what's going on?"

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It was about half an hour into his frantic sprint for the hospital that Ryouga realized he had absolutely no clue where he was going.

He leapt over a concrete retaining wall and landed in what appeared to be a small park. There were swing sets and play structures for children, but the park itself was empty at this time of day. I'm not lost in the woods yet. Need to stop before I am, but…

He looked down at the girl in his arms and felt the surge of cold panic again - the need to run - to keep going until he got somewhere with help. He didn't know what was wrong with her, he didn't know what to do and everything was wrong…!

Nabiki stirred, groaning softly, her eyes fluttering.
As quickly as the panic had risen in him, it was washed away by relief. He quickly carried her over to a park bench and laid her down. "Nabiki? Nabiki, can you hear me?"

Her eyes opened. She held up a hand to shield them from the sun. "... Ryouga?"

Ryouga slumped, feeling a suddenly drained. "Oh thank god…"

"Unnh… right… right… The… escape thing…" Nabiki muttered, putting a hand over her eyes. "... Ow… You don't happen to have an aspirin, do you?"

"No!" Ryouga shot back up and started to look around frantically. "I'm trying to get you to the hospital but I can't find my way and I don't see anything around here that…"

He felt her grab his hand, stopping him. He turned to look at her as he felt the Link flare to life and some of the nervous energy started to bleed away through it. "Nabiki, wha…?"

"Ow," Nabiki grit her teeth. "Ranma had to wade through this? Ryouga, calm down. I'm okay. I'm fine. You're the one who's in trouble right now, so you need to listen to me."

Ryouga blinked, then remembered the situation he'd left behind. "Oh god… Akari and… and Anna… and Mom saw, and Akane…" He hiccuped and his eyes started to get that wild look. "Akane thinks I'm a pervert and Akari has to hate me after that and… and I don't even know what Anna thinks and my Mom… my Mom saw it all…"

Nabiki grabbed the sides of his head and forced him to look at her. "No. Stop," she said sternly. "You're panicking and you need to reign it in before you lose control of it again."

He felt the stern calm through the link as she cut through the waves of dark, sickly fear that were starting to seep into his perceptions. Lose control… He suddenly realized what she meant as he felt it building inside. He tried to pull away. "I've gotta get away…! If I let it out here…"

"Don't you dare!" Nabiki cut him short. She grabbed his hand and firmly laced her fingers with his before he could object. "I am not letting go, so if you want to get away from me you're going to have to break my fingers. What you need to do is stop, listen to me and take a deep breath. Can you do that?"

He wanted to try anyway. He was pretty sure he could slip his fingers out of hers without hurting her. If he went now he had a good chance of getting far enough away that she'd be safe. But… something in her eyes held him fast. Determination, resolve and confidence. The Link only enhanced the effect. If he had ever wondered how Nabiki got away with extorting people who could physically snap her like a twig, he now had a pretty good idea how. He swallowed and nodded dumbly, not able to muster the will to disobey.

Nabiki nodded. "Good. You're having a panic attack. I can feel it. Akane used to have them when she was younger, after Mom died. Feels like you're having a heart attack, right? Fingers tingling?"

Ryouga nodded again. He was familiar with the tightness in his chest. He knew it wasn't an actual heart attack, but it seemed to grip and squeeze his heart with icy fingers.

"I don't blame you. That was a lot of stuff to land on you all at once and you're not used to dealing with it like Ranma," Nabiki said. Her eyes seemed to go unfocused for a moment. "Yeah… I never really wanted to know what one of these felt like, but I guess now I do."

"I'm hurting you…" Ryouga felt the hand squeeze as the urge to run flared up again.
"No," Nabiki said, sternly but calmly, fixing him with another intense look. "I'm just aware of you hurting. I want you to focus on me. Not on anything that happened, just me, okay?"

"...Okay..." he said weakly. He was breathing heavily though he didn't understand why. He wasn't tired. In fact, his muscled ached to move, like there was an electric current running through them, nervous energy that just wouldn't bleed off.

"Better," Nabiki said after a moment, smiling a little. For some reason that made him feel better, too. He could feel her through the link and the anxiety begin to bleed off through it and break up against the solid calm she was projecting. He started to try and steady his breathing - wanting to try and emulate what he was feeling from her, if for no other reason than to ease some of the burden of it.

The impending sense of disaster - of imminent danger - started to fade. Then, rather abruptly, all that nervous energy turned inward, collapsing in on itself and making his stomach protest violently.

"Ulp..." he managed before standing and being violently ill in the trash can next to the bench.

Nabiki, still holding his hand, stood beside him, rubbing his back.

"It's going to be okay," she said.

Normally those words were empty in situations like this, but he could feel her confidence through the Link. He shuddered, coughing as another wave of nausea hit him. Finally his roiling stomach had nothing more to expel, and after a few more dry heaves, his protesting insides finally settled down into an uneasy truce with him.

God I'm pathetic, he thought miserably, still gripping the sides of the trash can for a moment before he straightened up again.

"No, none of that!" Nabiki chided him.

"None of what?" he asked, looking over his shoulder at her, confused.

"Whatever that black, sticky ick is that you're feeling. If I had to guess, I'd suspect you're starting to beat yourself up for freaking out," Nabiki replied sternly. "Don't. It'll just make things worse."

Ryouga scowled and looked away. "I don't need you managing my emotions, Nabiki - any more than I needed Ranma doing it!" He tried to tug his hand from her grasp but she just held tighter.

"Normally I'd agree with you, Ryouga. But as long as your emotions being out of control turn you into a literal bomb, I can't afford to leave things to chance." Her expression softened. "I'm not trying to bully you into feeling better, Ryouga. And believe it or not, I'm not totally operating out of self-interest here. I'm just trying to get you to stop making yourself feel worse when you don't deserve it." She tugged gently on his hand. "Come here. There are some vending machines over there and I'll buy you something to swish that awful taste out of your mouth. Then we'll talk, okay?"

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After Ryouga scooped up Nabiki and vanished, everyone elected to come inside to try and work out exactly what was going on. Mrs. Hibiki went back to the kitchen to make tea (Ukyou joining her to make sure she didn't get lost) which left Shampoo, Akari, Akane and Anna all looking at Ranma expectantly.

Ranma was suddenly regretting all the times had desperately begged people to 'let me explain!' in these situations. Explaining this mess was probably going to be more difficult and perhaps even less
painful than just letting them beat the crap out of her.

Especially since one girl didn't even speak the language.

"Do... we know anyone who does speak English?" Ranma asked sheepishly, glancing around, then giving Anna an apologetic smile. Why didn't I pay more attention in English class?! WHY?!

"I know it fairly well," Mrs. Hibiki said, carrying a tray as she walked in. She set it down, took a seat next to Anna and smiled at the girl. "So you're from America, dear?"

Anna looked immensely relieved to hear someone speak her language. "Yes! Omaha, actually! I was amazed to find out that Joe was from so far away!"

"'Joe'?" Mrs. Hibiki asked, confused.

"Oh, that's... that's kind of a nickname for Ryouga," Anna said, blushing and twiddling her fingers. "When he first showed up on our farm and saved us from a local gang, we thought he was 'the Joe', the hero from the local legends who was supposed to appear whenever people were in danger. It's... it's silly, I know. But we were so desperate, and he really was the hero we needed, and..."

Mrs. Hibiki smiled. "I'm glad to hear my son is making such a good impression even in such faraway lands! So... you came to visit him?"

Anna fidgeted. "I... I know J... Ryouga said his heart belonged to another, but... but I never felt this way about anyone but him and... and I know he felt something for me, too! I decided I needed to come to Japan and see for myself - to make sure that he was really happier here with the person he told me his heart belonged to."

"I see. And... if he isn't happy with this other girl?" she asked. "What are your intentions?"

"To convince him to come back home with me! To the farm with Papa and me in Nebraska where he belongs and where he's needed!" Anna said firmly.

"I see," Mrs. Hibiki said with a sigh. "It seems my Ryo has made quite an impression on more than a few young ladies. Who was the girl he told you his heart belonged to?"

"Someone named 'Akane'?" Anna said uncertainly.

"Hmmm?" Akane perked up, hearing her name. "What did she say about me?"

"That my son has some explaining to do," Mrs. Hibiki said with another heavy sigh as she looked over the collection of girls sitting across from her. "And that he is far too much like his father for his own good."

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Ryouga swished the water around in his mouth. The worst of the bile had been cleansed, but he suspected the bitterness would linger a while. He glanced at the middle Tendo who was sitting next to him and holding his hand so nonchalantly as she did something on her cell phone.

"You don't have to keep holding my hand, you know," Ryouga said. "I'm not going to get lost sitting on a bench."

"Not holding it to keep you from getting lost," Nabiki replied. "I'm holding it because you're upset."

"I'm not..." Ryouga started then sighed in frustration as he realized it was pointless to deny it when
she could sense his emotions. "Okay fine, I'm upset, but…"

"And I'm making sure you don't go over the tipping point and waiting for you to calm down enough to talk about stuff. Which hopefully is about now," Nabiki said. "Did you know we're nearly in Kawasaki? That's over 30 kilometers. Pretty impressive."

"How do you know that?" Ryouga asked.

Nabiki put the phone away. "GPS in the phone. I imagine it'd be really handy for someone like you. You don't happen to have any money to buy one with, do you?" She gave him an appraising look.

"Ummm… is it more than a Rail Pass?" He asked nervously.

Nabiki rolled her eyes. "That would be a 'no', then. Not a surprise. I'll seriously need to help you and Ranma use those skills of yours to make some decent money sometime soon. It's criminal how poor you two are. You're wasted on menial manual labor."

"What, you're managing my life now as well as my emotions?" Ryouga muttered. "I get by just fine!"

"Nearly blowing up is just fine?" Nabiki asked.

"That was…!" Ryouga started, then trailed off. He slumped. "... Fine. I'm a mess. Exactly why you shouldn't be wasting your time! Just leave me be and…"

Nabiki leaned over and flicked him on the forehead, right between the eyes.

"Ow! What…!?" Ryouga blinked and jerked back, more in surprise than from any real pain.

"Stop that," Nabiki said sternly. "I decide who is and isn't worth my time, clear?"

"Uhh… yes ma'am?" Ryouga replied uncertainly.

"Good," Nabiki nodded. "I just sent Ranma a text letting her know we're alright. So, since the chances of us getting back to Nerima in time for school are nil, you and I are going to spend a few hours away from the Madness so we can sort out what to do about your Harem Problem."

"I don't have a 'Harem Problem'," Ryouga said crossly.

Nabiki gave him an exasperated look. "Yes, of course, you just about had a nuclear meltdown because a whole herd of attractive young ladies showed up and the situation was totally platonic."

Ryouga blushed. "It… it's not like that! I… I mean, Akari is the only one…"

"Mind explaining why she was insisting Ranma was your girlfriend?" Nabiki asked sweetly. "You know, explain it to me so I can convince my little sister to let you keep your lungs?"

"It's… complicated," Ryouga said, slumping.

"Yes, that's a given," Nabiki replied. She opened her can of iced coffee and took a sip. "Start from the beginning with Akari and we'll work our way through to the new girl."

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Ryouga stable for now. Crisis averted, but keeping him out of neighborhood until he's more stable and I've got a better idea how to sort the mess out. See if you can straighten things out with his Mom
at least. Keep me posted.

Love, Nabs

Ranma read the message and sighed, flipping the phone closed. "Okay, they're both okay. They're probably not gonna be back for a bit."

"Why did Ryouga grab Akane's sister and run off like that?" Akari asked.

Ranma took a deep breath, glancing around the room nervously. *Okay… okay, truth. Just get it all out.* "Ryouga knows this martial arts technique called the *Shi Shi Hokodan*. It uses strong emotions… heavy emotions like depression or despair or whatnot… to make an explosion of force. The problem is that if he gets too depressed he can't control it. Nabiki was just faking being sick to snap him out of it long enough to get him out."

"Oh dear…" Mrs. Hibiki said, looking aghast. "When did he learn that?! Who would teach him such a thing?!"

"It was a scroll he found," Ranma said. "It kinda *warned* that the technique messed up your life if you used it, but…" She felt a pang of guilt. *He was so desperate to win a fight with me…*

"Shampoo feel bad… Didn't realize Sha-errr, Ryouga affected so much by teasing," Shampoo said, hanging her head.

"So… you aren't seriously interested in my son, then?" Mrs. Hibiki asked.

Shampoo laughed weakly and shook her head. "Shampoo just playing girlfriend because think you worried no one take care of him. Make feel better, but Shampoo already married to Ranma."

Mrs. Hibiki blinked. "... Pardon?"

Ranma opened her mouth a half second too late to stop Shampoo from making the situation *way* more complex, and snapped it shut as the opportunity came and went.

Mrs Hibiki turned and looked at Ranma. "... Ranma?"

"I can explain…" Ranma started, then remembered she had soap-locked herself that morning. "... uh… Well, lemme show you my ID…" She reached for her pocket, then remembered her ID had been replaced with one with a picture of her girl side. "... Okay, I can't explain. Help…?" She gave Shampoo an imploring look.

"Airen… err, *Ranma* have Jusenkyo curse," Shampoo said. "Like Ryouga, but turn into girl instead of pig."

"... Jusenkyo… *curse*?" Mrs. Hibiki said, giving her a blank stare.

Ranme massaged the bridge of her nose. "She… doesn't know about Ryouga's curse either, Shampoo." She glanced to her right. "Akane, could you…?"

Akane shook her head. "*Ooooh* no! You've had *weeks* to sort this out! I don't want any part of this any further!"

"Yeah, I'm with Akane on this one, sugar," Ukyou said from the doorway, leaning against the frame with her arms crossed.

"Gee, *thanks* you two," Ranma muttered darkly. "Akari, could we get some hot and cold water? I
can't change right now, but if Shampoo is okay with it we can use her curse to…"

"Shampoo not changing in front of her! Get caught in Pokeball!" Shampoo said quickly.

"For the last time, I am a Sumo Pig Trainer! Pokemon aren't even real!" Akari said angrily. She folded her arms and lifted her chin, pointedly looking away from the Amazon. "Get your own water!"

Mrs Hibiki glanced back and forth among all of them, then sighed and laughed softly. "I see. You had me worried for a moment! I forgot how real some of these games can get at your age. So… do you use dice rolls for these things, or do you play it free-form?"

"Oh god damnit…" Ranma muttered.

Ryouga had to admit, it felt good to just tell his whole story without someone interrupting. Nabiki was a surprisingly good listener, nodding and making attentive noises, asking the occasional question, but letting him talk when he needed to. When he paused or was silent, she would give his hand a reassuring squeeze.

It wasn't anything like the Nabiki he thought he knew. But then, he admitted, he had barely known anything about her outside of her reputation. She was always there, but she stayed in the background. He supposed it made sense for her to know these things, given how often she seemed to be three or four steps ahead of everyone else as far as what was going on. He'd almost suspect her of an ulterior motive, but the Link dispelled that notion. To his surprise, he wasn't sensing anything from her that felt like duplicity.

"So… Anna is the girl you dumped to stay faithful to Akane. Akari is the girl you tried to actually give up on Akane for, Akane is the girl who broke your heart, Shampoo is just messing with the whole situation for fun and Ranma is the 'it's complicated'," Nabiki said, recapping. "We can safely eliminate Shampoo as a factor then, but that still leaves you with four. Definitely a Harem Problem."

"It is not," Ryouga huffed. "First off, Akane isn't into guys! I never had a chance with her and we both know it!"

"It's not about what Akane feels, Ryouga," Nabiki replied. "You still hold a torch for her and she's irrationally possessive of you, which means she's in this game no matter how loudly she insists that she isn't."

"Well, Ranma obviously…" Ryouga started, but Nabiki gave him a cross look, shutting him up.

Nabiki sighed. "Okay, fair enough on Ranma, actually. I can't realistically expect you to come to any sort of resolution about how you feel about her without a few years of therapy, a magic potion or one or both of you just flat out snapping. But she's still a factor. For the sake of argument, let's just say she's not realistically a choice…"

"... because she isn't!" Ryouga insisted.

"... Which in real life very seldom stops people, but fine," Nabiki replied, exasperated. "That leaves Akari and Anna. So… tell me about Anna to start. I know you met her while you were wandering around trying to get over Akane and that you saved her farm from a local gang. How serious did things get?"

"Her… Dad was talking about marriage," Ryouga admitted. "She didn't mind and… to be honest, it
didn't bother me either, at the time." He turned over an empty water bottle in his hands, studying it as he talked. "I was seriously considering it for a while. I… I could actually see it. I was kind of getting into farm life… I… I felt useful."

"That's all?" Nabiki asked.

Ryouga shook his head. "No… no. I mean…I didn't even consider Anna that way at first. But… but when she was kidnapped… I guess it might be a bit like how Ranma feels when Akane gets kidnapped."

"Not the same as how you feel when Akane gets kidnapped?" Nabiki asked playfully.

Ryouga shook his head, surprisingly not arguing the point. "Whenever Akane was kidnapped… Well, I always knew Ranma would save her in the end. No matter how much I wanted to, I knew I'd never find my way to her in time. It was more a race, to try and beat Ranma there, but…"

"You trusted Ranma to save her," Nabiki finished.

"... Yeah, I guess," Ryouga admitted. "But… with Anna… I was it. There was no one else. She wasn't waiting for some other guy to save her. I didn't have anything to prove to anyone. Just… someone who had faith in me that I couldn't bear to let down. And then… I didn't. And… and that feeling… it was almost enough to make me stay."

"Right feeling, wrong girl?" Nabiki asked sympathetically.

Ryouga closed his eyes and winced. That observation felt a little too close to the mark. "Maybe… I was ready to give up on Akane when it all started and by the end I had every reason in the world to give up on her… but that's when I decided to go find her again. Maybe that's why." He felt a wave of self-revulsion. Was that all Anna was to me?

"... I really am a pig."

He felt Nabiki squeeze his hand. He glanced at her and was surprised to see an uncharacteristically gentle expression on her face, something that reminded him more of her older sister.

"You're not a pig. You're a teenager. No one is supposed to make up their minds about this stuff this early," Nabiki said reassuringly. "Though… she came all the way to a country where she doesn't speak the language to try and find you. She sounds like she's pretty sure. So the question is… how do you feel about her now? Do you regret leaving?"

"I… didn't really think about it afterwards," Ryouga admitted reluctantly, feeling even more awful.

Another squeeze. "Good. Be honest. You can't make her happy if you're not honest about how you feel." Nabiki leaned forward. "So… that leaves Akari. Now… inane plans to be a better girlfriend aside… Why did you run from her?"

Ryouga swallowed. Oddly enough though, Nabiki had helped him find an answer when talking about Anna. "She was someone who had faith in me… who I couldn't bear to let down… and then I did."

"You made a mistake," Nabiki said.

Ryouga shook his head. "I could deal with it if it was a mistake. I was incapable. My directional curse and my Jusenkyo curse both came into play at once and… she was left alone in the worst place possible. Because I took her there. I… couldn't handle that feeling."

"… Hence your need to fix one or both curses. Just making Akari your Anchor wouldn't be enough,"
Nabiki said thoughtfully. "And so you're a massive aggregation of anxiety and guilt that's ready to pop until we manage to pull that off, whether you get back together with Akari or not."

Ryouga made a noncommittal sound.

"Well… that sucks," Nabiki muttered. "Nothing much for it but to wait for the results from the doctors."

Ryouga grunted again.

He felt Nabiki's gaze on him, even though he was studying the ground intently. *Give up, Nabiki. You can't fix this like you did with Ranma's problems. You're up against a 500 year old curse.*

"So, what do you do for fun, Ryo?" Nabiki asked. The non-sequitur snapped him out of his reverie.

"I… what?" He looked at her, confused.

"Fun. Other than martial arts or obsessing over my little sister." Nabiki stretched with one arm, still holding his hand with the other. "Video games. Movies. Theater. Books. Manga. Anime. You're not the socializing type, so it's not that… poetry maybe?"

Ryouga winced. "I tried that once. It was terrible. I… uhh…" He deflated a little. "I don't… really do anything for fun. I spend most of my time just trying to survive, you know?"

Nabiki quirked an eyebrow. "Come on, things have been pretty stable for the past couple of weeks for you. What have you done with your free time after school?"

"Study?" Ryouga said weakly. "Read through the textbooks a couple of times…"

Nabiki rolled her eyes and stood. "Okay, that can't be allowed to stand. Come on, we're going to go find something you want to do that isn't something you need to do." She tugged on his hand.

"Wait, what?!" He looked around nervously. "C-could you let go of my hand at least?"

"Nope!" Nabiki said, smirking. "And yes, people are going to think we're a couple. And no, no one here knows us or is likely to ever see us again, so I don't care and neither should you. That's the advanced part of the lesson. But for now, focus on the basics."

"Lesson?" Ryouga stood reluctantly.

"'How to De-feralize Your Martial Artist'," Nabiki said proudly. "I worked out most of the kinks with Ranma and it did wonders."

"Yes, and you fell in love with him in the process!" Ryouga protested nervously, intensely aware that her emotions had taken on a much warmer color and started swirling slowly.

"Yes, well, that was one of the kinks. Just try not to be too charming and we'll be fine," Nabiki winked at him playfully.

"Well… that went about as badly as it could have," Ukyou quipped as they walked.

Ranma hunched her shoulders and jammed her hands deeper into her skirt pockets, scowling. "I noticed. Thank you, Ucchan."
"What is 'Larper'?” Shampoo asked, still confused.

"'Live Action Role Play'," Akane replied. "It's... kind of like playing a game where you act out a story you make up as you go. A 'Larper' is someone who does it."

"Basically she thinks we're making it all up as part of a game, sugar," Ukyou supplied helpfully. "The curses, the stuff about Ki attacks and Chinese Amazons and probably most of the rest of the really difficult to believe stuff. It's a real shame someone decided to use the soap today so they couldn't show her the curse and settle the matter."

"I am aware of that, thank you, Ucchan," Ranma replied tightly.

"It probably would have been enough if you had agreed to change, Shampoo," Akane said, still not entirely understanding the Amazon's objection.

"Hmph!" Shampoo sniffed. "Not want to give Pokemon Trainer ideas!"

"What is your beef with Akari, anyway?" Ukyou asked.

"Make animals fight barbaric," Shampoo growled. "Weak person teach strong animal to fight so no have to be strong themselves! Saw dog fight once. Even Ryouga deserve better than such person!"

"Dog fighting is all underground and unregulated. Sumo pig matches are about as regulated as they get, sugar. I don't think there's a comparison..." Ukyou said skeptically.

Shampoo shot her a glare. "Maybe if Spatula Girl turn into animal herself she learn to be more sympathetic!"

Ukyou took a step back. "Okay, wow... hot button topic, I get it."

"You shouldn't judge Ryouga's girlfriend so harshly, Shampoo. Akari's really a nice girl," Akane said. "He'd be heartbroken if she actually left him."

"Take Ryouga to Joketsuzoku village. Find ten better girls in ten minutes," Shampoo sniffed.

"Not all at once, I hope," Ukyou commented dryly.

"Depends if he challenge all at once."

"Wait, that's a thing!?"

Ranma felt a buzzing in her pocket. She fished out her phone and flipped it open.

_Taking Ryo to find him a hobby that doesn't involve blowing up. Ask Shampoo to grab notes for me. Will be back later in the day. Text me if things get too crazy. Love you._

_Nabs._

She sighed and flipped the phone closed. _Great. Everyone is losing their minds, and I'm flying solo for it_. She glanced at the other girls. _Oh well... 'Anything Goes School of Keeping A Lid On It' is a go._

"Come on, we should hurry if we wanna make it before the last bell," Ranma said, picking up the pace.
"Are you sure you don't feel up to attending school today, dear brother?" Kodachi asked. She studied the shadows that passed across his face as the limo made its way to Furinkan High.

Tatewaki sighed. "Not quite yet, 'Dachi. There is… a great deal for me to make amends for and I am still struggling to decide how best to approach it. I would prefer to… thin the ranks of the apologies I must give before I face the school as a whole."

"You give this place too much credit, brother, and take too much of the blame," Kodachi said sourly. "This school is a cesspit of degenerates and misanthropes. If my Darling Ranma and dear Ran were not forced to attend this place…"

"Don't judge it too harshly, Dachi," Tatewaki said, putting a gentle hand on her arm. "The fault for many of the damaged ways of this place lies with Father and myself. But I think you and I can start to put those things right. It will just take some time."

"Well, I've already made a step in that direction," Kodachi said, an evil smirk crossing her face. "At least until Father gets out of the hospital. So… have you plans to resume your station as Student Council President?"

Tatewaki glanced out the window as the school came into view. "That… will require some thought. I was and most likely am still unfit, but… what I have heard from Ran Saotome and Ryouga Hibiki in regards to what is being done in my absence… I would like very much to speak with Nabiki Tendo before I make a decision."

"Nabiki Tendo? Why her?" Kodachi asked, curious.

"I trusted her counsel once, long ago," Tatewaki replied. "I would ask for her counsel again, should she be willing to give it. But…" He glanced down at the orange pill bottle he was turning over in his hands. "... This leads me to the most difficult of the amends I must make." He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "Still, you are right, mewling and cowering does not befit a Kuno. If you see her, could you tell her that I would speak with her, if she can or will make the time?"

Kodachi sighed. "I find that mercenary woman distasteful, but… very well, dear brother."

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Finding a large enough shopping district hadn't been too difficult, thanks to Nabiki's phone. Ryouga had to admit such a device would be incredibly useful, though when Nabiki told him the average price for such a thing, not to mention the monthly plan, he felt his heart sink. Still, they had experimented with it to see if he could follow the directions of the built-in mapping software, but he had just found himself getting confused by the instructions it was giving him. Several times Nabiki had to stop him from just blowing a hole through a nearby wall to get to where it seemed to be trying to tell him to go.

"So much for that idea," Nabiki said as she guided him through the district, tucking her phone away. "Sorry…" Ryouga said. It was about the tenth apology he had given.

Nabiki shrugged. "I didn't really expect it to work, given how Doc Tofu said the curse uses your own mind against you. The GPS would probably have to literally trick you into going the right way to make it work. It's not your fault."

*That doesn't make it any better…* Ryouga thought glumly. He felt a squeeze from her hand and rolled his eyes. "Are you going to do that every time I start feeling something that isn't allowed?"
Nabiki raised an eyebrow. "It's not a punishment, Ryouga. I'm trying to be reassuring! You're allowed to think it sucks, because it does."

"Just don't get too upset over it, huh?" he muttered.

She turned and glared at him. "Could you get your self-pitying head out of your own ass for a second, Hibiki? I am trying to help you and I am trying to be nice about it!"

"I…" He sighed, feeling his resentment drain away. It was tough to maintain any sort of front when the Link was feeding him a pretty decent running tally of how Nabiki was reacting, and he was pretty sure he had just hurt her. "I'm sorry. I get that you're being sincere. I don't get why though. I can't figure out what you're getting out of all this!"

Nabiki bit her lower lip and looked away. "Heh… Even with telepathy I can't get past the Ice Queen image, huh."

Ryouga's eyes widened. "Wait, that's not what I meant…!"

"Yes it is," Nabiki replied. "And… if I'm being totally honest you're not even wrong. As much as I've wanted to be a 'better person', I'm always talking about investments and benefits and justifying what I'm doing in terms of gains and losses." She ran a hand through her hair in frustration then looked at him again. "Look, you're right. I don't get anything out of this. If you want a reason for why I'm doing this? A good one? I don't have it. I don't know. I just… I want to, okay?"

Ryouga stared at her a moment. If her gentle expression before had echoed Kasumi, the defiance and frustration in her eyes echoed Akane. I guess the sisters aren't as different as I always thought. "I… Okay. I believe you," he said finally.

"Good," she nodded, relaxing a little. She bowed her head. "And… I'm sorry. I know I'm being pushy."

"It's fine. I'm… just not used to it," Ryouga murmured, looking away awkwardly himself.

"You're kidding, right?" Nabiki gave him a skeptical look. "You live in Nerima! The Pushy Woman Capital of Japan!"

"I… uh… I meant about the wanting to help me part," Ryouga clarified timidly.

"Oh," Nabiki blushed and quickly looked away, then tugged his hand to get him to follow. "Um… let's just keep going."

Ryouga quickly looked elsewhere. Nabiki blushing was a rare sight and one he wasn't entirely sure he was entitled to see. She was Ranma's girlfriend, after all, and Ranma himself/herself was a complicated enough problem. Letting himself acknowledge Nabiki was actually cute was opening himself to all kinds of potential complications. His memory replayed the conversation they'd had a couple of nights ago, and he realized that the Link could get him into trouble very fast. Unfortunately, he also remembered the hug she had given him, which sparked off all manner of other lines of thought that he had to hastily shut down. What is WRONG with me?!

Nabiki smiled up at him. "That's better, whatever you're thinking about."

"What?" Ryouga squeaked, for a moment wondering if she had actually perceived the contents of his thoughts.

"Whatever it is you're thinking about. It's a lot of complication, but at least it's something you like as
far as I can tell." She smirked. "You thinking about one of your girls?"

_No! Somebody else's! And I'm a terrible person_ Ryoga thought frantically. "No!"

She laughed lightly and leaned against him, batting her eyelashes at him. "Should I be _jealous_? Thinking of another woman while you've got _me_ on your arm…"

"It—it's not what you think! Honest!" Ryoga stammered nervously.

Nabiki laughed again. "Oh calm down, Ryoga! You're a teenage boy who's got multiple attractive girls on his mind. It's kind of _reassuring_ that your mind wanders to those kinds of things. It at least means you're not totally repressed like Ranma. It's actually kind of adorable how innocent you are about it, though."

She started to looked around at the shops, though Ryoga noticed she was still holding his arm rather than just his hand, and was walking much closer to him. He tried _very_ hard not to let on that he'd noticed.

"So, what kinds of things do you enjoy?" Nabiki asked.

"Huh? What? Uhh… isn't that kind of out of the blue?!" he asked nervously, feeling a bit on edge at how the atmosphere was slipping back into the same dangerous territory as it had on Saturday night.

"For a hobby, remember?" She smirked up at him. "Girls are _not_ a hobby."

"I wasn't…!"

"Uh huh," she sounded unconvinced but she was still smiling. "Come on, we need to find somewhere to start. Does anything catch your eye? Books? Craft store? There's a model shop over there…” She started pointing at the various storefronts around them.

Ryouga sighed and looked at the shops she was pointing out. Reading was more of a means to an end for him. Usually he read camping or survival guides, but that was more practicality than a hobby. Crafts? He had tried whittling several times and could never seem to get his fingers to translate what he saw in his mind into a physical object. Models? They were colorful and appealing, but… it felt like he would need to be more sure of having a regular home that he could find his way back to so he could display them. He sighed heavily and shook his head.

"No?" Nabiki shrugged. "No worries. Plenty of other stuff here, I'm sure."

Ryouga looked around as well, but didn't really see the point of it. Generally, when he had free time, he trained. He just didn't see the point of a lot of the time wasters other people indulged in. Though, to be fair, he was still not accustomed to how much free time having a home he could get back to would open up for him.

He caught a glimpse of a music shop out of the corner of his eye with several instruments displayed in the window - including a violin. He remembered the dream that Ranma had interrupted and, for a moment, visualized the redhead solemnly playing the instrument. _Nah. Definitely not her style._

"See something interesting in the music shop?" Nabiki asked, with a raised eyebrow.

"Huh? Oh, uh no, just…" He rubbed the back of his head. "Just something about a dream I had. I don't know anything about music."

"That's not the point," Nabiki chided him. "Does it _interest_ you?"
"I don't know? I like listening to music… sometimes… if a radio is already on…" He sighed. "I'm sorry, I'm not helping much." He frowned as a thought came to him. "Well… wait, what do you do for a hobby?"

"Me?" Nabiki sounded genuinely surprised.

"Yeah. It might give me some ideas."

"Well… uhh…" Nabiki looked genuinely uncertain a moment. She sighed and took a deep breath. "Don't you dare make fun. It's photography."

Ryouga blinked. "Oh… uhh, I guess that's kind of obvious…"

Nabiki scowled. "No! Not like the pictures I take for the idiots at school!" she huffed. "Well… that's part of it, but really that just gives me an excuse to take pictures."

"Hang on… are you trying to tell me you started taking lewd pics of Ranma to feed your photography habit?" Ryouga gave her a skeptical look.

"No, of course not, but…" Nabiki fidgeted. "... I mean, it's part of it though? Getting good shots in bad lighting or the action shots of you guys fighting… it was a challenge that I enjoyed."

"Isn't it all 'point and click' now with digital cameras and stuff?" Ryouga asked. He was a bit of a dope when it came to technology, but cameras and outdoorsmanship went hand in hand and he had absorbed some knowledge just by osmosis from all of the camping journals.

"I don't use digital cameras. I prefer the mechanics of doing as much of it as possible manually," Nabiki replied. She tugged his hand and started to guide him towards a nearby camera shop. "Come on, I'll show you."

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Himura was in a good mood.

Oh, naturally she always maintained an outward air of cheer - it was part of her public persona, after all. But today it wasn't at all difficult to keep up the smile. All of the pieces of her master plan were finally starting to fall into place.

She was flanked by Omi and Sanae as she walked down the hall toward the lab where the chemistry club met. With the exception of a few limited holdouts, most of the school's clubs had been more than cooperative, especially the non-sports clubs. After years of neglect under Tatewaki Kuno, Himura's recognition and attention had made them almost eager to do her bidding.

Which was why Himura had granted them more equitable treatment, of course.

The club members were hunched over their various experiments, only glancing up as she walked in. She noticed they no longer scrambled to conceal their various projects, despite many of them being quite obvious contraband. To be fair, a good number of those projects were being done at her behest now.

"Madam President…" The club leader walked up and bowed deeply, his oversized, heavy framed glasses nearly slipping off his face. "It… it is an honor to see you!"

Himura smiled pleasantly. "The honor is all mine, Matsuda-san," she bowed in return. "I've just come to check on your progress, if I might?"
"Ah, yes!" he said, his bright response telling Himura she could expect good news. "We've been poring over these recipes you've acquired for us. The compounds that resulted have qualities I've never seen before. The possible applications…!"

"... Will most likely make us both quite wealthy upon graduating high school, yes?" Himura finished with a smirk. "I am glad they meet with your approval, though these are merely the least of the secrets I've wheedled from my Chinese friends. However, my inquiry is one of a more… practical nature. Is the first batch prepared?"

Matsuda's face fell a little. He pushed his glasses up nervously. "Ah… yes… yes it is. H-however…"

"'However'"? Himura asked sweetly, cocking her head. There was no need for any threat in her voice yet - his own nervousness was doing the job for her.

"Y-yes, well…" He beckoned her to follow. "Several of the steps employed idioms that even our Chinese-speaking members were unfamiliar with… that, coupled with the ingredient substitution, particularly the primary ingredient…"

"I understand the difficulties. This is why I brought it to you - to see if such substitutions could be made to work," Himura said reassuringly. "Were you able to produce a viable prototype?"

He took a deep breath and sighed. "A-as far as we can tell, we believe that it matches the description the scroll gives of what the final product should be like. However… there is the matter of testing." He swallowed. "Current law doesn't allow live animal testing and the school rules certainly have forbidden keeping live animals for that purpose, so… we haven't been able to test the final product…"

Himura held up a hand. "Matsuda-san, Matsuda-san, please. You've already done all that I asked of you. Testing is something for which I have other resources." She smiled at him benevolently.

"Y-you… you aren't…." He took a deep breath. "You aren't going to use these things to hurt people, are you?"

Himura was almost impressed that the mousey young man had managed the inquiry. Of course, such things were to be expected and only provided her an opportunity to increase his confidence in her. "Matsuda-san, I am happy to hear this from you. Truly!" She held up a finger. "As the granddaughter of the head of Tanaka Pharmaceuticals, ethics must always be at the forefront of our minds as we forge ahead to make these advances in our understanding of the human condition. Such moral fibre will serve you well with my grandfather's company, I think."

He blinked and a wide smile spread across his face. "T-truly!?"

"Of course!" she assured him. It wasn't even a lie, though perhaps the position might not be as prestigious as he was imagining. Still, there was always a place for someone who could follow directions and not ask too many questions - especially with such… uncertain source material. "Please trust in me, Matsuda-san. Now… the prototype?"

He took a deep breath and nodded. "We have two for each of the 'packets' you provided. We had a couple of failures to start, but we still have two packets of each type for further potions. We were going to go ahead with trying to refine the process once… once you had evaluated the prototypes."

"I'm presuming the last two packets of the twelve I gave you were testing the effects yourselves?" Himura asked with a smirk.

"I…" Matsuda blushed and ducked his head. "W-we heard of such things… most of us
have seen Saotome change, after all, b-but…"

She reached out and gently pinched his chin, her voice dropping into a low purr. "I do hope you documented it? I imagine you made quite an adorable girl, Matsuda-san."

His shudder and deep blush confirmed her suspicions. *I DO hope your results justify me letting that little indiscretion pass, Matsuda-san. You do understand the importance of keeping such knowledge discreet, yes?* She released his chin.

"O-of course!" He nodded quickly. "W-we fully documented our findings, i-if you wish a copy…"

She waved her hand. "The effects of the ingredient are well known but I appreciate that it was not simple curious indulgence on your part. Now… about the other items I asked you to prepare?"

"I've… sent the samples of the other formula to the Airsoft Club as requested," he said nervously. "I… have some concerns about the formula, though… The potential of such a fast-acting paralytic to cause cardiac arrest…!"

"It's been thoroughly demonstrated to have no lasting effects by the creator. The difficulty has always been with the delivery method. In its original powdered form it was far too indiscriminate. I have high hopes that your intravenous suspension will be much more useful." She clapped her hands. "Just think of the applications Matsuda-san!"

"I… understand that. I just… should this be something we're developing at high school?" Matsuda looked nervous.

"We just need to provide a proof-of-concept to my grandfather. I assure you this will all undergo exhaustive testing before we ever consider using any of this on a human subject." Himura patted his shoulder reassuringly. "And… your name, as well as the names of your club members, will be the ones getting full credit for the development."

He let out a deep sigh. "That is… you don't know how reassuring that is to hear, Madam President. For… for a moment…"

"Were you worried I was going to load up a bunch of airsoft rifles with this and rampage across Nerima?" She folded her arms and gave him a playfully skeptical look. "I must admit to being somewhat dismayed, Matsuda-san! I find your lack of faith disturbing."

Her shook his head. "Not at all, Madam President! I… even if you were using it for that, you've done so much to earn our loyalty… we are fully committed to supporting you. But I am still relieved to hear that."

"I appreciate that," she said with a nod. "Might I collect those prototypes from you now? I will see about delivering more packets to you once we have some feedback from testing."

"Of course!" He smiled and scurried off to the locked back room.

Sanae leaned over and whispered in Himura's ear. "You do realize he knows too much, darling?"

"Oh, of course," Himura murmured back. "But for now it's fine. We already have more than enough to ensure he remains loyal - even if he has misgivings. He'll learn to look the other way soon enough if he wishes to remain useful. And if not… well, he is so very concerned about testing… He could always make himself useful that way, hmmm?"

Her smile never wavered.
Nabiki nodded approvingly as they stepped into the shop. Most camera stores she had come across these days were glorified cell phone stores that had a shelf set aside for a few dusty, lonely digital cameras, or they were high-end stores for professionals that carried only the latest, greatest and priciest.

Her first glimpse of this shop, though, reassured her greatly. In the back she could see a door labeled 'Darkroom' with a red light over it. She could also see behind the clerk's desk what looked like a high-end film processing machine. There were racks of film for sale, as well as display cases that held a wide variety of film cameras and accessories of every vintage. There were digital cameras too, of course, but she felt this shop fell right into the sweet spot of the hobby for her.

"I'll need to remember this place…" she murmured to herself appreciatively. She wandered over to the used camera displays, where there was a table with a number of the lower end cameras, and a locked glass case that contained a selection of higher end models, as well as lenses, filters and other accoutrements.

"So… why use a film camera?" Ryouga asked. "I mean, not that I know much either way…"

"Yes, you and Ranma are luddites, I know," Nabiki replied, grinning at him. "Honestly? There's not really a concrete reason. I'm sure there are some high-end photographers who have specific needs and probably a huge roiling debate about it all. But that's not why I use film." She picked up an old SLR and peeked through the viewfinder at him.

"So… why do you?" he asked.

She clicked the shutter then lowered the camera, unconsciously thumbing the lever to wind it despite there being no film in it. "It was something Mom used to love," she said, popping the back of the camera open to examine the internals. "She took photography in University, just for fun. She'd spend hours just sitting in the backyard trying to get good pictures of the most ordinary-seeming things, like a bird perched in a tree near the pond, or the wash on the line as the sun shone through the sheets. I remember asking her what the funny box was and why she kept pointing it at everything." She chuckled and put the camera down. "Photography kind of became our thing, like cooking was for her and Kasumi, or martial arts for Akane and Daddy."

Ryouga nodded silently, listening.

"Back then we only really had film cameras. Mom even developed some of her own pictures - mostly just black and white ones. I used to love when I finished a roll of film. It's like it became a little treasure chest, with no way to know what was really inside until you developed it. And even then, developing the film felt like you were a rogue in a dungeon; in the dark room, moving the film to the developer in the dark, working with your hands like some adventurer picking the lock of a chest. One wrong move, if just a little light leaked in, the treasure was lost forever. But once you had it in you would get to learn all its secrets. Some of those pictures were on that roll for days or weeks before I developed them. I got to rediscover them all over again." She picked up another camera, examining the settings. "There's so much artistry to it… You can know all there is to know about settings and light levels… try and frame everything perfectly… and then there's the moment. Maybe it's a small thing, like a leaf falling from a tree, or… or the look of joy on your sister's face as she holds up her first training dogi. Sometimes it's something huge like… like someone's very last smile…" Her voice grew quiet. "And you don't have time to be perfect, you just have to reach out and grab that moment. And you can't know what you actually captured until you open that treasure chest." She looked up at him. "That's what photography is for me. As much as I misuse it for silly things like blackmail or feeding the pervs at school." She sighed. "God… I'd kind of forgotten all of
Ryouga gave her a lopsided smile. "It's... not what I was expecting, I admit. I thought it was going to be something about how it's cheaper."

Nabiki rolled her eyes. "Oh god no! Film isn't cheap, and the developing costs... Then there's the hassle of actually finding a place that can do it these days. It's a dying art. Hana was the first person I met who actually knew what an 'F-stop' was..." she trailed off. She remembered how Hana had aspired to be a photographer for the student newspaper and to make a name for herself... only to find that no one cared. Nabiki had found her cradling her beat up old hand-me-down camera and it had sparked a conversation that had led to a friendship, and then a partnership.

_Hana WAS my friend... maybe I lost sight of that_, Nabiki thought glumly. _We had two things in common - photography and ambition. I guess the latter won out for both of us._

"So... what _is_ an 'F-stop'?'" Ryouga asked.

"It's... a lot of technical jargon," Nabiki said with a heavy sigh. "You probably wouldn't be interested in it."

"Hey, just because no one ever actually _explained_ it to me doesn't mean I wouldn't find it interesting," Ryouga protested. "That was the point, right? I'm here to learn about your hobby to see if anything catches my interest."

Nabiki blinked at him. She smiled slightly, feeling uncharacteristically shy. Photography was _personal_, after all.

She removed the lens from the camera she was holding. "All right, we'll start with the basic anatomy of a camera. This is an SLR - that's 'single lens reflex' - camera; there are other types, but if you're doing any serious photography you'll usually end up with one of these. The lenses are interchangeable, and the shutter here protects the film from accidental exposure so you can swap them on the fly. When you take a picture, this shutter opens for a brief instant to expose the film, which is treated with a light-sensitive chemical that reacts to capture the image. The lens itself also has a setting on it, called the Aperture, that determines how _much_ light is let in." She flipped the camera over and popped open the back. "The film is loaded on these rollers and each crank of this lever advances it one frame. So you crank the film forward, set your shutter speed and the aperture depending on how much light you have, what kind of film you're using and whether it's a still shot or something that's moving, then take your shot, crank to the next frame and repeat."

"Sounds... complicated," Ryouga said. "And... What's an 'F-stop'?"

Nabiki chuckled. "That's a couple more lessons in, Ryo. It's basically the setting for your aperture. We haven't even gotten to film ISOs yet."

"Film ISOs?" Ryouga repeated, confused.

"You ever see those numbers after the film, like 'ISO 400' or so?" She cocked her head. "No? Ugh... Well, it's roughly like this: A higher number means the film can capture an image faster and with less light, but the picture itself is granier. So for really crisp, clean images you need a low ISO - but for those pictures to come out, you need whatever you're shooting to stay still and for there to be a lot of light."

"So for shooting something fast-paced, like a martial arts duel, you'd go for a higher ISO?" Ryouga asked tentatively.
"Exactly!" Nabiki beamed at him. "You and Ranma in particular had me going through ISO 1000 like it was going out of style." She trailed off a moment. "Which... I guess it has. Nevermind! All this stuff is there with digital cameras too, of course, but most people just let the automation handle it for them. And they end up with mediocre *drek* for pictures. The mechanics are all the same, it's just an imaging chip rather than a piece of film."

"Sounds like a lot of stuff to juggle, especially if you gotta snap a pic right away," Ryouga said.

"Exactly," Nabiki grinned. "That's the challenge. Sometimes you don't have time to do the math. You just have to wing it - to go with your gut and take the shot. I always liked that... the skill and precision set against the element of unpredictability."

"Describes you pretty well, actually," Ryouga noted wryly.

Nabiki blinked as she felt a momentary rush of heat to her cheeks and looked away quickly. "Y-yeah, well... Me and photography... we're both complicated so I can easily understand why people aren't willing to deal with either of us."

Ryouga picked up a camera and examined it. "I dunno, I kinda like complicated things."

Nabiki's eyes widened, and her blush spread rapidly. She wondered if he realized that he had echoed her words from Saturday night, which had been a fairly *blatant* come-on from her. Ryouga didn't seem to notice, carefully examining the old camera in his hands.

She closed her eyes and slapped her cheeks in an effort to wrestle her emotions back under control. *Stupid! You're getting carried away!* She sighed, realizing that opening up about her beloved hobby had undermined her usual armor of cynicism. Ryouga's guileless and honest interest wasn't helping much either.

She decided to let that slide for now.

"So... what's it take to get into this?" Ryouga asked. "Are the cameras expensive?"

Nabiki was surprised again. "You... you seriously want to get into photography?"

Ryouga rubbed the back of his head. "Well... I mean... you wouldn't *believe* the number of times I've been out in the middle of nowhere and seen something and thought 'Man, I wish I had a camera!'. And... what you said earlier, about a roll of film being kind of like a treasure chest... I kinda like that concept." He shrugged. "I don't remember half the places I've been. It would be kind of cool to get back after wandering, develop a few rolls of film and have those reminders. And if it works without batteries, all the better."

Nabiki raised an eyebrow. "That's... actually a really good point. I guess you're often too far from civilization for a regular digital camera to be of much use with how fast they can chew through batteries." She looked across the table. "We could get you an older model. It would still need batteries for the light meter but those would last for *years*..." She picked up an old Fujica-brand and frowned. "Ugh, not a 701... We need something that uses a battery that's still made in this century, though..."

"A-are they expensive?" Ryouga asked nervously as the middle Tendo started shopping.

"Not really. There are lots of decent old cameras and not a lot of demand anymore. We could get you a decent old SLR and some lenses to get you started for..." She trailed off as her eyes lit on one in the locked glass case. "... *Warrflgh*...!"
"I… I'm sorry? How much?" Ryouga leaned in, trying to hear.

Nabiki pushed past him and nearly ran to the case. "A Leica M6! I've always wanted one of these! They're impossible to find for less than…" Her eyes dropped to the price tag and her face fell. "… 800,000 yen… yeah… about there actually." She sighed and let her head thunk against the glass.

"There are cameras that go for that much?" Ryouga asked in a slightly hushed voice.

"Not many anymore," Nabiki replied. "This is different though. Lecias are like the Ferrari of film photography and it's hard to find one that's in pristine condition like this." She gave him a reassuring smile "Don't worry, I can probably get you started for… 20,000 yen for everything?"

Ryouga sighed heavily. "That's… that's not a lot better for me, you know," he muttered.

Nabiki rolled her eyes. "Right, right, Martial Arts skill goes hand in hand with total lack of money management, I forgot." She rubbed the bridge of her nose, considering. "Are you serious about wanting to try this?"

"I… uhh…" Ryouga rubbed the back of his head. "Yeah. I mean, it sounds interesting anyway. I can take some part time jobs and…"

"Chump change," Nabiki cut him off. She looked at him and gave him an appraising look. "… Tell you what. I'll loan you my spare camera to get you started, and I'll find you a job that pays enough for you to get your own in no time, but I get a percentage. Deal?"

"Woah, hold on!" Ryouga held up his hands. "What kind of job?"

Nabiki's old smirk returned in full force. "What's the matter, Ryo? Don't you trust me?"

"No?" he said.

Nabiki tsked then folded her arms. "Full disclosure? I don't know what the job is yet because I have to find it. But I guarantee I can find something that pays better for your skill-set than anything you'd find." She extended her hand. "Plus I'll give you veto if it's not something you like - so you aren't going to get roped into something humiliating or unethical… as high-paying as those could be. Call it a 'Talent Agent' arrangement, if you like. Fair?"

Ryouga scowled, then a look of sudden inspiration crossed his face. "Shake first. Then I decide if I agree," he said, extending his own hand but leaving her to make contact. He gave her his own confident smirk.

Nabiki frowned then suddenly realized what he was up to. "You sneaky… You're going to use the Link to see if I'm lying to you!"

Ryouga's grin broadened. "Yeah, I am. Makes a pretty good lie detector. Is that a deal breaker for you, Ms. Tendo?"

Nabiki scowled at him, then clasped his hand firmly. She could feel how smug he was through the Link. "I was always on the up and up. You lot just never read the fine print or asked for details. But… fine. Trust me now?"

"Seems like a good deal, sure," Ryouga replied, shaking her hand once firmly then letting go.

"Hmph. It's a better deal than you'll get literally anywhere else," she said haughtily. She turned and headed back out of the store, fishing her phone out of her pocket.
"Thought you'd be the first to say something about 'If it seems too good to be true…'" Ryouga replied, following her.

"Oh, it's hardly that. That's part of the problem with all of you - your assessment skills are terrible," Nabiki replied flippantly, tapping away at a text message. She glanced over her shoulder at him. "And you're not always going to have something like the Link to let you cheat around it. Sometimes trust is a leap of faith, Ryouga."

"That… doesn't sound like you at all," Ryouga replied skeptically.

"It's absolutely like me," Nabiki replied. "I just don't have a lot of faith to waste, so I prefer to verify as much as possible first. Speaking of which…" she hit 'send' on the message… "you and I have an appointment to see Dr. Tofu. Ranma will meet us there. We need to verify what we actually did with the Link and see if maybe the good Doctors can use that to help you."

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"You what?!"

Nerima was decidedly short of adults that Ranma respected enough to actually pay any heed when they scolded her. Doctor Tofu, however, was one of them. She found herself unconsciously shrinking back a little and feeling a pang of shame.

"We didn't do anything on purpose, Doc," Ranma said defensively. She had hopped up onto Tofu's examination table. Ukyou, Akane and Shampoo sat off to the side while Ryouga and Nabiki, the latecomers, were forced to stand.

Tofu waved Ranma off, seeming almost irritable. "No, no, I'm not mad, Ranma, I'm just…" He tapped his chin as his brow furrowed in thought. "If the changes to Nabiki's ki are permanent… maybe it doesn't show up under individual examination…" He looked up. "The three of you, over here. Stand in a circle holding hands please, backs outward."

Ranma hopped down from the table and walked over, giving the two of them a sheepish grin. "I guess we're in trouble?" she said, holding out her hands to them.

"That's hardly new territory for you, Ranma," Nabiki replied with a snort, taking her hand. It was reassuring for Ranma to feel Nabiki's strong undercurrent of confidence when the link surged to life as they made contact.

"Yeah, but I ain't the one in trouble this time." Ranma winked at her, then took Ryouga's hand. Nabiki reached out and took Ryouga's other hand, then closed her eyes.

Ranma could feel both their presences. There was a kind of flow to being in a circle like this, like an active circuit - a tingle of moving energy that wasn't really electrical, but was still definitely some kind of current. She could feel Dr. Tofu moving behind her, probing a few spots on her back, and then moving on.

"Hmmmnn… Ki is definitely circulating between you… I see! I missed the change because it's a subtle shift between the three of you…" He continued to mutter to himself. "This is interesting… and you are all three able to sense one another's moods through this?"

"Yeah," Ryouga said.

"Actually," Nabiki piped up, "It doesn't always need physical contact if one of us is feeling
something intensely enough…"

Ranma winced as she remembered Ryoga's near meltdown.

Tofu's head popped up over Ryoga's shoulder. "Really? No, no, that would make sense for Ryoga or Ranma… you would all be attuned to each other's Ki, and if they started broadcasting…" he paused. "Ryoga didn't…!"

Ryoga rolled his eyes. "I avoided being a bomb, Doc. Thanks for the vote of confidence towards my self control."

"But you were upset?" Doctor Tofu didn't wait for an answer, rubbing his chin as he paced around them. "When we suppressed Nabiki's Ki with the herb… that's right, you were on either side of her, like an electrical current run through a resistor." He snapped his fingers. "With your resistance lowered so much, the flow was mostly unimpeded. It's the circulation that did it, between the three of you! That constant wash of ki must have somehow caused your body to become attuned to their energy in an incredibly short span." He considered. "But just a flow of ki wouldn't be enough, or we'd end up with patients attuning to their doctors all the time. It must be something unique… something about that ability Ryoga said he had to form such a link in the first place…" He resumed probing. "Ranma, Nabiki, have either of you had any directional problems since this started?"

"Directional…" Ranma frowned, then her eyes widened. "Wait… you're not suggesting that the curse is contagious?!" She felt a sudden surge of fear, eyes snapping to Nabiki. "I can handle getting lost and having to camp out in the woods, but Nabiki…!"

"I haven't had any symptoms," Nabiki replied, glancing at Ryoga.

Ranma felt a surge of guilt and worry from Ryoga, his gaze alternating between Nabiki and her. She gave his hand a gentle squeeze to reassure him.

"No, I'm not," Tofu said. "Which is unusual, because there doesn't seem to be any barrier to ki flow between the three of you now, which would suggest Ryoga's 'poisoned' ki should circulate as well. But… there's no trace of it. There has been nothing in either of your MRI scans either." He paused and considered. "It's possible that, because the ki is malignant, it is not attuned to Ryoga's natural Link-forming talent. It seems to be invisible to Ryoga's own body - but Ranma's ki strongly suppresses it with exposure, almost like an immune response to a tumor. Not enough to excise it by itself, but…” He glanced at Nabiki. "With three of you now to create a circular flow… hmmm…"

"W-wait… have you got something, Doc?" Ryoga asked nervously.

"We would need to suppress Ryoga's ki levels the same way we suppressed Nabiki's. Leave the poisoned foreign ki exposed as much as possible, and boost Ranma and Nabiki's levels as much as is safe…” He looked at Nabiki. "You've been training with Cologne, yes? Yes, of course, I can feel the change. Still, it would take weeks to get your levels high enough naturally."

Akane timidly raised her hand. "Doctor Tofu?"

"Hmmm? Yes Akane?" Tofu raised his head, giving the youngest Tendo a smile.

"You would need a lot of ki to cure Ryoga, right?"

"Yes… More than Ranma alone can produce safely," Doctor Tofu replied. "There are ways to increase one's ki production temporarily, but…"

"What if we added another person to the Link?" Akane asked, earning startled looks from Ukyou
and Shampoo.

Doc Tofu cocked his head. "Well… I mean, theoretically, yes, but at this point that would result in a permanent emotional bond to Ranma, Ryouga, and now Nabiki, and I doubt they would welcome either myself or Doctor Hirano, even if Doctor Hirano had the requisite ki levels…"

"I mean me, Doctor," Akane added quietly.

Doc Tofu blinked, then glanced at Ranma, Ryouga and Nabiki. "I… Well… yes, you would bring a considerable amount of ki to the equation that would…"

Ranma's eyes widened as she felt a sudden surge of surprise and… happiness from Ryouga. She looked at him, her eyes narrowing. You're STILL not over her, are you?! Even after all of this are you STILL getting your hopes up about her!? You JERK! Her grip on his hand tightened enough to have been painful for anyone else but him, but naturally he didn't even notice.

"Hold up! If Akane is joining the Link, then so am I!" Ukyou said, standing quickly and clenching her fists.

"Shampoo join too!" Shampoo stood next to her.

"Now hold on, girls!" Tofu held up his hands. "While I appreciate your willingness to help, please understand what you're suggesting. This… 'link' that Ranma, Ryouga and now Nabiki share is an unknown quantity. All that we do know is that it is something that - barring some unknown future development - will affect you for the rest of your lives. You won't just be linked to Ranma or Ryouga, you will each be linked to them and each other. There is no turning it off, no going back once this procedure is over with. We can't even be sure what the long term effects of having that many people linked to each other would be!"

"We know, Doc," Akane said softly. "We've… we've already been discussing it."

"You have?" Doctor Tofu glanced at each of them, a perplexed expression on his face.

"We… uhh… We figured this might be necessary at some point," Nabiki said quickly. Ranma realized that she was covering for the fact that Doctor Tofu wasn't up to speed on all the relationship wrinkles. We'll have to let him in on it all at some point, but… UGH that's going to be an awkward conversation…

"That's… remarkably prescient of you," Doctor Tofu said, chuckling weakly. "I don't suppose you've predicted any other possible treatment steps?"

"Would it work, Doctor Tofu?" Akane asked again sternly.

Doctor Tofu blinked. He studied the determined set of her jaw a moment, then sighed and relaxed. "To be honest? It would probably be our best option. It would almost undoubtedly be the safest - the only other alternative I could think of would be to train Nabiki to increase her ki levels, and even then it would take an extended period of time and likely require dosing both her and Ranma with some rather unsafe compounds to accelerate their ki production temporarily. Even if we were to assume all five of you were in the link together, Ryouga's own ki must be dampened, which will require a potentially dangerous dosage of the herb I previously used on Nabiki."

"Is this dangerous to any of them at all?" Ryouga asked. Ranma could feel a surge of what she believed was protectiveness from Ryouga. Ryouga's still trying to protect Akane, even after all this, huh?
Doctor Tofu glanced at him. He sighed, pulling his glasses off and polishing them with a corner of his gi in an unconscious mimicry of Dr. Hirano. "No significant dangers that we know of, but there are so many unknowns with this that it's hard to say for certain. I would want to monitor the process and each participant closely to be sure."

Ryouga nodded. "Will this get us a cure that will help my Mother faster?"

Doctor Tofu paused, then sighed heavily, putting his glasses back on. "Almost without question. Even if this method isn't applicable, the data we can glean from six subjects rather than just two…"

"Then… then let's do it," Ryouga looked at the three girls. "If… if you're really willing."

Ranma felt a surge of apprehension as the distant possibility of the entire Fiancee Brigade joining the Link went from nebulous possibility to near-immediate certainty. "Hold on, hold on!" Ranma protested. She let go of Nabiki's hand and tugged Ryouga's. "Ryouga, can we talk a sec? In private?"

"Wha…? Hey!" Ryouga reacted too slowly for the redhead, and she resorted to simply dragging him bodily outside by the hand.

"What's the big idea, Ranma?!" Ryouga said as Ranma dragged him out of the building. He snatched his hand back, breaking the Link for the moment.

"Someone has gotta think this through for ya!" Ranma huffed. She wasn't exactly sure why she was suddenly annoyed with him, but she was. "You… you can't just go jumping into this! Think about it! You're talking about being Linked with five girls. An' none of 'em is Akari! Isn't this gonna screw things up with you an' her?"

"I know, but…" Ryouga sighed. "The Link only really applies if I come in contact with one of you, right? If we cure the curse, then I won't need an Anchor anymore. I'll be able to find my way, and I can get out of your lives!"

Ranma blinked and took a step back. She felt a cold stab in her gut. "S-so… that's why you're so eager, huh? You wanna get away from me that bad?"

"What? No! I..." Ryouga closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "Damnit, Ranma… you need me out of your life!" He stepped forward and took hold of her shoulders. "Listen to yourself! Five girls. You're not even qualifying it anymore! When was the last time you were a guy, huh?"

"I… last week… sometime…" Ranma said weakly, realizing she didn't clearly remember.

"Uh huh. I can't tell because I haven't seen guy Ranma for a lot longer. I don't know about you, but that's messing with my head and it's gotta stop!" He sighed heavily. "Look, go inside, change into your spare guy clothes and get some hot water, and let's discuss this man to man, okay?"

"I… uh… can't," Ranma said, looking away and fidgeting nervously.

"What? Again!? Why?!" Ryouga said, scowling.

"I used the soap, okay?" Ranma glared back at him defiantly. "I decided I wanted to use it now for the Wednesday game so I could change back right after!"

"Ranma…" Ryouga closed his eyes, a pained look crossing his face. "God damnit…"

"Hey! It's my curse! I decide how I wanna deal with it, and which form I wanna be in!" Ranma
replied hotly, pulling away from him. "It's still me! Who I am doesn't change! They understand that!" She waved towards the clinic. She poked him in the chest, forcing him back a step. "And you do too! You were the first guy to get it! You were the first guy who didn't treat me any differently because of my form! If you're having 'issues', then they're with me, not with my body! Nothing changed with that part of me."

"That's even worse!" Ryouga protested.

"Why? Because the person you've been sharing feelings with is a guy?" Ranma put her hands on her hips, her ire rising. She felt... offended, even though some small part of her was wailing in sympathy with Ryouga's distress.

"No! That's not it! I mean..." Ryouga took a shuddering breath. "You were the first guy who didn't treat me any differently because of my form! If you're having 'issues', then they're with me, not with my body! Nothing changed with that part of me."

"Don't give me the pat answer, Ranma." His eyes were dark and intense as he stared her down. "I've been inside your head... way more than anyone should be. And... and after seeing Nabiki's mind too... You have been changing. In your head. Not a bad change but..." He ran his fingers through his hair as he struggled for the words. "I... I'm scared that it's my fault. That... that being linked to me is... is pushing you somehow. Like... you're changing to be what I need you to be. And I haven't done anything about it because I did need you. T-to cure the curse, I mean!"

Ranma set her jaw. For some reason Ryouga framing needing her as a bad thing hurt more than she expected. "And now you see a way outta needing me, huh? Got some better options? I mean hey, now you can finally get into Akane's head, right? That's even better than sleeping in her bed I bet!"

"What?!" Ryouga's expression darkened with old anger for a moment, but then it was replaced with a confused, inquisitive look. "... Wait, are you jealous?"

Ranma felt heat rise in her cheeks. "Oh, gee, why would I be jealous?! Felt like you won the lottery when she offered, didn't it? Bet you..."

"Are you jealous because you're being possessive of her?" He asked, cutting her off. "... Or possessive of me?"

Ranma's rant died in her throat. She opened her mouth to reply, then snapped it shut. "I... I... don't be stupid!" She turned away quickly. She forced a laugh that she didn't feel. "You're... you're getting real full of yourself there, pig-boy. Even if I was inta guys, you'd have a better chance with Akane than you would with me!" She whirled back to face him. "And just to be clear, so you and your stupid glass heart get this once and for all, your chances with her are nil!"

"Okay, okay..." he held up his hands defensively, taking a step back. "I get it, okay?" He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "Fine, I'm not totally over Akane. Maybe I never will be. That doesn't mean I have any delusions of anything happening. I gave up on that a long time ago." He pinched the bridge of his nose. "So... I'm guessing you don't want to go through with all of this?"

"I..." Ranma found she didn't have a good answer. After all, it was the fastest way to solve the problem, and she was always inclined to take the shortest route to a solution. What am I even objecting to this for? This gets me'n Ryo out of each other's hair the fastest, he can fix things with Akari an'... Her train of thought trailed off as she felt a pang at that.

"L-look... I... I just wanna make sure you know what you're in for," Ranma said after a moment. "The girls are... intense. An'... they got some boundary issues. An'... Akari was understanding about
you an’ me, but this is a lot to ask her to be okay with, so I just wanna make sure you aren't taking that for granted. That's all."

"I won't get in between you and your…" Ryouga struggled for a word that wouldn't set the redhead off. ",...family, I promise. And… I'll find some way to repay all of you for doing this for me."

"Y-yeah..." Ranma said quietly. Now that the irrational surge of anger had died down, she felt an odd… emptiness? Like she had been wanting something else from all of this.

"So… are we good?" Ryouga asked tentatively. "We should probably talk with Doc Tofu to hash out details."

"Yeah..." Ranma said, subdued. "Yeah, we're good."

Ryouga nodded. He hesitated a moment, as if he wanted to say something more, then turned to head back in.

"Ryo..." Ranma said to his back. "We're... we're still friends, right? Past all of the Link nonsense and you needing me to fix the curse and alla that?"

Ryouga paused. He looked over his shoulder at her and smiled. "Yeah. Always were, Ranna. I'm just really bad at the whole 'friendship' thing." He continued on inside, waving at her to follow.

"Yeah..." Ranma said under her breath. "Me too."

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So still working through the backlog. I insist on doing a once-over after my editor is done. Because we've had edits, but what about SECOND edits? Re-reads? Review? Panicked, frantic flipping through pages of notes because you realize you've forgotten to address a plot thread you've left dangling too long? Afternoon tea?

Believe it or not I AM building to something here, and it's important all the pieces be in the right place at the right time. I've also been accused of using the Link to fix everything neatly and... in hindsight, that WOULD be a pretty obvious use for a deus ex machina like that, wouldn't it? Yes, that would lead to a very nice, neatly wrapped up ending, wouldn't it?

Shame I didn't think of that.
(Three years ago)

"Look, you gonna talk to me or what?"

Ryouga pointedly didn't look at the pigtailed boy. His hands were stuffed in his pockets and his eyes were on the sidewalk ahead of them. Everything about his posture screamed that he wanted to be left alone.

Naturally, Ranma was completely oblivious. "I dunno why you put up with all that crap," Ranma said, his hands folded behind his head as he walked. "I mean… they're all weaklings. You'd think they'd show you a little respect or…"

"That'd be dishonorable," Ryouga said firmly, realizing Ranma wasn't going to let it go. "They're not martial artists."

The truth was the teasing at school had always been somewhat low-key. Ryouga's directional problems had long been a source of mirth for them, but now that his daily duels with Ranma over lunch bread were well known - and that Ryouga was regularly losing them - they had gotten bolder with their torment. Before Ryouga's martial arts prowess had always kept them at bay, but now they had taken to stuffing his locker with old maps, or making crude "Lost Boy" posters with his face on them and putting them up all over the school. A few people had even tried to claim the 'reward' they offered from him for 'finding' him.

"Yeah, but… they're the ones picking the fights. D'ya wanna look weak?" Ranma asked, glancing in his direction.

"I don't care," Ryouga growled. "Most of them can't even throw a punch. It'd just be bullying. They can't actually do anything to me."

"You bully the hell outta me," Ranma complained, rotating his shoulder. "Sure doesn't feel like you're pulling any punches there."

"Says the guy who wins every time," Ryouga groused.

"That's just 'cuz I'm faster. I can usually keep outta reach," Ranma asserted. "Trust me, when you do connect, I feel it."

"That's the point, though," Ryouga said, finally sparing the pigtailed boy a look. "You're strong enough to take a hit. You're actually worth beating into a pulp. It's a challenge. Someone I can learn something from. The only point of beating up those other guys would be to make 'em afraid of me. I'd rather be a joke than be a monster, y'know."

"Tch…" Ranma replied noncommittally. "Being strong doesn't make you a monster. But… you got a point I guess." He shot the Lost Boy a grin. "An' you're worth beating to a pulp too."

Ryouga folded his arms and smirked. "Oh really? There's a pretty big gap between playing 'keep away' with some melonpan and that. You think you're up for it?"

"Hell yeah!" Ranma replied, then his face fell. "Uhh… but… not today? Pops'll lose his mind if I get my school uniform all torn up. He's still bitching about how much it cost him. Most of my training duds are pretty ripe too, and Pops is lazy about doing laundry."
Ryouga glanced down at his own uniform and sighed. "Yeah… Weekend then, maybe?"

"Sure, assuming Pops doesn't hog all my time with some stupid new idea for training," Ranma replied.

Ryouga shuddered. Ranma had told him some stories. Even the ones Ranma seemed to think were fairly innocuous sounded pretty hellish. "He finally stop trying to teach you how to 'hand-broil' a hamburger over an open flame?"

"Yeah. He just gets weird ideas when he's hungry," Ranma replied, rubbing his hands self-consciously. "I just cooked up all the hamburger he bought for it the normal way and he forgot all about it after he ate it all."

"You get any?" Ryouga asked. He had discovered a lot of Genma's 'training' involved stealing Ranma's food.

"Nah, but… seemed a fair trade to keep from having to cook my own hands," Ranma replied. "I had some bread stashed so I was good."

Ryouga noticed them approaching his house. He didn't like the idea of Ranma going hungry, but Ranma's pride was something that needed to be worked around. "Hey, uhh… I dunno man…" The pigtailed boy feigned reluctance. It was all part of the dance to ensure the Saotome pride was properly mollified. "Please? It's way too much for just me, and I'm gonna hafta toss it if no one eats it." Ryouga walked up to his front door and waited expectantly.

"Ah, well, if you're gonna twist my arm…" Ranma managed to maintain the facade for another few seconds, then his hunger overcame the need to keep up the charade and he practically bolted for the door as Ryouga opened it for him.

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(Present Day)

Ukyou was used to waking up early, so it wasn't any surprise to her that she blinked awake while the light was still dim. She was warm and comfortable, wondering why her alarm hadn't gone off until she remembered she had stayed over at the Tendo Dojo for the night. She was spooned up against Akane's back, one arm draped over the youngest Tendo as Akane lay curled up with Ranma. For once Ukyou had managed to evade Akane and Ranma's tendency to tangle themselves up with their bedmates by turning them on each other.

She didn't have to get up. There was no morning prep to be done at the dojo but she felt a little guilty for imposing and had already resolved the night before to make breakfast for all of them - especially Kasumi, who had been weathering all this chaos with her usual calm steadfastness. She slipped her leg out from under the covers, biting her lip at the chill in the air, gingerly easing herself back away from her pair of lovers to avoid disturbing them.

Akane mumbled and stirred. "Nnnh… stay…" she mumbled, reaching back to clumsily grasp at Ukyou as she felt the warm body moving away.

"I gotta make breakfast, sweetie," Ukyou replied, leaning in to kiss the nape of Akane's neck gently.
"Mmmph... 'Sumi can do it..." Akane muttered, but she was already drifting back off to sleep.

Ukyou was again tempted to stay, but pushed herself to finish slipping out from under the covers while she had the opportunity. She retrieved her underthings from Akane's floor and slipped them on, as well as borrowing a fluffy terrycloth bathrobe that was hanging from a hook on Akane's door. *Maybe I should stash a set of clothes here?* She glanced back at Akane and Ranma and blushed. *Hell... maybe I should be thinking about moving in at this point?*

Of course, that would require the approval of the actual mistress of the house, and possibly Mr. Tendo as well. Either way, she was likely going to be spending a lot more time at the dojo so it was best if she got into the habit of treating the household as if it were her own. That meant ensuring she did her share to make sure it and those who were living there were properly taken care of.

She slipped out of Akane's room and carefully crept downstairs. A long time ago Shampoo had shown her where all the creaky floorboards in the dojo were, having carefully mapped them out during her many late night visits to creep on Ranma.

_We really are weird, aren't we?*_ Ukyou thought with a little bemusement. *Here I am, a student of the 'School of Anything Goes Stalking Ranma Saotome'. And now I'm using what I learned to make everyone breakfast.*

She made her way down the stairs, mindful that Soun's room was on the main floor, and crept into the kitchen. She had cooked meals in here before, like for the Christmas party, but it had always been with Kasumi's supervision. Here, more than anywhere else in the house, she felt like a trespasser.

_Forgive me Kasumi. I'll take good care of it, _Ukyou thought. As a chef, she was well aware of the sanctity of a cook's kitchen, and she took a moment familiarizing herself with where things were - not just so she could find them, but so she could return them to their proper places once she was done. Satisfying herself that she had mapped it all out sufficiently, she started gathering the utensil and ingredients she'd need.

_Plenty of eggs... _Ukyou thought, her head deep in the old fridge. There were several cartons that looked freshly bought, as well as a fully stocked crisper. _Kasumi must have just done some grocery shopping. I think omelettes would go over well today._

Ukyou was just straightening with her arms laden with vegetables and a carton of eggs when she saw something out of the corner of her eye. She turned slightly and nearly fumbled her armload when she saw Kasumi was standing near the kitchen door in her nightgown, watching her.

"It's a bit late for a midnight snack," Kasumi said with a smile. "Or am I late getting breakfast started? I am sorry if you were left hungry at dinner last night, Ukyou."

"Oh! No, no, not at all!" Ukyou said quickly, sheepishly putting her armload down on the counter. "I... uhh... I was just trying to surprise you by making breakfast for everyone so you wouldn't have to."

"Oh my, that's very nice of you Ukyou, but hardly necessary," Kasumi said.

"I insist!" Ukyou beamed at her. "You just take it easy this morning and I'll tackle the job of feeding everyone."

"W-well..." Kasumi sounded uncertain. "I... that's a very generous offer, Ukyou. Thank you."

Ukyou frowned. "Is something wrong, Kasumi?"
Kasumi closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "Please don't make fun of me for this? I've had people try and do favors like this for me before, and it's such a sweet gesture but…" She wrung her hands, almost as if she were ashamed. "... It… it just makes such a mess of my schedule! If someone else is doing everything for breakfast, then there's just the laundry to start. But it's far too early to put it out to dry, so if I start the wash now it will just sit in a wet pile for hours and end up smelling musty. Sometimes I try and clean but I can't vacuum with everyone asleep so I can only do the dusting and usually I do that when everyone is out for the day. So I won't be able to do the whole house. I could do the furo but then it won't be filled and hot when people get up and want a bath so then everything ends up out of order and… and… and…" She seemed to be starting to hyperventilate so Ukyou quickly put a hand on her shoulder out of concern.

"Woah, woah, easy!" Ukyou did her best to steady the older girl. "I'm sorry, I didn't know it threw your routine so far out of whack." Ukyou knew a few things about the importance of routines as they were vital to running a business, but she had nothing so seemingly strict as the eldest Tendo girl. "Why don't you just watch TV or read a book or relax or something?"

"But… that's for after the chores are done…" Kasumi said uncertainly. She closed her eyes and sighed. "You're right. I just… When your whole world is your home, small things can throw you off sometimes."

"Really? I always thought you handled change pretty well, what with Ranma and her father showing up and then that old pervert Happosai, followed by the bunch of us freeloaders from time to time," Ukyou replied. "I was actually feeling pretty guilty about how much we have been depending on you."

"No! Please don't!" Kasumi said quickly. "More work… more things to do… that's never a problem! It's…" She looked uncertain, her eyes darting away. "This… will probably seem strange to you but… this house… It's all I have ever felt certain of - the only place I feel at all in control. My routine… managing the chores around here…" she sighed, "... that must sound so silly to someone like you."

"No… no I can kind of understand…" Ukyou replied. "Now that I think about it, that one time I was really sick and Ranma, Akane and Konatsu tried to take over the restaurant for me was hell. Though… It probably didn't help they were grossly incompetent. At least Konatsu has gotten halfway decent at it now. I've… been a bit too distracted lately to run things like I should." Ukyou gave Kasumi a wan smile.

Kasumi shook her head. "That… is the difference, isn't it?" She stepped further into the kitchen, running a finger along the edge of the sink as if checking for dust. "As important as it is to your life, your restaurant is only part of it. That's my problem. This house is all I have. My whole world. Ever since mother died I've focused everything on the needs of this house and the people living in it. And… that was enough for me. I always felt needed. I always felt wanted and appreciated. I always felt like I had a place." She gently tweaked the tap. "But… more than that… I feel like I know this house… really know it. There are so many things people don't know or simply don't notice, so many stories… this place is old, and everywhere I look I can see the evidence of the families who lived here before us. I always felt like… I was doing something important taking care of this place. Even when a hole was put in the roof, or the water heater blew out… it was just another story for this place to tell. It was like I was the caretaker of that story."

Something jogged in the back of Ukyou's mind. "Wait… But… what was going to happen if Ranma and Akane inherited the dojo?"

Kasumi turned, giving her a weak smile, and shrugged. "It would be someone else's turn to take care
of it."

"But what about you?" Ukyou pressed. "Where were you going to go? What were your plans?"

Kasumi looked down. "I… don't know." She chewed on her lower lip. "Sometimes… sometimes I
wonder if that's why I never put my foot down… Why I always went along with father's meddling in
Ranma and Akane's relationship. Why I always said they were too young. It let me put that question
off for another day."

Ukyou felt crestfallen. Her grand idea to do something to repay Kasumi had backfired spectacularly
because she hadn't fully understood the situation. "I-I'm sorry. Here… I can put all this back and let
you get back to your routine, and…"

Kasumi held up a hand, eyes closed and brow furrowed. She finally opened her eyes, and there was
a determined glint in them. "No… no, I have a better idea, if you still want to do something to help
me, Ukyou."

"Uh… yes! Of course, anything, sugar. Just name it!" Ukyou said, eagerly latching onto the offered
rope.

Kasumi smiled. "Go ahead with what you were planning for breakfast. I'll help you, but please make
what you were planning to make. That will fill the time for me until it's time to start the laundry. And
if it's alright… I would like to talk."

Ukyou blinked. "O-of course!" She turned back to her pile of ingredients, portioning out things into
the various steps she had planned. She put aside the vegetables for washing, and Kasumi took them,
interpreting that part easily enough and busied herself with the task.

"So… what did you want to talk about?" Ukyou asked uncertainly, worried that there was going to
be some big concern raised about her unconventional relationship choices.

"Anything, really," Kasumi replied. "I… suppose I wanted to learn more about you."

"Oh! Sure, I guess that makes sense," Ukyou nodded. "I mean… seeing as I'm probably going to be
around a lot…" Ukyou wasn't entirely comfortable with claiming status as a member of the family
yet, especially as she and Akane had not yet discussed their plans with anyone, least of all Kasumi.

"That's not it," Kasumi said softly with a shake of her head. She took a breath as if gathering herself.
"Ukyou… you and I come from similar backgrounds, yes? Martial arts families… a family legacy
involving a lot of cooking… But… we've ended up in such different places." Kasumi looked up
from her vegetable washing. "You've become an accomplished martial artist and a chef, without
compromising one for the other. You've turned those skills into a successful business and you've
done it all on your own. You can go anywhere and make your way with just a grill and a spatula.
You had so little to start with and yet you've become someone who can hold her own in almost any
situation. I admire you."

Ukyou froze mid-chop, staring slack-jawed at the eldest Tendo.

Kasumi turned her gaze back to her washing. "And yet here I am, three years your senior, with…
with everything I've ever needed… with all the support I could have wished for to be or do whatever
I wanted… and yet… I've done nothing with it. I'm a housewife who is not a wife and who will
someday soon have no house. I feel like… I feel like I missed a step, an important step, and now…
Now I don't know what to do."

It took Ukyou a second to reboot after that revelation. "Kasumi… are you seriously suggesting that
you admire me because I have my life more together than you?"

Kasumi paused again, blinking innocently. "Yes…?"

Ukyou had to catch herself on the counter as the laughing fit hit. The very concept was just too bizarre for her brain to process as she doubled over giggling.

Kasumi stared at her in confusion as she waited for the Okonomiyaki Chef to recover enough to explain.

"K-Kasumi… You can't… I mean…" Ukyou shook her head, taking a few deep breaths to get herself under control. "Sorry, it's just… you're the gold standard for someone who has it together!"

Kasumi frowned. "I-I'm sorry? I don't follow…"

"Kasumi, every day my life is in constant danger of flying apart at the seams." Ukyou said. "My business is always just this side of being in the red. Between the expenses, keeping Konatsu and myself fed and clothed and having to go to school, I don't even have enough left over to pay Konatsu a decent wage, much less have any savings. Every year I'm just waiting for the landlord to jack up the rent on that rathole and price me out of the market. It's pure luck I'm still in business, and I keep pushing that luck because I decided on who I was going to marry when I was six and I've been burning the candle at both ends to try and actually make that happen because I had zero plans outside that. My whole life has basically been prideful insanity - so much so that most of my family will barely have anything to do with me now." Ukyou resumed chopping. "Yet you manage to keep this place together despite having three or four of the craziest martial artists in town living here, plus having the rest of the crazies regularly crashing the place. In the face of all of that, you manage to make this oasis of normalcy that kinda forces everyone to stop and be normal for a while. And you do it with practically no budget. On top of that, you've got a handsome older doctor who's crazy about you… maybe a little more literally than is strictly healthy, but…"

"Yes, Doctor Tofu…" Kasumi replied, handing over the next batch of vegetables she had finished washing. "He's… he's very sweet, really… and… he's everything I always said I wanted, isn't he?"

Ukyou paused again, looking over at her. "Changed your mind, sugar?"

"Not so much. More… I never made it up. I've just been going on since mother died trying to be her so very hard that… that I forgot to have any dreams for myself. And Doctor Tofu is sweet and funny and… and entirely too much like Father!" She thumped the counter with her hand, an unexpected look of frustration crossing her face.

Ukyou's eyes widened. "Woah…"

"I've spent so many years putting off having a life of my own so that others could have theirs, always thinking that once my sisters were old enough to manage I could just pick it back up again, but now…" Kasumi stared down at her reflection in the water in the sink. "... Now I don't know how. I've spent so long safeguarding and tending an inheritance that isn't even mine!"

Ukyou swallowed. She had never, ever seen Kasumi like this. She put down her knife and stepped closer, but didn't touch her. "Kasumi… Do you want to inherit the dojo?"

Kasumi looked up, and Ukyou was astonished to see there were tears in her eyes. She sniffed, then laughed bitterly. "No… no… God no! This house should go to a family… to the ones who will carry on the school. That's always been how it should be. Being alone and left to tend this empty house…?" She shuddered. "No… I'm the problem. I want to be… someone who knows how to be
more than just the caretaker of this house. I want to be someone who knows how to want to be more than that. I want to be able to remember whatever it was I dreamed of being when Mother was alive, or at least to come up with new dreams." She dabbed at her eyes. "That's why I've never pursued anything with Dr. Tofu. I am afraid… I would just be the same caretaker in a different house. But… at the same time, I'm so terrified of changing… of not being me anymore."

Ukyou pulled the older girl into a hug. Kasumi froze a moment, then returned it.

"Look… I don't know the right path for you, sugar," Ukyou said. "But I do know that what makes you special to me - and everyone I know who knows you - doesn't have anything to do with this house, or your being in it. You're the person that everyone relies on when they're hurting or scared or just need someone to make them feel like things are going to be all right - and that they can keep on going, even when everything else is telling them they're done. You're that 'safe place' - not just for your family, but for anyone you meet." She released Kasumi and smiled at her. "That's you. And if you change what you do or where you live or how you live, that isn't going to change. So… don't worry about it."

Kasumi smiled and wiped her eyes. "You're… you're right. I think… how can you be so fearless about it all, though? How do you keep going, taking such bold steps when the ground could crumble out from under you any moment?"

Ukyou shrugged. "I guess… because one day it did. And it sucked, and it hurt, and it felt like my life was over… and then it wasn't. Life went on, and I learned from that and drew purpose from it. All those things people are terrified are gonna be the end of the world… they aren't. You come out the other side of it. I guess… I just decided that since that was the worst feeling I could imagine having, and I could live through it, there really wasn't anything the world could throw at me that could really stop me, so long as I just kept going."

"I see," Kasumi chuckled. "You really can be an inspiration when you choose to be, Ukyou. I think I see why my little sister has grown so fond of you."

Ukyou blinked and swallowed. "Uhh… Well, you know we're both engaged to Ranma…"

Kasumi giggled and leaned in conspiratorially. "You've come home with Akane without Ranma, Ukyou. And the walls of this house are not very thick."

Ukyou felt a hot rush to her cheeks. She looked away and fidgeted. "Oh… U-uh… yeah… Sorry?"

Kasumi smiled and shook her head. "No apologies. Akane has been happier and more at peace than I've seen since… since Mother died. That is more than enough for me to approve." She took a deep breath and sighed. "It's just a shame there won't really be a wedding. Chances are Ranma will marry Nabiki for the legalities. I know you had planned a ceremony with the Amazons of some sort, but I had hoped one day I'd see my little sister making the walk down the aisle."

Ukyou swallowed hard. "Ummm… about that, Kasumi… actually… Akane and I have been talking… A-and it's just preliminary stuff right now… we haven't decided anything concrete but…" she leaned in and started whispering conspiratorially in Kasumi's ear.

Kasumi listened. Gradually her eyes widened, though she remained silent until Ukyou finished. It was a few moments after Ukyou stepped back nervously, waiting for her response, that Kasumi finally spoke.

"Oh my…"
Busying herself with breakfast was an excellent way for Akari to make herself feel useful. That it also helped soothe her nagging feelings of uncertainty also helped.

She glanced out the back door to see Katsunishiki snoozing in the backyard. She sighed, knowing the champion pig was going to start losing his tone if she let him slack off too much longer.

*I don't suppose it'll matter if he's retiring early,* Akari thought, then sighed. Katsunishiki was her first champion sumo pig and she always knew the day would come eventually. There would be his children to train, of course, but he was still in his prime and there was so much *more* she knew they could accomplish together.

*Enough lamenting.* She shook her head vigorously. This is for the sake of Ryouga and our future happiness together. She returned her attention to chopping vegetables.

"[Oh! Good mornin'…]"

Akari looked up to see Anna rubbing the sleep from her eyes. She was either wearing her clothes from the previous day, or an identical dress. Akari idly wondered if the girl might appreciate a shopping trip - it didn't seem she had brought much with her from America in the way of clothing. She smiled, trying to remember what little English she had learned in school. "Ummm… I'm sorry my English is terrible… umm… [Good aft…] no wait… [Good morning!]" She beamed for having remembered the right word.

Anna blushed sheepishly. "[Ah'm really sorry 'bout all this… ummm, hang on…] Am sorry," she managed, reaching for her book.

Akari shook her head, walked over and put a hand over the book. "You don't need that. Ummm… [Ryouga soon. Breakfast soon.]* She motioned for towards a chair.

Anna nodded and sat down. "[So… uh… Ah know you don't understand me at all, an' Ah reckon this is as big a shock to you as it is to me…]" She sighed, folding her hands on the table. "[But thank you for being so patient about all o' this. Ah knew Ah shoulda learned mah Japanese better before settin' out, but I'm a duff when it comes to languages…]"

Akari frowned and just nodded dumbly, not able to follow what the girl said at all. Her particular accent was so different than her English teacher's and she spoke so much faster that it made parsing what she said almost impossible, but Akari got the sense the other girl just needed someone to listen. She returned to making breakfast, but kept her attention on Anna. *Poor girl. Ryouga met her first, but never found his way back to her? I wonder if things would have been different for him and me if he had?*

She set the miso soup to simmer and put on a kettle to boil, deciding the least she could offer was a cup of tea. She had so many questions she wanted to ask the girl, but the language barrier made things difficult. Maybe she could find a good translation guide to help her out?

She poured out a couple of cups and walked over, sitting down and offering one to Anna. "Here, this is tea. Uhh… " She held up hers and sipped it demonstratively.

Anna picked hers up and glanced at it. "[Oh, tea,]" she sighed heavily. "[Ah'd kill for a good strong cup o' coffee right about now.]

"[Coffee?]" Akari perked up, recognizing the word. She held up a finger and quickly got up to check the cupboards, but quickly found there was none available. She sighed and sat back down, shrugging apologetically. "Sorry… ummm… [No have. Get soon.]"
"[Oh, no, no need for th' trouble!]
"[Ah appreciate the thought tho… uhh…] Thank you."

Akari smiled and nodded. She heard the sound of footsteps coming down the stairs and stood just as
Ryouga made his way in, looking worn out himself. "Ryouga!"

"[Joe!]
"[Ummm… I guess I've made things awkward for you, haven't I?]

Ryouga glanced at her, then Akari, then closed his eyes as if pained. "[Right, right… Anna I'm so sorry… about everything. I shouldn't have just walked away from you and your father like I did, I should have explained things better, I…]"

Anna stepped closer to him. "[It's okay! Ah just… Ah wanted to know you were okay. Ah ran after
you when you left. Ah tried to catch up, but… but you vanished, and Ah guess… Ah just wanted to
make sure you were okay an' all.]
"[Ah know you have someone else in yer life now…]"

Ryouga winced. "[I… for what it's worth, I didn't tell you everything.]

"Akari, could I have a glass of water and a kettle ready? I'm going to show Anna the curse."

Akari nodded, filling a glass from the tap and handing it over to him, stepping closer to catch it when
the inevitable happened.

"[Anna, there's a reason you didn't find me after I walked off. I was still there, I had just tripped over
a bucket of water. You see, I have a curse and… well, when I get splashed with cold water this is
what happens.]

"[Ryouga! Joe!? Where did you go?!]" she called out, giving Akari a frightened look. "[What
happened?!]"

Akari smiled at her gently, took her arm and guided her down to the pile of clothes on the floor.
"Here," she said, reaching into the pile and extracting the small, damp black piglet, who shook
himself off as soon as he was free.

"Ryouga! That's very rude you know! You shouldn't shake off on people like that!" Akari
admonished him. After ensuring she saw a properly remorseful droop of his ears, she handed the
piglet to Anna. "Ryouga," she said, motioning for her to take the piglet as she stood to fetch the
kettle.

"[R-Ryouga?]

The piglet made a nervous "Bweee."

Akari returned with the kettle and gently took Ryouga back from Anna's unresisting grasp, placing
him back into his pile of clothes. With practised movements he burrowed back in and positioned
himself. Having done this many times before, Akari waited for him to stop moving, then poured the
hot water on him.

Ryouga exploded back into being, managing to get all his limbs in the right holes of his clothes, a
trick he had told Akari he had learned after a number of embarrassing situations. Most Jusenkyo
Anna yelped as she practically flung herself backwards, staring up at him with wide eyes.

Ryouga sighed heavily. "[It's a curse I picked up in an old Chinese spring. When I'm splashed with cold water, I take the form of a small black piglet. Hot water changes me back. So… when I 'vanished', I was just under the water bucket. You never noticed me.]" He crouched down in front of her. "[I… know that's a lot to take in. Back then I felt I needed to cure my curse before anyone would be able to accept me. I spent a year searching before I realized there probably isn't one.]

She stared at him a moment. Akari crouched off to the side, watching. Anna's eyes were wide, and for a moment she was afraid the girl would run off screaming.

Slowly, Anna pushed herself up to her knees. She reached out and tentatively poked Ryouga's chest as if to reassure herself he was really there. She blinked when she actually met resistance, then looked up at him. "[Can… can I see that again?]

Ranma blew her bangs up as she walked, hands clasped behind her head. She was coming to realize that getting ready for school on time… walking with a group… arriving with time to spare… and not getting attacked along the way… was actually starting to get boring. Especially since she wasn't the focus of attention today - Ukyou and Akane had earned that honor.

"So, explain to me again, 'Little Brother', exactly what it is you and Kasumi talked about that has her looking so smug and secretive and humming 'The Wedding March'?" Nabiki poked Ukyou's shoulder and gave the Okonomiyaki Chef a suspicious stare.

"Nothing! Just… we chatted while making breakfast!" Ukyou said defensively. Akane walked close next to her, head down and blushing.

"Uh huh, not buying it," Yuka flanked the couple on the other side, poking Akane's shoulder. "Come on Akane, spill! What are you two up to?"

"It's… it's… you'll make fun!" Akane huffed and clenched her fists, looked away and turned even redder.

"Oh come on, Akane… We've been okay with all the weirdness in your life so far," Sayuri said. "This can't be that bad if Kasumi is happily humming about it!"

"We could just play 20 questions," Riko suggested. "Does it involve a foreign Prince from a forgotten magical land? Again?"

"Ooooh, did one of you get engaged to a demon?" Yuka piped up.

"I-is it aliens?" Rin asked in a hushed voice. "It hasn't been aliens yet, has it? We're probably due for aliens…"

"Alright! Alright…" Ukyou said finally, holding up her hands in surrender. "Kasumi… was saying that she kind of regretted that she wasn't going to get to see Akane in a traditional wedding, since Ranma is probably going to marry Nabiki here in Japan, and the rest of us will be doing some sort of ceremony at Jusendo… and…" she ducked her head. "I… might have suggested… well… I'm listed as male on my family register, so legally… I mean… Akane and I talked about…"

"I asked Ukyou to marry me and she said yes, and so we're going to have an actual wedding!"
Akane blurted out, her face cherry red now. "There! Happy?"

The group around her blinked at the two of them owlishly.

"Aaaaand suddenly we're walking over here," Hiroshi said as he and Daisuke moved up closer to Ranma, putting the redhead between them and any potential fallout.

"Gee, thanks guys," Ranma gave each of them a sour look as they not-so-subtly shielded themselves with her body. She glanced back at the Akane and Ukyou, pondering if she should get involved or not. The two of them had already talked to her about it and gotten her blessing, so this was no real shock for her, though the last she had heard the plan was to elope.

I can just see Mr. Tendo walking Akane down the aisle, bawling his eyes out, an' everyone just thinking it's the whole 'my baby girl has grown up' thing, Ranma chuckled mentally at the image. Poor guy... kinda? I mean... She glanced at Akane, who was blushing and fidgeting as Yuka, Sayuri and Riko started pestering her for details. I mean Akane is HAPPY, right? He ain't got no business being upset over THAT. She scowled, feeling her sympathy for the man bleed away as she remembered the sight of Akane in her wedding dress. Then she remembered that they had held the cure to her curse hostage just to force them into it - which had resulted in near total disaster. The 'cure' had gotten wasted, the other fiancees had been provoked, and the aftermath torn her and Akane apart for a while. Even if she didn't actually want the curse cured anymore, being blackmailed into things never sat well with her. Actually, he'll be lucky if we let him ATTEND.

She felt a pang of regret as she realized that the next time Akane walked down the aisle, it wouldn't be for her.

I mean... I know we're all going to be together... and Akane SAID she wants to marry me too, but... She glanced at the two of them and had to admit they looked good together. Ukyou too, I guess. If she marries Akane... Well, it's not like I'm legally a girl... and then there's Nabiki... Her eyes flicked to the Middle Tendo. She sighed. I'm greedy, aren't I?

"Airen got look on face again," A soft voice murmured in her ear, making her jump. She gasped and recoiled a bit, whirling to see Shampoo smirking at her.

"Shampoo, don't do that!" Ranma put a hand on her chest and took a few deep breaths to slow her heart-rate. "You're gonna give me a coronary!"

"Shampoo not even sneaking. Airen too-too distracted!" Shampoo huffed, crossing her arms haughtily. It only lasted a moment though before she glanced back at the couple. "Is strange, yes? Odd feeling... supposed to all be equal, all together, but even then..."

Ranma followed her gaze, noticing she was looking at Ukyou. She glanced back at Shampoo; In the past she had never been very good at reading emotions, but she had learned a great deal since then. "You and Ucchan... kinda had a thing, didn't cha?"

"Still have thing," Shampoo sighed. "Just... maybe not thing could have been." She moved closer and took Ranma's arm, hugging it. In the past Ranma would have panicked, but now she was able to recognize a request for comfort.

"You regretting things?" Ranma asked softly. She put her hand over Shampoo's on her arm.

Shampoo shook her head quickly, hugged Ranma's arm more snugly and rested her head on her shoulder. "No! No... This way so much better. Have Airen. Have Pintou. Able to go home to Joketsuzoku with head held high now. But..." She sighed and leaned more heavily against the
"... There is always path not taken. Shampoo might have been one to marry Ukyou if Airen and Akane get together. Can be close with Ukyou now. Sisters. But... maybe never that close. Feel... like outsider."

"I know exactly what you mean," Ranma said. She closed her eyes and rested her head against Shampoo's. "I guess... that's why the sort of thing we're doing doesn't happen much... or even at all. Everything ebbs and flows, and sometimes a thing is only really shareable between two people, an' so the others get hurt 'cuz they get left out."

"Used to be way with you and Akane," Shampoo replied. "Lots between you two... Me and Ukyou miss out. Now... all have moments with each other. Like this..." She sighed happily. "Airen make Shampoo feel better. Thank you."

Ranma realized that she felt better too. Sharing her worry, and having Shampoo open up about having the same feelings had somehow bled away some of the melancholy. *Mebbe that's how we make this work then? Can't always keep things equal, can't stop that feeling of missing out, but if we just share THAT with each other too...* She sighed, feeling the weight ease. She took Shampoo's hand, weaving their fingers together as they continued on towards Ryoga's house. "Mebbe I'm finally learning this 'supportive' stuff. A real man is s'posed to be that for his wife... uh... wives in my case. Right?"

Shampoo smirked at her. "Is not just 'man' thing, Airen. But is strength thing. Bonds of support why Joketsuzoku encourage bonds of sisterhood. Make better warriors." Shampoo seemed content to cuddle Ranma's arm as they walked. "Japanese too-too enamoured with idea of 'lone wolf'. Think being strong alone naturally make one stronger than those who strong in group. Not realize ability to make bonds is strength by itself."

"I... kinda never thought about that..." Ranma mused. "Never did the Hentai Horde any good though."

Shampoo snorted. "They not have bond, is just have same goal. If ever actually beat Akane would turn on each other. Is lowest form of cooperation, kind that come from not having other choice."

Ranma had to admit she had a point. "I guess that means the next time some nutjob shows up to challenge us, it'll be an easy fight, since we've got the whole 'bonds' thing going now?"

Shampoo chuckled. "Maybe. Need time to actually learn to fight as team first. Probably first training Great-grandmother insist on after omiai decided."

Ranma sighed heavily. "Yeah... that. Gotten any more letters from Mom? I'm guessing she's not actually gonna tell me who I'm s'posed to marry until they got me standing at the altar in a tux waiting for her."

"Not yet," Shampoo replied. She kissed Ranma's cheek. "If that happen, will blow up wedding again. But only if Pintou not find other way."

Ranma winced. "Don't I get a say?"

"No. Ranma already married to Shampoo. Already choose us, yes? Shampoo not let anything pull apart this time, especially not stupid Panda skin rug-in-law or his wife!" She set her jaw, eyes flashing with determination, as if daring Ranma to challenge her on the point.

Ranma couldn't bring herself to be upset about it. Honestly, part of her was a little worried that her idiot father might just kidnap her, drug her and force the marriage to her mother's choice, whomever
that ended up being. Knowing a rescue would be waiting was actually a little comforting. "Ummm… just… try not and blow up the Tendo Dojo or my house or anything?"

"Not blow up Dojo. Is property of Joketsuzoku sisters now, not want damage," Shampoo said solemnly, then smirked. "Promise will try not to blow up stupid Panda skin rug-in-law's house too," she added in a tone that suggested she wasn't planning to try very hard to avoid it.

Ranma sighed and looked up as they approached Ryouga's house. *I wonder how Ryo is faring with HIS relationship problems. Can't be as bad as mine, right?*

At that moment, the door of the Hibiki residence practically exploded open, and a small black piglet charged out, making a beeline for Ranma. Startled, Ranma caught the piglet as it leapt into her arms.

The American girl from before poked her head out the door. She had a kettle in one hand, and a bucket in the other, and spotting P-chan in Ranma's arms she got a scowl on her face and stomped over.

"[Who are you?]" she asked, looking Ranma over suspiciously and narrowing her eyes. Ranma felt an uncomfortable sense of being judged as Anna's eyes flicked from her red hair to the front of her uniform. She held out her hand. "Give."

"I'm… uhh… sorry?" Ranma said nervously, not quite parsing the request, but she could feel something very like abject terror from P-chan. Unconsciously she hugged him tighter to her chest.

Anna growled. "[Just give him back, you red-haired floozy! Honestly, dying your hair such a garish shade in high school,]" she huffed. She made a grab for P-chan, but Ranma stepped back out of reach, eyeing her suspiciously.

"What's your deal?! He doesn't wanna go with you!" Ranma protested.

Ryouga's mother and Akari emerged from the house behind Anna and Ranma felt a fresh surge of fear from the piglet as Mrs. Hibiki came into view.

"[Joe, come here… please?]" Anna implored. "[Look… ah'm sorry. I got carried away, but… Ah've never seen real magic before!]

"[What's that about real magic, dear?]" Mrs. Hibiki walked over. "Hello Ranma. Oh, is that piglet yours? When I saw it run outside I assumed it belonged to Akari or Anna here."

Ranma's eyes widened. *Ryouga's Mom doesn't know about the curse!* She could feel him start to succumb to despair. Thankfully there was little danger of an explosive Ki release as a piglet, but it still hurt to feel. She added the bucket and kettle in, as well as Anna's suspicious looks, and remembered how Ukyou had reacted to finding out about her curse (Which had been nearly half an hour of changing her back and forth in fascination) and suddenly had a pretty good idea why Ryouda was panicking. Unfortunately, Ranma didn't speak a word of English to explain it to the girl.

She set her jaw and made a decision. She knew it was probably going to make things worse short-term but she and Ryo could deal with the fallout afterwards.

"Yes! I've been looking all over for him!" Ranma said abruptly and hugged the little piglet tightly enough that he wheezed audibly as the breath was driven from his lungs. "He has a tendency to wander off and I get so worried! Thank you so much for finding him!" She held him up and made a big show of making a fuss over him. "Didja miss mommy, Mr. P?"

P-chan was staring at her as if she had lost her mind.
So was Shampoo. "Is… Ranma feeling okay?"

"[What.]" Anna said in a flat, menacing growl.

"Aheh…" Ranma's eyes flicked to Akari, but she could see the pig trainer had already gotten out her notebook and was furiously scribbling notes. Akari, _don't write this down! I could use some help here!_ She swallowed and decided she needed to double down, then get out as quickly as possible.

"Oh yes, he's mine! He's so cute that people keep trying to adopt him, but he'd know me anywhere. _Right Mr. P?_" She gave the piglet a warning glare.

P-chan _bwee'd_ weakly in assent. He gave Ranma an uncertain look, glanced at Mrs. Hibiki, then timidly nuzzled Ranma's cheek.

Shampoo's eyes widened. "Hey…!" Slowly the confusion started to morph into outrage. "What pork lunch special think he _doing_!?"

"What's all the commotion over here?" Ukyou asked as she, Akane and Nabiki approached, fate having decided that things just weren't chaotic enough.

_Okay, time to bail!_ Ranma noticed that Mrs. Hibiki had Ryoga's school bag and snatched it from her before she could protest or react. _ISeeYouHaveRyo'sBag! HeMustHaveGoneAhead! IBetterCatchUpBeforeHeGetsLost! BYE!_ She turned and darted past Shampoo and Anna, hopped up onto the fence wall and winced as she realized she was about to start roof-hopping in a skirt. _You freaking OWE me for this, Ryouga!_

"Wha…? Where is Ranchan going?!" Ukyou asked.

_[Hey! You come back here with Joe! _]" Anna cried and charged off down the street, doing her best to try and keep pace with the roof-hopping redhead.

"_Airen and Shagua have some explaining _to do!_" Shampoo growled and joined the chase, leaping first to the wall then onto the rooftops to follow much more directly.

"Go after her," Nabiki said to Ukyou and Akane. "I'll stay here and try and sort out what just happened."

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Rin sighed as she watched her Senpai leap off over the rooftops with the other girls in hot pursuit. Despite everything else she had learned about the lives of martial artists, part of her still wished she could join in on the adventure.

She slapped her cheeks to snap herself out of it. _Come on, Rin! This isn't a manga! Senpai has terrible parents and Senpai's Mr. Boyfriend-san has tragic family illnesses, Ms. Manager Nabiki lost her mother… being them ISN'T fun!_

She sighed. The logic was perfect and flawless and _absolutely_ did not help one whit. She remembered the sensation of weightlessness when Mu Tsu had carried her up the radio tower to watch the sunset. She wanted to fly again - with him especially. But knowing what she did about his story, she had realised that could never happen.

"Mu Tsu…" she murmured sadly.

"Yes, Rin Ito?"
She whirled to see the bespectacled Chinese martial artist standing behind her, his hands folded into the sleeves of his robe, his head cocked curiously as if awaiting her question.

"Yiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii!" She leapt back, eyes wide and face bright red. "M-m-m-m-m-m-m-m Mr Duck Delivery Person Mu Tsu-san!"

Mousse blinked and sighed. "... Could you maybe just refer to me as 'Mu Tsu'? Or even 'Mousse'?"

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" Rin started bowing frantically. "I sometimes append things to people's names and when I get nervous it gets really bad and I wasn't thinking and and and..."

She trailed off. Most times people would interrupt her, but Mu Tsu usually waited for her to wind down on her own. She closed her eyes and took a few deep breaths and forced herself to stop her racing thoughts and string them into coherent order. She opened her eyes again. "I'm sorry, Mu Tsu."

"No apologies needed, Rin Ito..." he began.

"Rin, please," she said firmly. She had Kasumi's worry stone clenched in her hand. He raised an eyebrow. "Am I correct in guessing we're on better terms once more?"

Rin took a final deep, steadying breath. "You're trying, so yes. My father always said it's not fair to be mad at someone for not knowing something while they're trying to learn it. I'm sorry for being cross with you."

Mu Tsu actually smiled and she felt her heart skip a beat. "Again, no apologies needed, Rin I... Rin. I've noticed that you often quote your father's teachings. He sounds quite wise."

Rin nodded. "He says a lot of what he says is just other people's wisdom that he learned, but I think he's the best teacher ever!"

"Perhaps one day you can introduce me to him?" Mu Tsu said. "I fear you have proven to me that I am sorely in need of those."

"T-t-t-t-take you h-home t-to m-meet my parents?!" Rin stammered, eyes going wide and her blush returning. She closed her eyes quickly and slapped her cheeks again. Stop that! That's not what he meant. It CAN'T be what he meant!"

"Yes. What... what do you suppose he would have to say about my... my trespass against Young Mi?" Mu Tsu continued, oblivious. "Would... would he have some wisdom to help with that, you suppose? Or... perhaps that would be too much to ask."

"O-oh..." Rin deflated a little. Of course. He's asking for help with his fiancee. You KNEW this Rin. "I-I'm sure... I mean, if you explained it to him..."

He sighed. "I know it is too much to ask for your continued assistance, even. The more I consider the issue, the more I realize that I have not been allowing myself to consider the ramifications of my actions, and the more I consider those..." His gaze dropped. "... I fear my reluctance to make amends has simply been because of how impossible it is to make this right."

Rin swallowed, feeling a lump in her throat. When Mu Tsu had been no more than an object of admiration, someone who 'ticked all of her boxes' as Yuka would put it, that had been one thing. But somehow... now that she knew more about him and had seen the worst side of him... and was now seeing him struggle with trying to be better... she was actually finding him more compelling to her than the idealized fantasy. She had a sudden, insane and terrifying impulse to hug him. "I-I'm sure
That is what I was hoping for your help with," Mu Tsu replied, reaching into the sleeve of his robe and pulling out a large stack of paper. "I've been trying to write a letter to her for the past few days - to explain things - to apologize… but no matter what I have tried thus far, everything I have written seems hollow and insincere. I was hoping… well, you have a clarity about these things that I admire, and feel that I need for this. Would you help me?"

"You have a clarity I admire. 'Rin felt a warm rush at those words that caused her to space out for a moment. She realized he had asked her a question and shook herself. "Umm… O-of course, Mu Tsu." She timidly reached for the first sheet of paper. "May I?"

She could see his eyes close behind his thick glasses. After a moment, he reluctantly nodded. This must be terribly personal, she thought, taking the sheet and reading it.

Dear Young Mi,

There was nothing else. She blinked and took another page from the stack.

Dear Young Mi,

Nothing else once more, though she noticed the handwriting was slightly different. She pulled another sheet, then another and another.

"U-um… Mu Tsu?" she asked nervously. "Have… have you got any where you got past writing her name?"

"I… have one that I wrote 'To Whom It May Concern'…" Mu Tsu replied. "I saw it on a letter once… I don't think it would be a good idea. I also tried 'Dearest' a few times, but… that doesn't feel right either. I've also been practicing my calligraphy…"

Rin sighed and put the papers back on the stack. "I… think we should meet after school. This is probably going to take a while." She looked up to see the group had moved on, probably chasing Senpai towards school. Her shoulders slumped. "Oh drat… everyone went on without me!"

"Oh, have I made you late for school?" Mu Tsu tucked the stack of papers away hastily.

"No, I think I'll be okayiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii!" Rin's reply trailed off in a squeak as Mu Tsu scooped her up in a bridal carry without another word and leapt for the wall, then to the nearest rooftop, bounding with the same superhuman lightness as before, but with more urgency as he made a beeline for the school.

Ranma landed inside the school courtyard and sighed in relief. She could see from the big clock that she still had time to get to class. It had taken longer than she had expected to shake the American girl.

"Bwee?" P-chan said inquisitively. He had been thankfully quiet and docile for the entire thing.

"Sorry buddy, hadda get away so you can explain to… what was her name… Anna? Yeah, Anna… Explain to her about your Mom not knowing about the curse." She perched the piglet on her shoulder to give him a bit more autonomy. She had his bag slung on her back like a backpack while she carried her own. "I don't suppose you have a spare uniform in your bag, do ya?"
P-chan made a mournful sound.

"Well, I guess 'P-chan' is just gonna hafta make another visit to the school," Ranma sighed. "Ms. Hinako is cool with it at least. Just don't suck up too much, okay? About half the class is in on the secret now, after all."

P-chan made an inquisitive grunt.

"I'll explain things to the 'll see if we can get you a uniform by lunch or something." She started walking towards the school. "I'd head back to the dojo so you could change and get a spare set of clothes but after that second win I bet my attendance is tracked real close now. I can't afford any more hiccups to give 'em a way to mess with me any more."

P-chan grunted and settled on his haunches.

"Uh… you're welcome," Ranma replied, a little put off by the easy gratitude. She felt a buzzing from her pocket and fished out her phone.

Nabs: So what was THAT all about?

Ranma ducked inside the school and into a doorway to quickly send a reply.

Ryo's Mom doesn't know about the curse. Avoiding meltdown. At school safe now.

There was a few seconds pause, then a reply. Ranma was impressed with how fast Nabiki could tap out messages on her phone, especially since it didn't even have a number pad.


Ranma winced. She knew she was probably going to have to explain herself fast to avoid getting in trouble with the girls, but she'd had little choice but to ditch them as well in the effort to lose Anna.

Lost 'em ditching American girl. Probably pissed. Help?

She chewed on her lower lip, knowing it was a long shot, since as far as she could recall, none of them had cell phones.

Nabs: Tell 'em D'artagnan said to wait until I can get there to explain.

Ranma frowned. She had no idea who this 'D'artagnan' was… code word or something? Still, it meant Nabiki had a plan, and that was good enough for her.

Gottit. See you soon! First bell any minute.

She snapped her phone closed. "Well, that's something. So… d'ya think anyone else made it here before us, Mr. P?"

P-chan made a noncommittal grunt.

"Yeah, you're right… they're probably gonna blame us either way…" She started towards her homeroom class.

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Bright green eyes watched as the red-haired girl landed in the courtyard, carrying something in her arms. A slight adjustment to the binoculars, and she could see it was a small black piglet. Her sharp
eyes also picked out that she carried two school bags.

"Hmmm… They did say he had a Jusenkyo curse…" The binoculars dropped as she narrowed her eyes as she glanced at the large clock. Trying to get on school grounds now, just before the bell, would likely draw too much of the wrong sort of attention. Better to be patient and wait for them to come back out.

She was perched on a rooftop a few buildings away wearing dark clothes that made it easy for her to conceal herself. Keeping out of sight in a town was a skill she had been taught a long time ago, and getting onto the roof had been child's play. Had anyone seen her, they might have mistaken her for a burglar - but common thievery was the farthest thing from her mind.

"Unusual hair color, tremendous acrobatic skill, obviously a martial artist. Even the school uniform couldn't hide that figure, either. And she's got a 'pet' that could just be a Jusenkyo victim." She rocked back on her heels, playing thoughtfully with a curl of her pink hair. "That sort of subservience to her would suit him, too."

A smile spread across her lips. "It seems I've found you, Darling. Now I guess we see if this 'beloved' of yours is willing to fight for you?"

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Home room was a little uncomfortable. The volleyball team had made it to class (Rin had come in last, just before the bell, looking a little dishevelled and out of it. Ranma guessed she had ended up running). They were all shooting glances at Ranma and the small black piglet on her desk, which they all knew was Ryouga.

Everyone else in the class was, of course, making a huge fuss over him - including Ms. Hinako.

"So he's yours now?" one girl asked. "I thought he was Akane's pet?"

"Yeah, he's mine now," Ranma said, deciding to keep her story consistent. P-chan shot her a look, but didn't protest otherwise.

"Is he hard to take care of?"

Ranma shrugged. "Not really. He's pretty good at looking out for himself. Gets lost if I don't watch him though."

"Does he sleep in your bed? Ooooh I bet he's a cuddly sleeper!"

Ranma winced."Uh… sometimes… He usually sticks to his side of the bed, though…"

"Awww! You should cuddle him more!"

Naturally Ranma's rebellious mind instantly conjured an image of that - except Ryouga wasn't a pig. It wasn't exactly a picture, either - more of imagining the sensation of being cuddled, with strong arms around her and the warmth of him through the link - a bit of an extrapolation from what was becoming an unnervingly comprehensive catalogue of experiences with him. She closed her eyes quickly and angrily tried to push the feeling away. *Nope nope nope, not doing this today! *Look… I can't believe *I'm* saying this, but… shouldn't we be learning stuff?"

Ms. Hinako gave her a sour look, then sighed. "You're right Ms. Saotome." She turned and walked back up to the board. "Today we're going to cover 'conjunctions'…"
Ranma breathed a sigh of relief. She put a hand on P-chan's head under the cover of scratching behind his ears in order to link and make sure he wasn't upset. Thankfully all she sensed from him was relief.

"Sorry about that," she whispered.

"Bwee," the piglet replied, as if in acceptance. She got the sense Ryôga knew she was doing her best, which was reassuring.

At least with him as a pig, no one is gonna get any weird ideas about us even if they DO know about the curse, she thought as she tried to focus on the lesson. She did not want to give Ms. Hinako an excuse to draw any more attention her way. Nabiki will be here by noon, we can change Ryo back, then sort out his girl problems, an' NO ONE will have any reason to be mad at either of us because there's no way anything we do until then will raise any eyebrows. Just focus on classes until then an' we're good!

She smiled a bit, satisfied that her plan seemed foolproof.

Without being consciously aware of it, her feigned ear scratches became the real thing. She could sense his emotional churn smoothing out and settling into a pleasant lassitude - all but zoning out. Reassured, she attempted to apply herself to the lesson, drawing on Ryôga's almost-zen to help her focus.

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"So… what was all of that about this morning?" Sayuri asked as class ended and Ranma was packing up her books.


"As opposed to the Casanova one?" Yuka asked dryly.

P-chan made a protesting 'Bwee!' over that.

"He's not a Casanova," Ranma stated firmly, giving Yuka a stern glare. "Trust me. As someone who gets accused of that crap every single day, it sucks. Ryôga's done some dumb stuff, yeah, but leading girls on ain't one of 'em. He's just not real good at talking to 'em."

Yuka gave her a skeptical look. She folded her arms and arched an eyebrow. "We're expected to believe that a girl came all the way from America without even knowing the language here and he didn't do anything to give her the wrong idea?"

Ranma scowled at her. "Yeah, I am. 'Cuz I've been in exactly the same boat. Unless you wanna go back to accusing me of the same thing?"

"Using yourself as an example doesn't really help his case, all things considered," Yuka pointed out.

"Yuka, back off," Sayuri gave her a warning look. "This isn't something to fight over when we've got a game tomorrow. It's none of our business."

"It kinda is," Yuka retorted. "I mean, our star player is all wrapped up in it." She looked past Sayuri and fixed Ranma with a look. "The point I'm getting at is… are you okay with all of this, Ranma?"

Ranma blinked in confusion. "Am I okay with all this?"
"Yeah," Yuka repeated.

"I mean… you and Ryouga are kinda…" Riko added timidly, her eyes flicking to the piglet.

Ranma glanced down at him and realized she was unconsciously scratching behind his ears. Her initial impulse was to jerk her hand away, but she could sense he was intensely uncomfortable with everything. It was also starting to irk her that they were talking like he was somehow not aware of what was being said.

She kept her hand where it was and glared at them. "Look. What Ryo and I are isn't any of your business. But, for the record, he has a girlfriend. Her name is Akari, an' he ain't done nothing to betray that. I'm trying to help him get through this because no one helped me, an' I don't want a friend to hafta go through that alone!" She stood, picking up P-chan and depositing him on her shoulder. "Think what you like, but I've got math class." She grabbed Ryouga's bag, slung it over her shoulder, grabbed her own bag, and stalked out of the class.

"Bwee?" P-chan grunted inquisitively in her ear.

Ranma sighed and slowed down as she walked down the hallway. "... Yeah, maybe that was kinda harsh." She felt a sudden pang of regret for going off on her friends. "I guess I'm just… what's the word? 'Projecting', is it? I've gone through this exact same crap so often that I'm still kinda sore about it."

P-chan grunted. She got a sense of gratitude from him through all of the embarrassment over the whole situation.

She smiled. "Yeah, you're welcome buddy."

Her smile faded as she reached the classroom. Math was not exactly a favored subject of hers, though for different reasons than English. She stepped inside the classroom and found her seat, setting P-chan down on her desk.

English was stupid. Even Shampoo, who had proven surprisingly adept scholastically, agreed on that. But math? Math was one of those things where Ranma felt almost like she did understand it, only to find out halfway through that she was totally off track. It seemed to hover in that frustrating, tantalizing region of something that should make sense, but didn't. Worse, spending so many years out of school left her ignorant of so many of the tricks and shortcuts the other students seemed to know - and that made it a constant struggle for her to keep up.

Today, the lesson was on quadratics.

No one had been able to adequately explain what quadratics were actually for - just that Ranma needed to learn them so she could move on to ever more complicated stuff for which they had even less explanation for the good it was supposed to do her.

She opened her book and sighed. It wouldn't be so bad if it was just straight out gibberish, she thought glumly. But… there was a kind of sense to it… like a puzzle she could almost work out. She looked over the questions they had been assigned the previous day and her half-completed attempts at solutions, and sighed. She hoped she wouldn't be called on to answer in class. The teacher was starting to write the questions on the board, so she tried one last time to wrestle with her current nemesis, question six.

P-chan looked at her sheet, then up at her inquisitively.

"Quadratics," Ranma murmured to him. "Fighting Herb was easier…"
P-chan grunted, then cocked his head at the question. He stood up and nudged Ranma's pencil, taking it in his mouth and gently guiding it to part of her scribbles.

"What are you…" she paused, realizing what he was pointing out. She had written down a number wrong! Her eyes widened, and she hastily corrected the number, then redid the steps afterwards.

"Ms. Saotome?" the teacher said. He regarded her haughtily, having taken to emphasizing the 'Ms.' part ever since she had started showing up to his class as a girl. "The answer to question six? Assuming you did the homework this time?"

"Uhh… yes!" Ranma beamed. "X equals -4 or 1… right?"

The teacher paused, his eyebrows raising. "I… yes… yes that's absolutely correct, thank you, Ms. Saotome." He turned and wrote it on the board. "Let's hope the rest of you have been as diligent…"

The class continued, but Ranma was buoyed by the warm feeling of accomplishment, having managed to solve the problem herself this time. With a little help… When no one was looking, she quietly gave the piglet a fistbump in thanks (Well, hoofbump in his case.)

Most of the rest of the class was the usual slog, but P-chan continued to point out things she was missing and Ranma found things making much more sense without the errors that made her work devolve into nonsense. She recognized there was almost a kata of sorts to it all, though she had no idea how people memorized some of the more dizzying techniques.

Mebbe I'll actually get this stuff someday, she thought, looking over her notes as the class ended. They were still a mess that didn't make a lot of sense now that class was over, but there were fewer doodles in the margins at least. Glad to finally be free for lunch, she packed up her stuff and perched P-chan on her shoulder as she got up to leave.

"Ms. Saotome," the teacher said, stopping her dead.

"Uh oh." She turned and smiled weakly. "Uh… yes sensei?"

"It was good to see you apply yourself in class," he said, folding his hands on his desk and smiling. "If this is the result of your… change, then perhaps I misjudged things and this is for the better. Well done."

"Aheh… thank you..." She rubbed the back of her head. Damn it… someone ELSE who thinks I'm better off as a girl now?

"Now… about the pig?" He quirked an eyebrow.

"Aheh… yeah… Ummm… he's… he's mine, but he gets lost sometimes, so by the time I found him I didn't have time to take him back home. Sorry. I promise it won't happen again!" Ranma laughed nervously. P-chan growled softly at her, objecting again to her 'cover story'.

The teacher sighed. "Try not to make a habit of it, please. Though heavens know around here that sort of thing is fairly tame compared to what typically goes on. As long as this doesn't result in some escapade that shuts down the school for days again, I'll overlook it."

She bowed. "Thank you, sensei!"

He waved her off, already engrossed in grading papers. Ranma gratefully took her escape, slipping out of the classroom with a sigh.
P-chan grunted once they were out of the classroom and relatively alone in the hall.

"Look, I know you don't like the cover story much, but if you wanna keep your curse quiet there's gotta be one!" She poked him gently. "Honestly, things would be a lot simpler if you'd just grow a pair and not be so afraid of people finding out!"

P-chan squealed in protest.

"No, it ain't that bad! You ain't even the only one with a 'small an' cute animal' curse!" Ranma argued. "Shampoo doesn't have the same problems you've got!"

There was a quarrelsome grunt.

"... okay, fair point, no one is gonna try and cook her," Ranma acknowledged. "But she's liable to get picked up and made somebody's pet. And nobody gives baths to a c-c-c-c..." She sighed in frustration as she felt the tremor of fear just from the word. "Nobody bathes felines. So no easy out for hot water."

P-chan grunted noncommittally.

"Look, I'm just saying you should consider it. I'll help explain it..."

P-chan gave a sharp negative huff.

"... okay, fine, point. After my performance this morning mebbe it's best if I play dumb about 'Mr. P' to avoid any awkward questions. We'll get Akari to explain it then?"

Reluctantly the pig snuffled assent.

"Cool. That's one less thing that can go horribly off the rails, at least." She reached the doors to the courtyard, then smirked at the piglet. "So... should I have a total meltdown when I find out my 'pet pig' who has been sleeping in my bed the whole time has been Ryo all along?"

P-chan squealed in alarm.

"Aww c'mon, it's your chance to work through all that anxiety you had about Akane finding out..." Ranma started to say, but suddenly she realized P-chan's alarm had nothing to do with her suggestion as a black whip snapped around the piglet and jerked him from her shoulder and out the partially open door.

"Ryo!" Ranma kicked the door the rest of the way open and charged outside, skidding to a stop after a few feet as her eyes adjusted and she could see who had snatched P-chan.

A girl about her age stood there, dressed in bright slacks and a tailored jacket that was so gaudy and glittery that it reminded Ranma of nothing so much as a Ringmaster's outfit for some renegade Circus. She was a bit taller than Ranma, and her tight outfit, while not technically revealing, hugged impressive curves. Her hair was cotton-candy pink, a mass of soft curls that fell about her shoulders and was topped with a magician's stove-pipe hat. Her eyes were a piecing green so intense they almost glowed. She held a wicked looking whip in one hand and in the other... she was holding the piglet by his bandanna.

"Well, hello, Darling," she said with a smirk, addressing the piglet. "It has been so very long, hasn't it?"

"Hey, that's mine, give him back!" Ranma protested, taking another step forward before
hesitating. Crap! The Sports Team No Fighting rules! I can't touch her unless she attacks me first!"

The Ringmaster girl raised an eyebrow. "Ah, yes… you." She strode towards Ranma, the sway of her walk brimming with confidence. Ranma could sense real menace from her and knew she was likely going to be a formidable opponent.

She regarded Ranma cooly. "I thought you'd be taller, honestly. And I was expecting more chinese style attire." She tipped Ranma's chin up with the edge of her coiled whip. "I can certainly see why he'd develop an obsession over you…" Her eyes narrowed. "Though you're hardly a beauty worth all the strife Darling has caused."

Ranma jerked her head away. "You're no prize yourself, lady," she growled, feeling her pride pricked. To be fair, the comeback was weak - the Ringmaster girl was gorgeous and, from her demeanor, she was well aware of it.

"Ooooh, the redheaded beast from China speaks!" the Ringmaster girl seemed amused. "Let's not catfight, sweetling. Let me be plain; I know you are well versed in all manner of Joketsuzoku tricks - ways of bending the minds of men. I know you don't really want my Darling, yet for some reason you've used your tricks and traps to enslave his mind. "Know that he loves me, witch! And you will release him from whatever mystical leash you've fettered him with. The only question is if I get to take my pound of flesh from you first."

Ryouga, what did you DO!? Ranma shot an annoyed glare at the piglet, then turned her defiant glare on the taller girl. "Lady, I don't have a clue what you're talking-"

She never got to finish. She knew the Ringmaster girl moved, but it was almost too fast to follow. Something snapped around her ankles and pulled, yanking her off her feet and flinging her across the courtyard until she slammed into the nearest tree so hard that she actually cracked the trunk of it.

Ranma managed to drop into a three point crouch, wheezing a bit as she tried to convince her lungs to start drawing in air again and glared at her opponent.

The Ringmaster girl was twirling her whip casually, the long leather braid dancing and snapping like it was a living, agitated thing. She smirked nastily as she walked slowly towards the downed redhead. "Well well… so you still have some fight in you? Good… I was hoping that the 'best warrior of her generation' would give me a decent fight. I do have quite a bit of frustration to take out on you, after all." Her eyes widened with a mad gleam and she made an almost casual flick with her wrist.

Ranma dodged to the side as the tree trunk shattered, the whip impacting it with the force of a high-caliber bullet. She forced her legs to move and charged along a spiralling path towards the other girl. Well, that's the kid gloves off! Gotta get close and end this, before she uses her reach to…

The Ringmaster girl jerked her hand back. Ranma caught the motion out of the corner of her eye and very nearly didn't react fast enough. Her instincts screamed as she ducked, dropping flat to the asphalt as a large tree branch sailed over her head.

"Ah ah ah!" the Ringmaster girl said with a grin. "I'm afraid we can't be having you getting that close. I'm sure you know all sorts of pressure points and grappling tricks, don't you?" She snapped her whip, cracking the tarmac. "Such a shame you're not going to get close enough to use them."

"Oh please, you're hardly the first person I've fought who used weapons," Ranma said with a smirk of her own. "Not even the first with that style of weapon. 'cept they were faster. And you're fighting one-handed. Unless you got some other tricks to show me, this is gonna be over real quick."
The Ringmaster girl smiled and nodded. "Of course. It would hardly be a *decent* fight if I beat you one-handed, would it?" She held up the struggling piglet, giving him a fond smile before she swept the hat off her head and popped him inside. She turned the hat to show Ranma that it was empty inside, then put it back on her head. "Isn't that better? I don't want my Darling to get hurt... before it's *time*.

"Hey, you give him back!" Ranma shouted, realizing she could no longer sense where Ryouga was.

"Oh my dear, that's not how this *works,*" Ringmaster girl chided her. "You give him back *first!" She drew back and made a slashing strike with her whip.

Ranma leapt upwards, feeling the breeze as the whip passed under her. There was cracking crumbling sound as it shattered and tore through asphalt and concrete like they were plaster.

The Ringmaster girl spun, using the momentum of her turn to magnify the speed and force of the whip so that it caused the air to sing with the force behind it. Ranma arched back, the coiled leather braid passing close enough to brush the tip of her nose.

Ranma finished the backflip and landed, her eyes widening as she caught a glimpse of the damage that one slashing whip strike had done to the courtyard and retaining wall. *Holy...! She's slower than Kodachi, but she hits WAY harder!*

"Oh do stop moving around, sweetling," the Ringmaster girl purred menacingly. "It will only make this hurt so much more when I finally catch you." She twirled the whip around her, cracking it like an angry viper.

*Gotta get that thing away from her!* Ranma thought. Her eyes followed it's movements for a moment, finding the pattern, then she darted forward again. Fighting Kodachi had taught her how to do this, and with the Ringmaster girl's slower weapon, the openings were larger, though maybe not so much as she might have hoped.

The Ringmaster started stepping back as she started making snapping strikes at Ranma. Ranma was wise to her technique now, though, dodging not only each strike, but also the chunks of concrete or wood that the whip brought back on the returns. She coiled to dart back further, but Ranma's raw speed was greater. The redhead feinted and let the Ringmaster girl make a last strike before she reached out to snatch the extended whip from her hand and dart back away with it.

"Let's see how good you are *without* this!" Ranma said, cracking the whip triumphantly.

The Ringmaster girl seemed unconcerned. "You probably should have gone for the killing strike, sweetling. A shame you aren't going to get the chance now." She pulled something from a pouch on the back of her belt - what appeared to be a wooden recorder. She began to play a haunting melody on it, seemingly unconcerned by Ranma's display.

Ranma felt the whip move in her hand. She tried to fling it away from her, but it was too late - the sturdy leather braid coiled itself around her body to bind her arms and legs and truss her up like a mummy. When she opened her mouth to shout in surprise, the handle even pushed into her mouth like a gag. Struggling mightily, she toppled over onto her side.

"I've traveled all over the world and learned skills you've likely never even heard of," the Ringmaster girl said, pausing in her playing. "This was called 'The Indian Rope Trick' and was widely considered to be a hoax. My father met a fakir who knew a somewhat more *authentic* version."

Ranma could feel the whip slacken slightly. It was tightly wrapped around her still, but it was no
longer animated. She spit out the handle. "That's a cheap trick!"

"Funny how it's always the loser who says such things," the Ringleader girl said with a theatrical sigh. She glanced around to see that quite a crowd had gathered to watch the fight. "But I see your classmates have come to watch!" She smiled and held out her hands. "Good! I always did prefer to have an audience. Now…" She turned back to the bound redhead.

The whip lay in an empty pile on the ground.

"Wha…?" She spun just in time to get hit with a fierce right cross that snapped her head back and rocked her back on her heels. Ranma was nearly on top of her, winding up to deliver a flurry of blows that would put her down for good.

The Ringmaster girl snatched a colored kerchief from her belt, and with blinding speed began to flick and wave it in front of her, somehow managing to parry Ranma's Kachu Tenshin Amaguriken with the filmy cloth. She backpedalled frantically and finally got a bit of distance between herself and the enraged redhead. "You throw quite the punch. I wonder if you can take what you dish out?" She pulled something else from her belt and flung it at Ranma.

Slender wires wrapped themselves around Ranma's arms, legs, elbows and waist. "What the…?!

"We have quite the puppet show at my Circus. Perhaps you should see it someday?" The Ringmaster girl held up her hands to show each wire tied to a finger. She began to wiggle her fingers and tug on the wires.

Ranma tried to run towards her, but the wires tugged and pulled with just the right force and in just the right directions to send her limbs askew. She stumbled but managed to get closer and reared back to throw a punch. But the wires tugged and redirected her fist, to send it crashing into her own cheek.

"Or perhaps you should be the puppet show?" the Ringmaster girl added with a giggle.

Ranma growled, but she had dealt with techniques like this before, too. She had even used a few herself. She snatched a handful of the wires and gave them a sharp twist and a yank, just so.

The Ringmaster girl was shocked to have her own hand close into a fist and smash into her own face.

"It works both ways, 'sweetling'!" Ranma said, grinning fiercely. "Whadaya say, wanna see who can knock themselves out first?"

"Gah…!" the Ringmaster girl flicked her fingers to cast off the wires and reached back for another trick. This time it was more straightforward - she pulled out a handful of throwing knives and flung them at Ranma.

Ranma dodged the first three, and simply caught the fourth as she got closer. She cast it aside and threw a few quick jabs at the Ringmaster girl with her right hand. They were blocked by the colored scarf again, but it left an opening that Ranma exploited, driving her left into the girl's ribs. When she stumbled, Ranma dropped for quick sweep, but the Ringmaster girl managed to flip back and away, tossing a handful of deflated balloons at Ranma.

Ranma felt strings wrap around her wrists as the balloons suddenly self-inflated, pulling her up rapidly and yanking her arms over her head. "Oh come on!"

The Ringmaster girl landed and charged forward. "You're wide open!" she cried as she aimed a side kick at Ranma's mid-section.
Ranma used the lift of the balloons to pull herself up and swung her legs to wrap around the Ringmaster girl's leg and pin it, twisting with her body to send the pink-haired circus girl tumbling. The balloons were actually lifting Ranma upwards now and she kept her legs firmly locked around the other girl's, pulling her up with her.

"Let go!" the Ringmaster girl snarled, rolling over to hurl another handful of knives at Ranma.

Ranma arched her back, leaning out of the path of the blades so they struck the large cluster of balloons tied to her wrists instead and popped the majority of them. The two girls fell back to the ground with a crash, breaking the leg lock.

Ranma scrambled back to her feet and ripped off the remaining strings, panting. "Out of tricks yet?" she asked, dropping into a ready stance. "Even Mousse runs out eventually!"

"How dare you speak that name to me!" the Ringmaster girl snarled. She flung a handful of what looked like pink sand at Ranma, but it quickly puffed out into fluffy, sticky mass of cotton candy that enveloped Ranma's arms and legs. The Ringmaster girl darted forward, aiming a series of side kicks at Ranma's torso.

The redhead wove and swayed, unable to step back with her legs stuck in the surprisingly sticky and strong cotton candy. Her arms were stuck uselessly out to the sides, trapped in giant clouds of soft pink. She dodged one kick when the ringmaster girl overextended, and then leaned in, taking advantage of the fact her feet were stuck to the ground to support her own overextension, and headbutted her savagely.

The pink haired girl stumbled back which gave Ranma a chance to grab the cotton candy stuck to her right arm with her teeth. With a grunt of effort she ripped her arm free and tore one leg free as well. She hit the girl with a fierce straight punch to the face that sent her reeling back even further. She then took her time ripping the rest of the cotton candy away.

"There, you get it yet? You done!?" Ranma snarled. "Now you gonna tell me what this is all about, or do I gotta get serious!!?"

The ringmaster girl held a hand over her mouth. When she pulled it away, she was nursing a split lip. "How dare you..." she growled. She reached back and pulled out a whistle from her belt, blowing a single shrill blast on it.

"More tricks!?!" Ranma was shouting now. "Why doncha fight me fair and square?!"

"That would be revealing my secrets, sweetling," the Ringmaster girl said with a smirk. "But this is no magic trick. This is more of a specialty of mine. The circus has many disciplines, after all."

With that, there was a loud roar - a sound which caused Ranma to freeze as her blood suddenly ran cold with fear.

A massive shape leapt up onto the courtyard wall from the far side and perched there for a moment, tail lashing. It had the body of a lion though the mane was somewhat understated and its fur was primarily white with faint striping. But by far the most striking aspect of the creature was its sheer size. It was massive - nearly the size of a horse.

It roared again, yellow eyes tracking to fix on Ranma.

Ranma found she couldn't move as something straight out of her nightmares hopped down from the wall. Its lips peeled back in a snarl to reveal gleaming white teeth as razor sharp as the huge claws that clicked on the pavement.
"My father had two prized cats. A White lion and a snow tigress. They had but one cub. Did you know it's a quirk of nature that the offspring of Lions and Tigers are always far larger than either?" The Ringmaster girl smiled. "This is Samson. I raised him from a cub. He's really just a big housecat."

Samson roared. It was the most horrifying sound Ranma had ever heard. Her breathing started to quicken, her legs trembling as she felt the urge to run warring with the paralyzing fear.

"... Well, he is for me," The Ringmaster girl shrugged. "He's... less friendly with strangers. Especially if they're people I don't like." She walked over to the big cat and hugged him. The creature nuzzled her, then growled at Ranma once more.

"Samson... be a dear and go play with our new friend," the Ringmaster girl said, stepping back and patting the liger on the flank. "Attack."

Ranma was shaking. Normally by now she'd have already slipped into the Neko-Ken, but this was too much even for her feline altered state. The unreality of the monster before her, coiling to pounce, kept her frozen, like she was back in that pit. Helpless. Even the Cat in her, normally fearless, was too scared to move.

Muscles rippled and bunched under the skin of the behemoth as it lowered its great bulk, like the slow motion of a smaller cat preparing to pounce. Its claws extended, cracking and piercing the pavement as though it were cardboard. Its pupils dilated and muscles suddenly uncoiled as they began to propel its near-ton of mass upward in a graceful arc that had its terminus in the space occupied by the comparatively tiny red-haired girl before it.

"Katsunishiki! KACHI-AGE!"

There was a rumbling as an even larger black and white form slammed into the liger mid-leap. Samson was thrown violently across the courtyard, rolling onto the grass of the soccer pitch.

The massive cat snarled and got quickly to his feet, only to find his movements blocked by tremendous bulk of the champion sumo pig.

Ranma blinked and stumbled backwards as the paralyzing fear abated somewhat. It was not gone, to be sure, but at least she could move again. She gaped as Katsunishiki stared down the huge cat. She looked the other way to see Akari and Nabiki.

"Katsunishiki! Hazuoshi!" Akari called out.

Katsunishiki charged forward as the liger pounced once more. The sumo pig reared up onto his hind legs, extended his forelegs and caught Samson over his ribcage, lifting the big cat up and driving him further back. The liger clawed at Katsunishiki's back, but with the sumo pig's hooves planted solidly under his armpits he was unable to get any purchase on the boar's thick hide.

"Now that's cheating!" the Ringmaster girl cried sourly. She glared at Ranma. She had recovered her whip and she slapped the handle into her palm in irritation. "Can't fight your own battles, Amazon?"

"This - after you call in a giant c-c-c… whatever the hell that is?!" Ranma shouted back. She clenched her fists, tears of frustration, rage and humiliation forming in the corners of her eyes. "You show up outta nowhere, steal Ryouga, attack me, then you sic your stupid fleabag monster on me when you're not winning, and you have the gall to say that I'm the one cheating!? I've had it!"

Crackles of ki started to run along her arms.

"You'll wish you had let Samson get you…” the Ringleader girl shot back menacingly. "You need to
pay for stealing Darling away from me." She drew her whip back, the length coiling around her. "Here's one from your homeland! LINGCHI!!"

The whip snapped out and scored a cut across Ranma's cheek, then again, slicing the sleeve of her uniform and drawing blood. Once again it lashed across her leg, the tip cutting her like a razor as it blurred, moving too fast for the eye to see.

Ranma didn't even flinch. The yellowish aura around her was growing and the pavement was starting to crack under her feet.

"Give Ryouga back," she said. Her voice was barely audible over the sound of the snapping whip.

"What was that, Sweetling?" the Ringmaster girl called out. She recoiled her whip with a snap of her wrist, pausing to lick a droplet of Ranma's blood from the tip. "Are you done already?"

"Give Ryouga back," Ranma snarled more loudly and the sounds made by the cracking of the pavement grew from soft pops to reports like gunshots. A rising spiral of air sent debris skittering across the courtyard as the energy surged. All of the fear and the helplessness that normally fueled the Neko-ken was instead being channeled into Ranma's aura in a massive buildup of ki, mixing with her anger and her rage until the forces started to feed on one another, building into a devastating crescendo.

The Ringleader girl blinked. "... Who?"

"GIVE RYOUQA BACK!" Ranma roared. She raised her hands over her head, and all of that accumulated energy flooded into a ball between her palms, forcing them apart. She drew back, her eyes flashing as she fixed the ringleader girl with a murderous glare, then as the ball grew so bright that onlookers had to turn away, she hurled the entire mass of roiling pain and emotions with a savage cry. "SHI SHI HOKODAN!"

Unfamiliar with ki attacks, the Ringleader girl didn't think to dodge until it was too late. A concentrated ball of heavy ki slammed into her and flung her back like a straw doll to pin her against the concrete courtyard wall, then drove her body on through as the wall itself all but exploded under the force of it.

Silence descended on the scene as everyone froze - even the massive sumo pig and the giant liger.

Ranma stumbled forward, her footsteps shaky at first as the residual ki crackled around her. But with each step her motions became more sure, her pace increasing gradually as she stalked towards the rubble left in the wake of the blast.

The Ringmaster girl lay atop one of the large piles of rubble like a broken toy and coughed weakly as she struggled to get up. She opened her eyes to see Ranma looming over her.

The Ringleader girl smiled weakly, and coughed again, a little spray of blood flecking her lips. "H-heh… not a bad trick, sweetling…"

Ranma reached down, grabbed her by the throat and lifted her with one arm to hold her up in the air by her neck. Her blue eyes held a tinge of ice within them, as the temperature around her began to drop sharply.


"Gckt… Y-you c-can't have my Darling…" the Ringmaster girl struggled weakly, clawing ineffectually at Ranma's hand.
"Ranma!" Nabiki ran towards the redhead but stopped suddenly as she reached the zone of cold that surrounded Ranma. Frost was already forming on the ground and was starting to creep up over the Ringmaster girl's neck. "Ranma, you're going to kill her!"

"She's got Ryouga somewhere! I can't tell where he is!" Ranma replied, not looking at her.

"Wh-who…?" The Ringmaster girl croaked.

"Where is he!?" Ranma snarled and shook her like a rag doll.

"Senpai, let her down!"

Ranma blinked and turned her head to see Rin standing off to the side. Ranma's eyes widened and she faltered, almost dropping Ringmaster girl. I don't want Rin to see me do this! Her breathing grew more ragged and she turned back to the girl she was throttling, her voice tight. "Just tell me what you did with him!"

The Ringmaster girl just smirked weakly at her, prompting another surge of rage. Ranma's grip started to tighten again.

"Young Mi, she isn't Shampoo," Rin said softly. "Mu Tsu isn't here. You've got the wrong people. Please… give Ryouga back to Senpai."

Young Mi's eyes widened. They flicked from Rin to Ranma, and she nodded slightly.

Ranma dropped her immediately. She glanced at her hand and brushed the frost off of it, shivering as the effects of the Soul of Ice slowly started to fade, leaving her feeling chilled and drained.

Young Mi took off her top hat, reached inside and pulled out the piglet. Weakly she lifted him to return him to Ranma. "I should… have known… the Amazon would never… would never have fought so hard for Darling…"

Ranma snatched P-chan away from her, but he wasn't moving or responding. She felt a horrified lurch in her chest. "What did you do to him?!"

"Just… a little chloroform in the hat… Didn't want Darling tearing free… He knows the trick to it…" Young Mi replied hoarsely, rubbing her throat. Her skin looked frostbitten where Ranma had been holding her. "Probably a little much for such a small animal though…"

"Nabiki…" Ranma gave Nabiki a pleading look. She could sense Ryouga now, but the feeling was faint… distant.

Nabiki nodded, her expression hardening as she went into crisis management mode. "Okay, let's get him some hot water… doesn't he carry a thermos in his bag?" She ran over and retrieved the discarded schoolbag, reached in and fished out an old, dented thermos then trotted back to Ranma. "I guess his secret is gonna be out with the whole school now. So much for that…" She reached into her own bag. "I've got his clothes here… just… set him down in his pants so he's at least got some decency."

Ranma did so, practically snatching the thermos out of Nabiki's hands and pouring it over the piglet. She nearly ended up with Ryouga's legs both going in the same leghole, but managed to adjust fast enough thanks to her own experience with the curse.

Ryouga coughed and groaned, his hand going to his head. "Owww… okay, what happened this time?"
"Oh, thank God…" Nabiki breathed in relief.

Ranma didn't say anything. She just glomped him - hard.

"Ack…" Ryoga wheezed. "Hard enough to breathe right now, Ranma…"

"Shut up…" she muttered. "I-just shut up! You did it to me again you jerk!" She released him when she noticed the crowd murmuring, and smacked him across the head.

"H-hey!" He yelped, ducking. "I didn't have a lot of choice! You were the one who dragged me to school as a piglet!"

"Hey, Hibiki has a Jusenkyo curse too!"

"Does he turn into a cute girl too?"

"Nah man. I think it's a little black piglet."

"… Is it a girl piglet?"

"The hell is wrong with you?!"

"I'm just askin'!"

"He looks just like the one Akane was keeping as a pet. You don't suppose…?"

"Yeah, well, you heard Ranma. Looks like he belongs to someone ELSE now!"

"Geez, and here I thought the whole 'fiance' thing was a cover! I guess she really HAS gone full girl!"

"That's not fair! We just find out she's actually attainable, and Hibiki's already snatched her up?"

"The dude blows up tanks with his finger. YOU wanna complain to him about it?"

Nabiki sighed and shot Ranma an apologetic look. "We… should probably get him to the Nurse's office." She stood up and dusted herself off. "What about our friend the circus freak?"

They all turned to look, but Young Mi had vanished. The Liger, too, had disappeared, leaving Katsunishiki alone on the soccer pitch.

"So much for getting answers…" Nabiki said glumly.

"I… know a little," Rin said quietly.

Nabiki nodded. "We'll talk once we get these two to the nurse."

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Himura smiled as she tapped the windowpane thoughtfully with one fingernail. "Now that is something interesting! Hana, dear? Do you know anything about this one?"

"The uh… the 'Circus Girl'?" Hana asked nervously, pulling out a worn, dog-eared black book and flipping frantically through the pages. "I… I don't think she's ever shown up here before. There's no mention of her in Nabiki's notes."

"Even better," Himura murmured softly. She reached into her pocket and pulled out her phone,
tapping the speed dial. "Ms. Sasaki, I need you to put a tail on someone. Martial Artist type, garish circus uniform, pink hair, *gigantic white liger*. I suspect you won't have any difficulty picking up her trail... No, don't intervene or contact please, but open a dossier on her. I have some research to do on this end, and I'll almost certainly have some digging for you to do as well. Just keep tabs on her for now, and advise me immediately if she appears to either be set to leave the area or is about to confront one of the locals... Yes, that would be perfect, thank you." She thumbed the phone off and tucked it away, then turned and leaned against the windowsill with a sigh. "Well! That was certainly some excitement, wasn't it?"

"What are you plotting to do with that freak?" Sanae asked, sniffing haughtily. "We already have those boorish Chinese Amazons skulking about..."

"I don't know yet. That very much depends on what it is that she wants. Isn't that exciting though? You should get more into the spirit of the adventure, Sanae!" Himura said brightly. She turned to Hana. "I am afraid I am going to have to ask for a little more work from you though, Hana, dear? Be sure and find out whatever our fellow students might know about her, if you could? Particularly the ones on their way to the nurse's office right now. Thank you dear."

"Well, the pickups I placed around should..." Hana began, but trailed off as Himura pointedly ignored her.

"Now about more adventurous things, I believe we were discussing possible candidates?" Himura looked at Umeko.

Umeko raised an eyebrow, then turned her gaze to Hana and cleared her throat.

Himura blinked and looked at Hana as if only just noticing she was still there. "Yes, Hana, dear? Was there something else that you needed?"

"Uh, n-no, but..." Hana stammered.

"Well then!" Himura made a shooing motion. "Off with you! Don't let us keep you!"

"Y-yes..." Hana murmured and turned, making her way awkwardly out of the room while the rest of the group stared after her.

"Why do you keep that one around?" Sanae asked, examining her nails. "There's very little she can do for you now that others can't, and she's failed to deliver on her promises so many times..."

"My grandfather has often cautioned me against discarding assets too soon. Even... *depreciated* ones," Himura replied. "The faint hope of getting back into our good graces will be good motivation for her. Regardless I'm sure I'll find appropriate ways to use her talents - such as they are. Still, let's not get off track, shall we? Umeko?"

Umeko shook her head. "I don't think he's a good candidate. He uses a lot of makeup, yeah, but it seems that's not uncommon for a figure skater. It's just that he uses so much then obsessively cleans it off and starts over."

"So the womanizing wasn't vigorous denial like you thought it was?" Omi asked.

"Oh, I'm still pretty sure he's about as straight as a bent corkscrew, but he's way too into himself as he is for him to really welcome the potion or it's effects," Umeko snorted.

"Didja hafta let him steal a kiss to figure that out?" Omi prodded, grinning.
"I... don't wanna talk about it," Umeko scowled and folded her arms.

"I heard he's pretty much a dead fish in that regard," Sanae said off-handedly.

"Fish-lips! Fish-lips!" Omi giggled, bouncing a bit.

Umeko sighed in frustration and rolled her eyes.

"Omi? What about yours? Any luck?" Himura asked.

Omi paused her 'Fish-lips' dance. "No," she said. "I mailed and mailed and mailed, but I couldn't find the right mailbox! I even talked to them and everything!"

"You do that anyway, Omi," Mineko quipped.

"I do!" Omi said with a grin. "They look like they have faces! And then you stick your mail in them and it's like they have tongues, and are going 'blehhhhhhhhhh!'" Omi stuck out her tongue demonstratively.

"And you're sure none of them were the right one?" Umeko asked.

Omi considered. "Welllll... I set a few of 'em on fire, and poured some nasty stuff in some of the other ones... Ooooh! Ooooh! And I stuffed one fulla lit cherry bombs!"

"How have you not gone to prison for that stuff? It's a serious crime!" Mineko said sourly.

"I got good at it not getting caught in my old neighborhood," Omi said with an impish smile. "Used to prank the mailman all the time. We went through a lot of mailmen. Plus Daddy's on the Diet. The best one was when I managed to stuff a cat into one! It made noise for hours!"

"Psychopath..." Mineko muttered.

"Mineko, did you have any luck?" Himura asked.

Mineko chewed her lower lip. "I... don't know. I mean... I'm pretty sure he'd jump at it, but..."

"'But'?" Himura asked.

"I'm not sure I feel right about it," Mineko said. "He's not part of any of this. He's just a poor lovesick jerk who got left behind by the romance train. He doesn't really have a stake in this, because he knows he's lost no matter what happens to Ranma. Shouldn't we test this out on... I dunno... some jerk first?"

Himura sighed and walked over to the athletic girl. "Mineko... I understand your hesitation. I do!" She smiled and held up her hands at Mineko's skeptical look. "The point is... we only have a handful of doses and the important aspect isn't just the physical change. We need to ascertain how well this works on someone who..." she took a moment to find the right words. "... would welcome a chance to rewrite who and what they are."

"I know... I'm just..." Mineko sighed. "You know... how do we know this won't turn someone inside out or something?"

"It kinda does..." Umeko muttered.

"It does?! Ooooh I wanna watch!" Omi bounced.
"She means in a *metaphorical* sense, dear," Sanae said.

"Awwwwww..."

"We're not *that* uncertain of it, Mineko," Himura replied. "I wouldn't be taking things to this stage if I wasn't certain of that, I promise you. Now... I know you have your doubts but... I think he might be our best option. Do you think you can convince him to come on his own?"

Mineko sighed. "I... probably not, given where his loyalties lie."

Himura nodded. "Then... we will arrange something."

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Nabiki didn't like how things had played out *at all.*

The brief snatches she had gotten through the Link from Ranma as they helped Ryouga inside to the nurse were not reassuring - her emotions were a churning mess, shot through with what could only be intense fear. Some of it had to be from the near Neko-ken freak out, but a lot of it was going further, tying into deep insecurities that ran like fault lines through the whole of Ranma's mental landscape.

*It's the whole fear of losing someone she cares about again,* Nabiki thought, chewing on her thumb. *She never got over Jusendo and Akane's close call. Hell she SHOULD be in therapy! For this and a dozen other things!*

The nurse had shooed them outside, wanting to treat both Ranma's lacerations and Ryouga's breathing troubles. Thankfully she didn't seem overly shocked or concerned. To be fair, the injuries were all fairly minor compared to what Ryouga had walked in with the *last* time there had been a fight in the courtyard.

*That had at least been related to Ranma and Ryouga in some way. This was completely out of left field.* Her gaze moved to Rin. The petite girl was sitting in a chair just outside the nurse's office, her feet not quite reaching the floor, her head bowed. *There's no WAY Rin would have kept a secret if there was any indication it would harm Ranma... right?* She took a breath. *Time to find out, I guess."

She walked over to the girl and took the seat next to her. "The nurse says they'll both be fine. Ryouga's just a little short of breath. So... you knew that girl who attacked them?"

Rin sighed. "I... knew of her. I knew who she was by what she was wearing and how she fought, but I've never met her before. Her name is Young Mi, and she's the daughter of the Ringmaster of the Circus that Mu Tsu used to travel with."

Nabiki's eyes widened. "Oh my... So... she was here for *Mousse*?"

Rin nodded. "She must have learned he had a Jusenkyo curse, but not which one. Mu Tsu said he told her where he was going, so... Maybe she followed the path he took when he didn't come back to her..."

Nabiki frowned. "Tell me the whole story, Rin. From the beginning."

Rin hunched down a bit more. "I... I really shouldn't... It's a lot of Mu Tsu's personal life... stuff he is ashamed of."

Nabiki put a hand on the girl's shoulder. "I know... but after what just happened... This girl
is dangerous, and she gave Ranma a good fight. She might be more than Mousse can handle if she's going after him."

Rin took a deep breath. "It's not Mu Tsu who's in danger… I don't think anyway. But Ms. Shampoo is." She pulled out a small, smooth purple stone and started rubbing it with her thumb as she talked. "After Mu Tsu left the amazon village he ended up joining a Circus run by a man named Byungchul. Young Mi is his daughter. She and Mu Tsu… were engaged. But when Mu Tsu heard Ms. Shampoo had been disgraced back home and by an Outsider…"

"... He demonstrated his poor decision-making skills," Nabiki finished for her with a sigh. "And started mooning over Shampoo all over again."

"I… don't think he ever really stopped," Rin said timidly. "But… maybe for a while he thought he could."

"And then she finally caught up to him, and of course she's just as rational as any other martial arts type around here," Nabiki muttered. "So why attack Ranma of all people?"

"I… think she thought Mr. Ryouga was Mu Tsu. A-and Senpai was Ms. Shampoo," Rin said. "Ms. Manager? I…" She clenched her fists and blurted out. "I think this is my fault!"

Nabiki blinked. "Your fault? How?"

"I-I went to the carnival looking for a way to contact Mu Tsu's circus family. I didn't know about any of this yet and… and I ran into a man who used to work with Mu Tsu's circus. He didn't seem to like Mu Tsu very much and… and I think he may have told Young Mi where to find him!" She looked up at Nabiki with teary eyes. "I-if I had just kept out of his business then… then…!"

Nabiki sighed. "She would have shown up eventually, Rin. This was all just a lot of bad luck all at once." She patted the girl on the shoulder reassuringly. "You were trying to help. And you did. This isn't on you."

"Y-you're going to warn Ms. Shampoo… right?" Rin asked quietly. "D-do you think you c-can keep them from fighting?"

Nabiki rubbed her temples. "She's still out with Ukyou and my sister, probably chasing their tails or that Anna girl. Which is another bit of backstory I need to get from Akari." She glanced at Rin. "Rin… you like Mousse, don't you? Like like I mean."

Rin blushed bright red and stared at the floor, squirming. "U-uhm… w-well… I-I…"

"That would be 'yes' then." Nabiki leaned towards her. "Rin… I need you to stick close to Ranma or one of the other Martial Artists until we sort this out, okay? If this Young Mi gets wind that you're a rival for her 'Darling'…"

Rin shook her head. "Mu Tsu doesn't see me that way."

Nabiki rolled her eyes. "Firstly, I don't think that matters to our friend from the Circus. Secondly," she shrugged, "well, Mousse has never opened up to anyone before you. I wouldn't write yourself off."

Rin blinked at her. "I… r-really? B-but…"

"Rin, Martial Artists in Nerima all seem to have one thing in common - they have no idea what they really want. They get so caught up pursuing some idea that they end up oblivious to what's right in
front of them. But… they seem to catch on eventually." Nabiki gave her a warm smile.

"W-what are you saying…?" Rin mumbled, blushing and looking nervous.

"I'm saying that if you actually want that hot mess that is Mousse… Give him some time to figure out what he wants for himself." She poked her chest. "In the meantime, though… welcome to the Nerima Targets Club, population you and me. Keep your head down and your phone handy, okay?"

Rin nodded, looking uncertain but a little more hopeful. "O-okay…"

The nurse finished bandaging Ranma's cuts, noting that she didn't think any would need stitches but she recommended Ranma stay on light duty for the day to avoid reopening any of them.

"I'll let your homeroom teachers know so they can adjust your attendance," she said. "I'm giving you both a pass to excuse you from the rest of your classes today. Stay until you feel well enough to head home and then check in with me tomorrow." With a reassuring smile she left Ranma and Ryouga alone in the small clinic as she was called away for the daily staff meeting.

Ranma watched her go. Ryouga sat up from the cot he had been lying on, snagged his shirt and pulled it on. He felt a bit self-conscious being shirtless around Ranma, even if he knew it was hypocritical of him. Ranma noticed and turned to look at him.

"You should rest," Ranma said, though without much conviction.

"I'm fine. I've breathed in worse things," Ryouga replied, coughing lightly and then thumping his chest with his fist. "Had worse congestion than this the last time I had a cold."

"That's not the point," Ranma replied. Her eyes were hidden by her bangs as she walked up to him, right up close. Her fists were clenched and he didn't need the Link to tell she was upset.

_Shis\_shis\_hokodan_ he thought glumly. "Look, Ranma…"

She stepped forward, leading with her head as it thunked against his collarbone. He nearly stumbled back against the cot in surprise, his arms going around her out of reflex. He felt her arms go around his waist.

"Just… just shut up," Ranma said, her voice slightly muffled by his shirt.

Ryouga could feel the turmoil through the Link. Nabiki had already whispered the words _Shis\_shis\_hokodan_ to him before the nurse had shooed her out, and from the pile of rubble that was all that was left of the wall he could guess at what had happened. Ranma was rattled. Badly.

He closed his eyes and just hugged her back. Her head tucked in under his chin almost perfectly. She was tense for a bit, but gradually she relaxed and he could sense her mood stabilizing. Eventually she slackened her death grip on the handfuls of the back of his shirt she had grabbed. He heard a couple of muffled snuffles from her but kept his mouth shut as he waited for her to regain her composure.

Finally she released him and he let her go as she stepped back, trying to covertly swipe at her eyes to clear the dampness from them. "Thanks… for not making that weird."

"Yeah, well… I had a rough day. I kinda needed a hug," Ryouga said. He was starting to remember the old game he and Ranma played in middle school to mollify her ego so she'd let him help her when she obviously needed it, just as she did the same with his.
A flicker of her old smile crossed her face. "W-well… just don't go expecting it all the time, y'know. It's not manly…" She turned, making another furtive rub at her eyes. "'What a day, huh? And she wasn't even one of ours."

"Yeah…" Ryouga toyed with the idea of putting a hand on her shoulder, then thought better of it. "We oughta thump Mousse for this one."

Ranma laughed weakly, but it died fast, leaving only an awkward silence. Before Ryouga could try again, she spoke up.

"Do you think it'll always be like this?" she asked softly. "Even if I deal with all of my crap… is it just gonna be someone else's instead? Until… until someday…" She tensed up again then sighed, hugging herself. "I think… I get why you run away sometimes," she said - so softly he only barely heard it.

He was gripped with a sudden, insane urge to ask her to come with him this time. He choked it down savagely because he was honestly scared that she might say yes.

"It… doesn't ever get me anywhere," he said finally. "I always end up having to come back and deal with it eventually. Whatever it is."

"Yeah…" she replied, sounding almost sad. She looked over her shoulder at him, and gave him a wan smile. "Whatcha standing over there looking like a wallflower for, anyway? Let's find Nabiki and figure out what we gotta do to clean this mess up."

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Sayuri elected to forgo the last pre-game practise in favor of giving Ranma and Rin some time to recover. She suggested they all stay over at the Tendo Dojo that night.

Nabiki went one further, suggesting Rin should probably stay over as a houseguest until Mousse at the very least could be tracked down so they could find a way to ensure Young Mi wasn't going to pose a threat to her. Rin gave a token protest, but it was fairly obvious she was unsettled by the idea that the sadistic woman might turn her sights on her.

Shampoo, Ukyou and Akane showed up by the end of day bell. They had spent most of it chasing Anna around, trying to keep an eye on the girl and keep her out of trouble. It had taken quite some time for her to tire herself out in her search for 'Joe' and head back to the Hibiki residence.

"I felt really bad for her…" Akane said. "But… I couldn't think of what to say to her to try and explain it."

"And I thought you were good at English?" Nabiki said, smirking slightly.

Akane scowled at her. "There's a big difference between memorizing how to say 'Do you know how to get to the rail station?' in English and stringing together 'Ranma stole the piglet that the boy you like turned into because Ryouga is terrified of his Mom finding out about his curse!'"

"Maybe we should ask Ms. Hinako for a curriculum more tailored to our needs?" Ukyou joked.

"Stupid Shagu have to make American girl fall in love with him," Shampoo muttered. "Should have found nice Greek girl."

"I didn't…" Ryouga protested, then sighed in frustration. "I really should go talk to her and make sure she's okay…"
Nabiki noticed a flicker of hurt across Ranma's face as the redhead walked quietly beside him and decided to step in. "And how are you going to explain running off without your uniform, Ryo? You're usually lost for at least a day or two, right? We can give her the cover story you got turned around getting the mail or something. Lay low at the dojo a couple of days, help us keep Rin protected and then when we've dealt with Mousse's psycho ex we can sort out your romantic problems."

Ryouga shook his head. "I appreciate the offer Nabiki, but I don't think I can leave Anna that long without explaining…"

Nabiki huffed in frustration and cut him off by pinching his earlobe with her finger and thumb. "'Scuse us a sec?" she said sweetly to the others and dragged Ryouga off to the side.

"Ow ow ow ow ow!" Ryouga protested, glaring at her as she released him. "Nabiki, what the…?!

"Shush!" Nabiki hissed at him. "Just listen, okay? Right now Ranma needs you to be where she can see you. You don't understand what happened. When Young Mi stuffed you into that hat, the Link stopped working. Neither of us could tell where you were anymore. Ranma had a meltdown. She nearly had a Neko-ken fit, threw one living hell of a Shi Shi Hokodan, and then nearly throttled the girl to death while everything around her started to freeze. I need you to be right here until all those cracks that opened up in her psyche at least scab over a little, got it?"

Ryouga blinked.

"Ranma doesn't deal well with the concept of losing someone she cares about," Nabiki continued. "As in really really doesn't deal well."

"I… uhh…" Ryouga blushed and rubbed the back of his head awkwardly. "I don't think… I mean I'm not… I mean Ranma's not…"

"I swear to god I will beat you over the head with Kasumi's best frying pan until it's ruined and make you explain it to her!" Nabiki growled at him. "I don't have time for your stupid denials right now, okay? You know damn well how she feels about you, even if she doesn't get it yet!"

"I'd think that would make you not want me around!" Ryouga hissed at her, stealing a glance at the redhead in question who was watching them from the far side of the street with a look of confusion on her face.

"Unlike some other notable individuals in Nerima, I can keep my insecurity in check long enough to think about what the person I care about might need," Nabiki replied. "Just don't kidnap her and run off to Egypt or something. Because I'm really scared she might actually go along with that."

Ryouga swallowed, remembering his earlier impulse to do just that.

"Just… stay near her and Rin for the next bit, okay?" Nabiki implored him. "Besides, we were going to talk with Tofu about adding Ukyou to the Link today, remember?"

"You think it's a good idea to go ahead with that after all of this?" Ryouga asked, sounding uncertain. "Besides, Mom speaks English! If nobody goes home and heads Anna off at the pass, she'll blab about the curse and then that's one more thing for Mom to stress about! Maybe we should wait until the crisis is over?"

"There's always going to be a crisis. That's how this place works, Ryouga," Nabiki replied. "And having Ukyou to be focused on will hopefully help keep Ranma glued together. Besides, I'm pretty sure you're necessary to make forming a Link work." She smirked and winked at him. "You get an
excuse to cuddle a cute girl who's all cold from the herbs along with Ranma. I'd think you'd jump at the chance!"

Ryouga scowled. "Yeah… The whole 'Ranma' issue aside, you do know that Ukyou's like a sister to me, right? This is going to be super awkward…"

"Awww, poor baby…" Nabiki reached up and patted his cheek. "…I have absolutely no sympathy for you! Now suck it up and be a good teddy bear for a few days, okay? I'll head to your house with Akari to head off Anna. My English is pretty good."

Ryouga raised a skeptical eyebrow. "[How good?]" he asked in English.

"[English is the language of business, Ryouga Baby. I'm pretty sure I can get the gist of it across to her. Though I make no promises that I won't 'accidentally' sell her a timeshare in the process,]" she replied, winking at him.

Ryouga rolled his eyes. "[Please don't get her involved in any scams? Just… she's a nice girl."

Nabiki resisted the urge to make a crack about how it was suspicious how Ryouga kept running away from the 'nice girls' in his life. She had promised to be supportive, after all.

"How are you going to get there before her, anyway? You can't roof jump yet." Ryouga said after a moment, brow knitting as he thought through the logistics.

"I'll get Shampoo to carry me, and see if Akane will come along as well. That'll keep them from getting all worked up seeing Ukyou have her turn with the Link and wanting theirs early," Nabiki said. "Plus maybe I can straighten out your Mom about Shampoo and Akane so she's not so convinced you're a Casanova."

Ryouga sighed. "I'd appreciate it. I… uhh… better let you get going if that's the plan then." He glanced back at the others, who were waiting for them and watching curiously.

"[ Ryouga,]" Nabiki said, switching to English one last time. "[Just… stay close to Ranma, okay? Sleep on the floor next to the bed she's in.]"

Ryouga's eyes widened. "[What?]"

"[She needs to see you're okay. She has a game tomorrow and she needs to sleep, so you need to be close enough that she can wake up in the middle of the night and see that you're okay. That, or change to a piglet and sleep in her bed.]"

"[I'm not going to do that!]"

"[Then don't change to a piglet and sleep in her bed anyway! I don't care! Just be in the room in case she has a nightmare or something!]" Nabiki growled at him. "[I'm not asking you to have sex with her, just be a compassionate human being for once and be there for a friend who's terrified and too stubborn to admit it!]

Ryouga looked ashamed for a moment. "[All right… all right, I'll… I'll figure something out.]"

Nabiki nodded. "[Good. Thank you. Sincerely.]" She patted him on the shoulder. "[Believe it or not, you've been a big help to me. I'll do my best to try and be the same for you,]"

She turned and led him back to the group, getting suspicious glares from a few of them, Ranma among them.
"What are you plotting, Nabiki?" Ranma asked, folding her arms and eyeing her warily.

"Not plotting. Fixing," Nabiki said. "For instance? In a short while, Anna is going to get home and have a chat with Ryouga's Mom about his curse. Assuming we don't want your performance this morning to go to waste, I need to get there quickly and head her off. Shampoo, could you be a dear and get me there fast?"

Shampoo raised an eyebrow then glanced at Ryouga. "Sure, but why Pintou need talk with Shagua alone?"

"Because he's a doofus and needed extra convincing to trust me," Nabiki replied smoothly. She could feel Ryouga's glare after that one, but Shampoo seemed satisfied with the answer. "Akane, would you mind escorting Akari back as well? No need to roof hop, but after today… well, the non-martial artists should be escorted for the next while."

Akane glanced at Akari and nodded. "Sure! It's been a while. Akane and I can catch up."

Nabiki nodded. "Good. The rest of you are going to Doc Tofu's for the… uh… procedure, then head to the Dojo. I'll give you a call once things are settled at the Hibiki's and we'll figure things out from there."

"Are you sure it'll even work without you there, sugar?" Ukyou asked.

"It should. Ryouga's the one who started it all," Nabiki replied.

"Actually…" Ranma said, looking thoughtful. "…I wonder… if we add Ucchan to the link without Nabiki there, will she and Nabs be linked?"

"Probably not?" Ryouga said.

"No… I think they will be!" Ranma shot Ryouga a grin. "I think I'm starting to get a handle on how all of this works, an' if I'm right… Well, first off, it's all you, Ryouga. We're just… boosting it, I guess. An' second… well, maybe it's something the Docs can use."

Ryouga frowned and folded his arms. "No way."

"Betcha one of the Monster Fudge Mountain surprises at the Ice Cream shop!" Ranma shot back, smirking confidently. "Loser treats."

"Fine! But you're wrong, trust me, I should know!" Ryouga shot back. The two of them clasped their hands to seal the bet.

That'll keep them busy, Nabiki thought. She gave Shampoo a smile, offering to put her arm over her shoulder. "Shall we, kitten?"

Shampoo wasn't having any of it. She scooped Nabiki into a bridal carry, startling her enough to earn an undignified squawk. The Amazon grinned. "Pintou need to be carried like damsel in distress? Pintou going to get carried like damsel in distress!"

Nabiki scowled and crossed her arms to sulk. "It's not my fault I'm not that far in my training yet!"

"Is what you get for training part-time," Shampoo winked then coiled. Nabiki quickly decided to abandon her sulk in favor of wrapping her arms around Shampoo's neck, figuring wounded pride wasn't worth the possibility of tumbling several stories to the concrete as they suddenly accelerated up, onto the lamppost, then to a nearby roof.
"Oof... Think Pintou heavier than last time..." Shampoo said playfully. She adjusted her hold on landing, then made another leap.

"I swear I'm going to make you pay for that one, kitten!" Nabiki growled warningly.

"Promise?" Shampoo asked, giving her a leer as she bounded skyward once more.

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Once they reached the clinic, Dr. Tofu took his time examining all three of them before he was satisfied that it was safe to proceed.

"All right... Now, I had to increase the dosage for Ukyou, given her much higher levels of ki." He handed the Okonomiyaki chef the pills. "The side effects will tend to be more pronounced than what Nabiki experienced. The sensation of cold and the drowsiness in particular will be bad. I've added caffeine to the mix to try and counteract the worst of the drowsiness - it's important you try and remain conscious until the link forms. Afterward, it will be all right for you to go home and sleep, but I recommend Ranma and Ryouga remain in contact with you as long as possible to ensure the Link is fully established."

"Are you telling me that your prescription is to sleep with Ranma, Doc?" Ukyou asked with a smirk as she accepted the pills.

Dr. Tofu raised an eyebrow. "Contact with Ranma and Ryouga is required, since I believe Ranma's supposition that Ryouga is the key to the process is correct. I had thought the fiancee matter was..." he glanced at Ranma, "...are you and Ranma...?"

Ukyou blushed but nodded. "Ummm... yeah. It's complicated, but... yeah."

Ranma's eyes went wide and she started making shushing gestures from behind Dr. Tofu, trying to get Ukyou's attention.

He frowned and swiveled to Ryouga. "And... you're aware of this, Ryouga?"

"Yeah? I mean... it's not like it's a secret..." Ryouga muttered, having completely missed Ranma's frantic signals to him as well.

Dr. Tofu turned to look at Ranma just in time to see her facepalm. "Is... something wrong, Ranma? I... wasn't aware that your relationship issues were this... complex. I admit to being... a bit shocked, and more than that, dismayed that your commitment to the Tendos has been put aside... I do hope they are aware of it?" He sighed deeply. "I'm bound to confidentiality regardless, but..."

Ranma massaged her temples. "Doc... sit down... this is gonna take some explaining..."

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Fortunately Anna had taken her time returning to the Hibiki residence. Nabiki couldn't see her face from their angle of approach, but her hunched shoulders and slow steps told her all she needed to know.

Okay, get buy-in on protecting Ryouga's secret FIRST. Straighten out relationship snarl AFTER, she decided, motioning for Shampoo to hop down in front of the girl.

"[Eeep!]" Anna started as Shampoo landed in front of her.
Shampoo set Nabiki down smoothly and stepped back.
"[Anna? Hi, I'm Nabiki Tendo. I'm… kind of a friend of the Hibikis.]" She extended her hand,
smiling in a way she hoped was reassuring.
"[...Do you Japanese people not use those trains o' yours?!]" Anna took a few deep breaths, trying to
calm herself. "[Scared me half out of my wits!]"
"[I'm sorry,]" Nabiki said sincerely. "[I was trying to catch you before you got back to Ryouga's
house. We need to chat.]"
"[About what?]" Anna asked suspiciously. "[Is this about that crazy redhead who stole him!? Do
you know where they are!?]" She darted forward and grabbed a handful of Nabiki's blouse and
shook her "[TELL ME!]"
Nabiki very quickly realized Anna was much stronger than she appeared. "[E-easy!]" she begged the
distraught girl. "[Ryouga is fine, and there's a good reason Ranma grabbed him! You see… I know
you just found out about his curse, right? He neglected to tell you his mother doesn't know yet.]"
Anna blinked at her, then sheepishly released her blouse. "[O-oh! So… Ah'm so dense!]" She
smacked the side of her head.
"[You didn't know,]" Nabiki replied. "[But the reason he was running from you was…]"
"[... He didn't want her to see,]" Anna finished. "[Oh poor Joe… That must have been so humiliating
for him. So… who is the redhead, then?]"
"[That's Ranma. She's…]" Nabiki considered how best to describe the situation, not knowing what
the American girl's opinions might be. Best avoid talking about Ranma's own relationship knot. "
[She's his friend, and she has a Jusenkyo curse too. Mrs. Hibiki doesn't know about hers, either.]"
"[Oh? What does she turn into?]" Anna asked.
"[A boy,]" Nabiki replied. It wasn't entirely accurate, and Ranma would probably be horrified at the
implication that her male form was the curse, but it was simpler, and it wasn't technically a lie either,
as Nabiki had never identified the male form as the cursed form, just the form that female Ranma
changed into.
"[There are curses that do that?!]" Anna replied, aghast. "[That's… that's…!]"
"[Awkward?]" Nabiki asked.
"[Sinful!]" Anna replied. "[That's some terrible, terrible black magic! You should find yourself a
priest, and… and… well, I saw a movie once about an exorcism, and so you might need two…]"
Nabiki sighed. "[We've… well, we've tried that, trust me. Ranma and Ryouga have spent a lot of
time trying to find cures for their respective curses.]"
Anna's eyes narrowed. "[Hmph! Ah bet you she just wants to get cured so she can have him to
herself!]"
Nabiki raised an eyebrow. I'm pretty sure at this point the 'cure' would cause more problems than
the affliction… "[Actually… Akari is Ryouga's girlfriend.]"
Anna blinked at her. There was a terrible, ghastly silence.


"Maybe I ripped the bandaid off too quickly on that one… Nabiki thought nervously.

Then Anna started giggling.

"[Hehehehehehe… Good one!]" Anna said, clapping her on the shoulder. "[You had me goin' for a minute there! Akari is a sweet girl an' all, but… She's always got her head in that notebook o' hers an' Ah don't see how if she were Joe's girlfriend she'd stand for that red haired succubus hangin' off him like she does! Ah've spent a couple o' days with 'em both, an' Ah've not seen a single lingerin' look or romantic moment. Ah honestly thought she was his sister?]

"[I… uh…]" Nabiki blinked, taken aback.

Anna sighed. "[Ah guess Ah shouldn't be surprised Joe is so popular with the girls. Ah mean…]" she giggled, "[Well, Ah mean jus' look at him! An' he's so heroic too! But that just means he needs to be with the right girl! A sturdy girl who can take care of him proper like!]

"Ah guess Ah shouldn't be surprised Joe is so popular with the girls. Ah mean…" Anna said, patting Nabiki's shoulder as she walked past. "[Until he gets back, Ah should write a letter back home! Papa will wanna know Ah'm gonna be here a mite longer.]

Shampoo walked up to Nabiki as Anna walked past them in the direction of the Hibiki residence. "So… how go? Did Pintou tell her Shagua is taken?"

"Shampoo, we need to have a talk about your new tendency to give out pet names," Nabiki muttered. "And… yes, I told her Akari is his girlfriend."

"And she not believe you," Shampoo stated flatly, a small smirk appearing.

"Not a word," Nabiki replied with a heavy sigh. "But… she's on board about the curse, anyway. So at least Ryouga can avoid additional mild embarrassment while he's being utterly humiliated as this all goes horribly wrong."

"So… let me get this straight…" Doctor Tofu was striding back and forth, rubbing at his chin. "Ranma, you are currently pursuing a relationship with Akane, Nabiki, Shampoo and Ukyou at the same time."

Ranma shrank back in her chair a bit. "I… uh… yeah…"

"Hnh." Doc Tofu made a noncommittal sound and resumed pacing. "And… I am forced to take your word for this… for all but Ms. Kuonji of course… but I am to understand that all of the girls have accepted and agreed to this arrangement?"

"We have, Dr. Tofu," Ukyou said firmly. "We didn't decide this lightly. We spent a lot of time deliberating it between ourselves. The… uhh… the fiancées I mean," she clarified.

Doctor Tofu paused and glanced at her, raising an eyebrow. Ukyou's confident and defiant look wavered a bit under the cool examination. "I see," he said finally, and returned to his walking. "And are your parents aware of this arrangement?"
"Cologne knows, and has given her blessing. Joketsuzoku law is actually what allows all this to work," Ukyou said.

"Mr. Tendo knows about it, but… uhh… Mom and Pops don't. An'… if you could not tell them?" Ranma asked sheepishly.

Doctor Tofu sighed, stopped and took off his glasses to polish them. "I… don't see any reason to, Ranma. You are still minors..." He shot them all a stern look. "...but unless there is a medical concern that requires their intervention, this is all covered by doctor-patient privilege. But..." He put his glasses back on. "I expect each and every one of you to report to me for a full physical. That was already going to be a requirement because of all this business with the Link, but with this revelation..." He sighed. "...I presume it's safe to assume you are all now sexually active?"

"D-Doc!" Ranma blushed and shrank deeper into her chair.

"Yeah..." Ukyou said, fidgeting.

Doctor Tofu raised an eyebrow. "...Both forms, Ranma?"

Ranma flushed a brighter red and just huddled down further, nodding miserably.

Doctor Tofu then gave Ryouga a questioning glance.

Ryouga's eyes widened and he frantically waved his hands in denial. "H-hey! I'm not part of this! Honest!"

"Yet you're now deeply emotionally linked to Ranma, and proposing extending that link to the others," Doctor Tofu said. "Have you considered the possible repercussions to yourself, Ryouga?"

"I can handle it," Ryouga said, swallowing nervously and shooting a glance at Ranma and Ukyou. "It's what's necessary to cure the curse and save Mom, so..."

Doctor Tofu sighed. "You are all very young and I worry about the long-term effects this will have on you emotionally. You all still have a lot of growing up to do. There is... absolutely no precedent for any of this," He shrugged. "I will trust your judgement since... well, you are currently the subject matter experts, as scant as our knowledge is."

Ranma breathed a sigh of relief. "Thanks, Doc."

"There is also the matter of the complication introduced by your 'cover story'," Doctor Tofu gave Ranma another stern glare. "You do realize that you and Ryouga have falsified legal documents with the Hospital? That there are legal repercussions to claiming relationship status on official forms?"

"Are... we gonna get in trouble?" Ranma asked, eyes going wide as a potential new wrinkle was added.

Doc Tofu sighed. "No, but... with the full physical done by your school recently, and the work with Dr. Hirano reinforcing it... as far as your medical records are concerned Ranma... you are female. And with the addition of listing yourself and Ryouga as being engaged... In order to be able to release Ryouga into Ranma's custody, the nurse listed you both as 'Common law' to satisfy the legalities of making Ryouga's personal medical information available to you. Dr. Hirano has been relying upon that assumption during this matter of the MRI scans and discussing Ryouga's private medical concerns with you."

Ranma blinked, confused, then heard a 'smack'. She turned to see Ukyou covering her face with her
"Ucchan, what does all that mean?"

"It means you jackasses are married," Ukyou replied, dragging her hand down her face.

"What?!" Ranma and Ryouga both squeaked in unison.

"It's... not as legally binding as, say, a Civil Marriage," Doctor Tofu answered. "But it is a matter of record. You could always request it be scrubbed as a mistake... but then that opens legal issues with how much private information Dr. Hirano has shared with you both, and opens him up to legal repercussions due to violations of client-doctor privilege." Doctor Tofu scowled at them both. "I don't appreciate your misleading a colleague in this manner, even if your intentions were noble. This could still cause problems for us all down the road should the discrepancies in Ranma's records ever be investigated. At the very least, you will need to file the appropriate paperwork to dissolve the Common Law marriage on record before either of you can enter into a Civil Union with anyone. Both of you."

"We have to get divorced?!" Ryouga yelped. He rocked back in his chair, staring at the ceiling. "Akari's grandfather is going to kill me..."

"You?!" Ranma said. "What about me?! You don't have a seppuku contract hanging over your head! If Mom finds out...!"

"It's not actually in your Family Register. Technically it would be an annulment if both parties agree," Doctor Tofu reassured them. "Just... I ask that you hold off until Dr. Hirano and I can finish our study..."

"Mrs. Saotome is supposed to decide on the omiai this weekend," Ukyou said. "She... uh... she seemed pretty intent on pushing the wedding forward as soon as possible."

Ranma groaned and slumped in her chair. "I'm doomed..."

"...Though if she accepts Nabiki's proposal, that might be delayed a bit until details are worked out," Ukyou added. "And... If not... well, at least you know you have a legal barrier to her forcing you to marry Kodachi."

"Wait... 'proposal'?" Ranma sat up. "What 'proposal'?"

Ukyou sighed. "To... marry all of us, under Joketsuzoku law."

Ranma groaned again and sank back into her chair. "Then she does know! Then... why is she busting my chops about being manly still?! She use to say 'being manly' was peeping on girls an' stuff an' she liked that I had all these girls chasing me!" She balled up her fists in frustration.

Ryouga noticed her reaction, reflexively reaching a hand towards her before apparently thinking better of it and withdrawing it.

"Because she wants grandkids as soon as possible," Ukyou replied. "I think her tune changed when She, Genma and Akane's Dad tried to push you two into marriage and it fell apart." She glanced at Ranma's posture, then turned her gaze to Doctor Tofu. "Doc... I think we should probably start now, if we're going to do this? If we're going to get my fiance all worked up over this, I'd like to be able to know what she's feeling."

Doctor Tofu raised an eyebrow, then nodded and handed her a glass of water. "You can use the
couch in the waiting area. I've already closed the clinic for the day for this. You'll need to remain in close physical contact until the Link is established, and Ukyou is liable to be drowsy. It's important you stay awake until the Link is in place. Call me over once something happens, all right?"

Ukyou nodded, popped the pills into her mouth and took a swig of water. She smiled at Ranma and Ryouga. "Care to escort me to the couch, boys?"

"Out of context, that would probably sound really wrong…" Ryouga muttered, standing up.

"Let's be honest Ryo… In context it sounds kinda bad." Ranma stood as well, offering her hand to Ukyou to help her up, though she didn't really need it. "That's even without the usual misunderstanding that seems to be the standard around here."

"What's to misunderstand?" Ukyou asked, a playful grin on her face as the three of them walked out into the waiting room. "I'm just here to snuggle with my fiance and her husband until we're all telepathic. Seems pretty straightforward to me."

A pained expression crossed Ryouga's face.

"Could… could you not remind us of that little wrinkle, please?" Ranma asked. Truthfully, the concept of marriage was terrifying enough for Ranma without throwing in being the bride. Not that she hadn't narrowly avoided that a few times. The very idea that she had somehow already suffered that fate and just hadn't realized it was straight out of her nightmares.

"Yeah." Ryouga sat down on the couch first, then he shot Ranma a smirk. "Ranma already told me when we get fake-married she wants a big fake-wedding." He closed his eyes and held up a finger. "... But no more than three fake-kids. Right?"

Ranma blinked. "I can't believe you remembered that, you giant doofus…"

"Whaaaaaat is this?" Ukyou said suspiciously, sitting on Ryouga's left.

Ranma sat on Ukyou's left and sprawled, offering her hand to Ukyou. "It's just some nonsense we were joking about when I realized that I was totally doomed as far as convincing Ryo's Mom that there's no relationship between us. Since we were already faking the engagement and all."

"Oh, that," Ukyou took her hand, offering her right hand to Ryouga. "Yeah I've… I've had some experience with Mrs. Hibiki. She seems to think Ryouga is quite the ladykiller." She smirked at Ryouga. "I'm not so sure she's wrong anymore, either. I mean, here you are at seventeen... already married, girlfriend on the side, plus another foreign girl travelling all this way…"

Ryouga grumbled and took Ukyou's hand. "I'm not sure how, but I'm convinced this is your fault somehow, Ranma."

"What, my terrible romance problems are infectious?" Ranma shot back.

"Yeah! Maybe they are!" he replied. "For all we know, that's some kind of ki-based curse you've got, and… and…"

"It is a curse. But its name is Genma Saotome," Ukyou said, interrupting him. "I'm pretty sure everything can be traced back to him." She shivered and slumped back on the couch. "Ooof… dizzy… this stuff hits you kinda hard, huh?"

Ranma noticed her shiver and huddled in closer to Ukyou's side. "Yeah. Nabiki was pretty dopey."
"Didn't take too long after she started feeling cold, though," Ryouga replied.

"Good. 'Cuz I'm gonna need my hands back eventually," Ukyou mumbled sleepily. "My nose itches."

Ranma reached over and scratched Ukyou's nose, causing the Okonomiyaki Chef to start a bit in surprise.

"Better?" Ranma asked.

Ukyou smiled at her and waggled her eyebrows. "If I say 'no' can I convince you to kiss it better?"

She shivered again.

Ranma snorted then kissed her nose. "How's that?"

Ukyou grinned. "What if I say it was my lip that was itchy instead?"

"Could… could you please not make out on the couch next to me while I'm holding your hand?"
Ryouga muttered, scowling and keeping his eyes fixed on the far wall.

"I'll make out with your wife if I want to, Hibiki!" Ukyou shot back.

"She's not…!" Ryouga started, then slumped back on the couch. "…how does this keep getting worse?"

"Hey! You'd be lucky to land a hottie like me!" Ranma said, her pride prickled.

"He did land you, sugar," Ukyou reminded her, giggling a bit drunkenly. "Eloped via hospital release form. Woooo, romantic!"

"He…! I…!" Ranma sputtered, glanced at Ryouga, then slumped back to the couch in a sulk. "He did not!"

The sulk lasted for all of thirty seconds. Ranma felt Ukyou pull her hand back, but before she could protest she felt herself being tugged back into Ukyou's lap. "Ack?!"

"C'mere… I'll show you who landed you," Ukyou said, pulled the redhead in close and draped her free arm around her, then clasped her hand again which did a pretty good job of wrapping Ranma up.

"Better," Ukyou murmured in her ear. "Now be a good wife and keep me warm, 'kay?"

Ranma certainly felt a rush of heat to her face. But she could also feel how cold Ukyou's hand was, so she suppressed her initial urge to protest and curled up a bit more, leaning in against her and hugging that cold hand close. "Better?"

"Geez…" Ryouga muttered. Ranma glanced over Ukyou's shoulder and could see him blushing and looking away, still holding her hand, but having scooted over away from the two of them a bit. She sighed and felt bad. This really isn't fair to him.

"Mrrrrr…" Ukyou mumbled.

"Hey, no falling asleep," Ranma slapped her cheek lightly with her free hand. "You fall asleep and I'm gonna go sit in Ryo's lap instead."

"What?!" Ryouga squeaked, shooting her a disbelieving look.
"Nuh!" Ukyou hugged tighter. "I'm 'wake… Don't you dare."

"Then keep talking," Ranma prodded her. "Pretty sure you gotta be awake for this to work. Also, I'm not your wife!"

"Would you prefer 'Wode Airen'?'" Ukyou replied, giggling softly.

"It's more accurate at least," Ranma muttered. "Akane is gonna be your wife, remember?"

"You're not sore about that, are you Ranchan?" Ukyou blinked, waking up a little more and giving Ranma a concerned look.

Ranma sighed and blew her bangs up. "I don't know, okay? I mean…" She closed her eyes and rested her head on Ukyou's shoulder. "This whole 'marriage' thing is weird for me. It's like… I understand being married, I guess. And I get the whole importance of asking someone to marry you, but… weddings?" She shuddered.

"Well, to be fair, your only experience with weddings has been with the shotgun variety," Ukyou admitted.

"I thought you wanted a big wedding?" Ryouga piped up unexpectedly.

"Huh?" Ranma peeked over Ukyou's shoulder at him. "Where did you get that…"

"We're eloping? I didn't expect that. I wanted a big wedding… But it doesn't matter. Ryouga and I will be together forever!"

Ranma's eyes widened as she remembered exactly when she had said that, "Really?! You're going by something I said when I was doped up on magic!?" She glared angrily at Ryouga.

Ryouga blinked. "I… oh! Right, I guess that's where I heard that…" He chuckled weakly then cringed. "...Sorry."

"What is it with magic love spells and weddings anyway?" Ranma continued, grousing. "I mean, I've been hopped up on love magic I dunno how many times, and it's always the same thing! 'I want a big wedding, tee hee!' Even when I'm a guy! It's humiliating! An' now everyone thinks that's what I actually want."

"I don't think you feel that way, Ranchan," Ukyou said, hugging a bit tighter. "I think… I think…"

Ranma sucked in a breath as she felt that same draining sensation as before, and it all came to her in a rush. She groaned as the world spun a bit, her perception suddenly full of colors that were not colors and shapes that were best described as temperatures.

"Oooh, that's…!" Ukyou gasped, her eyes going wide.

"Doc!" Ryouga called as he noticed the sudden change.

It was different than before. There was some of Ryouga's ki mixing in, but the draw was much stronger on Ranma this time. Some small part of Rann's mind pointed out that it was probably due to the fact she was cuddling with Ukyou rather than just holding hands, and Ukyou had a much deeper 'well' to fill than Nabiki. It still shouldn't have been a big problem for her.

But… ki was, effectively, emotion. And Ranma's usually boundless supply of confidence had taken a rather severe hit, leaving a lot of heavier, darker emotions much more poorly suppressed. A lot of
fears and insecurities lay uncomfortably close to the surface and now it was like a sudden, roiling vortex was dragging them up and out.

Ranma whimpered. She dug her fingers into Ukyou's sleeves, her vision actually starting to go dark as her perception was filled with a rushing torrent of inky blackness. She felt Ukyou gasp and could hear Ryouga and the Doc talking. Their voices sounded distant - incomprehensible, though she could sense the urgency in them. She struggled weakly, knowing she needed to break the connection, but there was no strength left in her limbs. Her joints ached as the cold bubbled up from somewhere deep, deep inside of her and seeped into her bones.

She could hear them now. She could hear the cats.

They were always there, of course - somewhere deep down in the darkness. But the darkness was all around her now. She couldn't run, just as she hadn't been able to then.

She had learned how to hide - how to make herself one of them to keep herself safe, but for some reason that wasn't working now. She meowed weakly, but the tattered cloak she had woven of the mind of a cat for herself just fell apart when she tried. These were the cats from her nightmares - the ones who always knew where she was, with their teeth and their claws and their hungry, yellow eyes.

She squeezed her own eyes shut but that did nothing to make them go away. The tears started, though she knew that only ever made things worse. The fears that came with the cats whispered in her ears;

*You're weak*

*I'm NOT weak!* she protested, struggling a little more, but she was desperately denying the truth. She didn't have the strength to escape this time.

*You're helpless*

*No! I'll fight! I can always fight!* She shuddered, remembering how that always went. The cats had nothing to lose, after all. Pain was nothing to them. Fatigue was nothing to them. They were never afraid for long - their hunger was everything. They would keep coming and keep coming and though Ranma could buck them off or toss them away, they kept coming back. She would get tired and slow, and the bites and scratches would burn and itch, and she would get sleepy, and perhaps the next time she blinked for too long it would cost her an eye...

*No matter how strong you are. No matter how fast. It won't be enough.*

Tremors shook her. Faces swam through the darkness now. Akane… Nabiki… Ryouga… Shampoo… Ukyou… Rin… all of the people who depended on her, but whom she had failed. *Would* fail. The meowing had turned into laughter.

"You are alone. You will always be alone."

The last… the last had been in her mother's voice. Said lovingly… gently… *devastatingly.*

Ranma could feel herself sinking into the blackness. Not like when she normally went into the Neko-ken - this time she had been stripped of the disguise that had protected her. This time, it was going to consume her. She could already feel the claws catching at her flesh, the teeth sinking into her legs.

Then… warmth. A voice that sounded like it was far away… two voices… A reddish gold warmth cut through the black murk, like someone had pulled aside the lid from over the pit. Ranma reached
out, and felt it drawing her up. It was comforting, reassuring… it rinsed the darkness away, silenced the doubts and the fears and forced the claws digging into her to lose their grips and to fade…

"They're going to hate you, you know."

Ranma shuddered as the blackness spoke with her mother's voice again, even as Ranma was drawn away from it.

"They love you now because you've fooled them. When they find out what you really are. When they find out the things that you've decided to forget. Then they will abandon you and they will hate you."

Wait… what did I forget? She struggled a bit, feeling some of the fear that clung to her, a hook that would not let go and tore at her even as she was drawn out of the pit.

"You'll see. And then you'll be sorry."

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"She's alright, she's just in a very deep sleep now," Tofu said, gently probing the pressure points around the redhead's face and neck. He was having to work around the other two teens on the couch who were currently holding Ranma between them; Ryouga was laying back with Ukyou between his side and the back of the couch with Ranma between and on top, trying to maintain as much contact as possible.

"What the hell was that?" Ukyou asked in a hushed tone. She gazed worriedly at the redhead, trailing fingers through her hair.

Something had happened when the Link opened up. Ranma had passed out and there had been a sudden, massive surge of heavy ki. Ryouga had given her a crash course in the basics of ki manipulation as they worked together to safely disperse it while circulating more positive-aspected ki into the redhead in an effort to stabilize her.

"That was the Neko-ken, I think," Ryouga replied. "Or… whatever it is the Neko-ken keeps bottled up."

"If I had known Ranma had been in such an unstable state prior to starting, I would have called this off. You should have told me she used the Shi shi hokodan. That is unusual for her, to say the least!" Tofu said, then sighed. "No… I apologize. I should have examined her more closely myself."

"So… what do we do?" Ukyou asked him. She could still feel a chill on Ranma's skin. She herself felt fine. Energized, even. It was like all of the effects of the pill had been drawn into Ranma, and after the purge, the redhead had been left with very little ki of her own.

"I was expecting something like this, but not to this degree, to be honest," Doctor Tofu said. "When Nabiki was added to the Link it caused a kind of 'trauma letdown' between her and Ryouga. Ranma didn't experience one that time, so it was reasonable to assume that… I simply wasn't expecting it to be of this magnitude. But after what you told me of today's events…" He rubbed his chin. "I want you two to remain in contact with her until she wakes up."

"Wait… all night?!" Ryouga yelped, his eyes widening with a panicked expression. He shot a look at Ukyou, then at Ranma, then the door.

"If need be. I'd offer you a cot, but I fear it wouldn't be any more comfortable that the couch for three people," Doctor Tofu replied, completely oblivious to Ryouga's distress.
Ukyou sighed and reached up, tweaking Ryouga's nose to get his attention. When he gave her a confused look, she shot him a warning glance to shut him up, then smiled wanly up at the doctor. "If we can just get a blanket, we'll be fine, Doc."

Doctor Tofu nodded. He retrieved a blanket from one of the storage closets and laid it over them. "I'll be upstairs if either of you need anything. Call me when Ranma wakes up, or if there is another ki buildup."

"We will," Ukyou replied, trying her best to be reassuring for the doctor. She didn't really feel it, but she wanted some privacy to grill Ryouga about what was going on. Right now she was getting all sorts of images and impressions from each of them, and she needed a translator be able to make sense of them.

Doctor Tofu checked a few more things then headed up the stairs, leaving them alone with the lights turned down.

"Okay, now spill it, Ryouga!" Ukyou turned to him and growled. "What do you know about what's going on in Ranchan's head?"

Ryouga glanced nervously at the door. "Uhh… maybe I should…" he swallowed hard and turned back face to her. "You know… get up first? I'm pretty sure Ranma will be okay with you, and…"

Ukyou rolled her eyes. "Oh please! You and I have been in much more compromising positions than this, Ryouga. And I know you've done even worse with Ranma!"

"Not for an extended period!" Ryouga protested.

Ukyou raised an eyebrow. "Not even with Akane?"

"That was different!" Ryouga shot back. "B-besides… I was a small black piglet! Look, maybe that would be best… you'd have more room and…"

"And you could escape answering my questions!" Ukyou replied sharply. "Just calm down, would you? You get used to this sort of thing if you hang out with this bunch. Whenever we were sleeping in the same place, Shampoo used to end up halfway on top of me even before… DON'T YOU DARE NOSEBLEED!"

Ryouga whimpered, having already snatched off a bandanna and held it to his nose. "You're not helping! And you're also cutting off circulation in my right arm!"

"Honestly, you're hopeless," Ukyou shifted a bit to unpin his arm. "Look, just move over a bit and put your arm around my shoulders… You're not going to catch fire if you touch me, y'know!" She settled into a more comfortable spot where she could rest her head against his shoulder, with Ranma's head tucked under her chin. "Geez, younger brothers cuddle with their big sisters all the time. You don't have to be weird about this."

"One. How would you know? You don't have any siblings, let alone younger ones," Ryouga said. "Two. You're not my sister, and Three. You're still two months younger than me!"

"Metaphorical big sister!" Ukyou insisted.

"Yeah, well, you're still metaphorically two months younger than me!" Ryouga shot back. He shifted, seemingly less concerned about disturbing her as he got more comfortable.

Ukyou could sense some of the odd dark emotions and spikeyness settling out of his mental
'landscape' and smiled. Best way to calm a Hibiki is give 'em something to gripe about. "So… what do you know about what just happened?"

Ryouga sighed, rubbing his forehead as he gathered his thoughts. "Well… Last time it affected me and Nabiki, not Ranma. We were talking, and somehow it got me and Nabiki thinking about… about the parents we've lost."

Ukyou felt a twinge, a burble from the dark sea that underlay all of Ryouga's emotions. She sent some reassurance to him without even realizing she was doing it until she perceived the change in him, the disturbance settling. Woah… I think I'm starting to see what Nabiki meant about this.

"Anyway… it started dredging up a lot of bad memories… bad feelings that I guess we hadn't dealt with, and… it was like the flow of ki between us kept churning it up, and…" he shrugged, "...I guess the three of us just… held each other up through it all. Dr. Hirano said something about people not processing some bad experiences fully until they were safe and secure enough to do it. I guess… when you've got a couple of other people there and none of you have any real secrets anymore… I suppose that was 'safe enough' for Nabiki and me."

"So you think having me here made Ranma feel safe enough to let all that loose?" Ukyou asked.

Ryouga shook his head. "No… she didn't feel like she felt safe. It was more like… it was too close to the surface, and the churn from the Link just brought it all up."

"Well… great, so much for that little ego boost…" Ukyou sighed and looked down at the redhead sleeping in her arms. She could see the dark circles under her eyes now, how her face seemed drawn and tired. She ran her fingers through Ranma's hair, frowning as she tried to make sense of what she was getting from the girl's sleeping mind. "It's… not like I thought it'd be."

"What isn't?"

"The Link. And… Ranma, I guess?" She frowned. "I… guess I just never saw the cracks before but they seem so painfully obvious right now." She curled her arms around the redhead, able to 'hear' her sleeping mind even with her eyes closed. "Ranchan was always indestructible. He was always the unbeatable hero to me. And now here she is… fragile and coming apart and it was all there but I just never saw it." She looked up at Ryouga, searching his eyes. "Was… was it always like this?"

"It's… gotten worse, but…" he sighed heavily. "It was a shock to me, too. For a bit, when I first woke up after the shi shi hokodan when the Link opened up like this, I actually thought she was a different person. I kinda still do, actually… She's not the person I thought she was."

Ukyou looked back down at the redhead, lost in thought as that concept rattled about in her head. Did I fall in love with Ranchan under false pretenses? She brushed a strand of red hair tenderly from the girl's face. Maybe…? Maybe it doesn't matter. I love her NOW after seeing more than maybe anyone else has of her. I guess that's what's important, right? But…

"Ryouga… Why doesn't she feel like… why…" Ukyou struggled for the words for things that didn't have words. "You've got more experience with this, seeing inside Nabiki's head too… Is… does Ranma…?"

"Why does Ranma not feel like a guy, right?" Ryouga asked.

"Yeah…” Ukyou said.

"It's there. But…” Ryouga used his free hand to touch Ranma's cheek, holding it there as he closed his eyes, 'listening'. "It's… I dunno. When all this started, Ranma was… well, almost in balance, I
guess. For a day or two she swung hard to the male side, but after that…” He sighed and removed his hand. "I thought it was *me* at first, but…” He shook his head. "I don't know what's causing it."

"Rebellion, maybe?" Ukyou suggested. "If… if she's had these two sides to herself for so long, and had to repress one side for her whole life because of her father's demands to be a 'man amongst men', and now finally she's letting go of that… maybe…?"

Ryouga's expression darkened, his brow knit. She could feel a wave of something dark and cold from him… regret or guilt, maybe?

"Ryouga, I know… I mean… I get that part of you must be happy about that, deep down. That's the side you… well, I won't say the word if you're not ready to, but it's obvious to anyone but Ranma… and I know you're probably tearing yourself apart with guilt because that's the kind of guy you are, but…”

"That's not it," Ryouga said, cutting her off. Ukyou blinked, but didn't protest. She had felt… sincerity in those words.

"I'm scared I'm going to lose my friend," Ryouga said. "Ranma was… You of *all* people should understand… he was my *only* friend. The only one who understood… the only one who cared if I showed up to school, or made it home afterwards. He…” His voice got thick with emotion. "... He waited *three days* for me… just because it was important to *me*, and… and I was so mad when I finally caught up with him I just blamed him for everything. And… he *let* me!"

Ukyou's eyes widened. She had not expected this.

"He trusted me. With his curse, with his back… with *Akane*… And I did *nothing* but throw it back in his face." He clenched his fist. "And… and then now that I've finally realized it… now that I've finally got all these things to say to him… he's not *there*. In his place is this… this fragile, terrified *girl*. And she's…” He trailed off, his expression softening as he looked down.

"She's *everything*… Even if I can't tell her that." He sniffed, tears gathering in his eyes as his gaze rested on the sleeping redhead. "And I want her to stay. I want her to stay more than *anything*. But… I'm terrified that I'll be trading my friend for her. I'm terrified I might be *okay* with that, if it came down to it. Every time I *Link* with Ranma, there's less of him in there, and more of *her*. It's like he's… he's giving up."

"Ryouga… are you saying you think Ranma is… is going fully female?" Ukyou asked softly.

"I don't know," He shook his head. "Maybe it's just me, but… I haven't even *seen* Ranma as a guy since this all began. I thought… I thought maybe Nabiki would notice something, so I wouldn't have to…"

"Ryouga… listen to me." Ukyou reached up and touched his face with her hand and forced him to look at her. "As someone who knows a hell of a lot more about what Ranma is going through because she's gone through it herself, let me be clear, okay? Your friend? She's *right there*. As much as Ranma 'wobbles'? It's still *Ranma*. And… yeah, now that the pressure to always be fronting manliness is off, that's going to change that balance and yes, everything that's going on with her now is going to shift stuff the other way for a while. But eventually she will find the balance point that is *hers*, no matter what you or I or her parents or Himura or *anyone* else does. But wherever that point lands, she is still *Ranma*. She is still the guy who is your best friend… and she is still the girl that you love, and those things are one and the same. You need to figure out that it doesn't *matter* if Ranma shows up tomorrow as a guy, or if she never changes back again."
Ryouga closed his eyes and slumped back onto the couch. "Yeah… but…"

"But what?" Ukyou demanded. "You're not okay with being in love with a guy? You think it was any easier for any of us? The curse works both ways, Ryouga."

Ryouga cracked an eye open. "Hit me if you want, but I know it wasn't as hard for you."

Ukyou blushed then looked away. "Alright, fine. Maybe I was a little more open to the idea. But what about Akane? She was a bundle of issues around it all. She had to deal with being in denial about her own preferences, meeting a girl she fell for hard enough at first sight that it almost got past that denial, then finding out he was actually a guy."

"Yeah… thanks for reminding me… I kind of have my own issues around Akane…" Ryouga mumbled.

"I know that more than anyone, sugar. I'm the one you told about all of them, remember?" Ukyou poked him in the chest. "And the same advice applies. You need to tell Ranma how you feel. And tell Akane how you still feel, even if you know she doesn't feel the same way."

"You can't be serious…" Ryouga gaped at her.

"You don't think she's going to find out sooner rather than later? We're going to be adding her to the Link too, you know!" She poked him again.

"It… it doesn't work that way! I mean… I mean…" His eyes flicked to Ranma.

"That's because you two idiots are in denial," Ukyou replied. "Look, I'm not saying you need to give either of them a declaration of undying love, but… Regardless of what you do… even if your future is with Akari… you need to get this out of your system before it drives you crazy. You need some closure on this, and I'm pretty sure they do too."

"But… but what if…" Ryouga stuttered, struggling for the words.

"What if they shoot you down?" Ukyou supplied helpfully. "Akane already knows you were in love with her. I don't think finding out you still have feelings will be a big shock to her. Just… keep in mind that things will never go anywhere with her. She's… just not wired that way. And Ranma… Ranma will probably be insensitive and say something she doesn't mean and stomp over your heart without really meaning to."

"Then you come see me, we talk it out, and we figure out what to do next."

Ryouga was silent for a moment.

"What if Ranma doesn't shoot me down?" he asked, his voice low, almost timid.

"What if she doesn't?" Ukyou asked, quietly curious.

Ryouga gave her an incredulous look. "How can you be calm about… about…" He swiped his hand through his hair in frustration. "We're talking about your fiance!"

"Because freaking out doesn't fix anything and it doesn't make all of this go away? Plus, I really do wanna know - what would you do next if Ranma felt the same way about you?" Ukyou said evenly.

"That's the problem. There is no 'next' to that!" Ryouga insisted.
"Yes there is," Ukyou prodded him none too gently. "C'mon… hypothetical. Say me and the other fiancées weren't in the picture."

Ryouga sighed heavily. He closed his eyes and Ukyou could sense the emotional churn going on. He finally opened his eyes and reached out tentatively to mimic Ukyou as he ran his fingers through Ranma's hair.

"I don't know," he said at last. "I can't even picture it."

"Even if she was a regular girl?" Ukyou asked, raising an eyebrow.

Ryouga chuckled dryly. "Yeah... Even then." He was quiet a moment, his expression growing thoughtful. "I... keep having dreams about it, I think. I don't remember them very well, and I get the feeling they don't make a lot of sense. Like I'm trying to work that out. Like... I can't reconcile the idea of us... y'know... together."

Ukyou sighed sympathetically. You really are a mess over this, aren't you Ryouga? "All right... Then you tell her, and then maybe you, me'n Shampoo go out and get you good and drunk, and then figure things out after we sober up, huh?"

He covered his eyes with his hand. "Ukyou, that's an incredibly stupid idea... remember what happened the last time we got drunk?"

"Hey! I'm trying to help and be supportive here, jackass!" Ukyou shot back, her pride wounded. "Look, fair enough deciding to get drunk then walk you home was probably not the best plan, but... I dunno, this time we'll set you up a cot or something in the storeroom to crash on. You need a healthier outlet for when you get all emotional."

"Your 'healthier outlet' is alcohol."

"Yours is blowing yourself up!"

"It... I don't normally blow myself up when I do that!" Ryouga huffed.

"Yeah, just everything else around you!" Ukyou growled.

"It's a technique for mining! It's supposed to be good at making holes in things!"

"That's why it's bad for stress relief!"

They glared at each other over Ranma's head. There was a moment of deadly seriousness... then both of them broke down into fits of giggling.

"This is so stupid..." Ukyou finally managed to gasp, letting her head flop back down against his shoulder.

"It is stupid," Ryouga agreed.

"It's kind of hard to keep up a proper level of outrage for a fight when you're tired and cuddling with someone," Ukyou continued. She noticed him stiffen and sighed, giving him an exasperated look. "Oh stop. We've been over this. You're fine, Ryouga. I trust you to be a gentleman."

Ryouga tried to force himself to relax, finally releasing a frustrated sigh of his own. "This isn't easy, y'know... This is awkward as hell, actually. How am I supposed to get any sleep?"

"You've slept in more uncomfortable situations I'm sure," Ukyou yawned. "Tell you what. If it
helps, you can be the older sibling tonight. Focus all that nervous energy on keeping your little sister and your wife warm an' safe, 'kay?" She hugged Ranma's sleeping form a little tighter to herself and let her eyes close.

"She's not my…! That's the mental image you want me to sleep on?!” Ryouga squawked in protest, but the sound of his voice was already fading from Ukyou's tired perceptions as she surrendered to sleep.

000 (Chapter 27 End)

(I apologize for how long it's taking to get chapters out. I've been hit with the winter blahs, which makes writing tough, and my editor is having to deal with a massive move and so doesn't have the time to keep the cattle prod properly charged.

I think I've fixed the issues with the brackets around English speech, and fixed it in Chapter 26. doesn't like arrow brackets apparently, but square brackets seem to be okay.

I've got Chapter 28 mostly ready to go, so I'll give that a once-over and post it, hopefully later in the week. Then... well, things will be slower because Christmas is poison for writing for me.

Thank you for sticking with me this long!)
Dreams and Reality

(Three years ago)

He was lost.

That wasn't a new thing, of course, but he usually didn't get lost inside a building he was familiar with. The school wasn't that big but, for some reason, he just couldn't find the doors leading outside. He sighed as he opened yet another utility closet - the fifth one in a row.

But now that he thought about it, that mop looked awfully familiar. It could easily be that it was the same closet - five times over.

He glanced out the window, seeing the reddish light as the sun started to set. Everyone else had gone home hours ago. Normally, even when he was feeling confused, he could just follow the crowd out. But today he had gotten saddled with cleaning the chemistry lab and the last class had left it a mess. Some idiot had decided to dump the contents of two beakers together, resulting in an explosion of fizzy, foamy mess which the teacher had assured them wasn't toxic, but still smelled terrible. By the time they had finished, the rest of the students were long gone, and Ryouga's classmates had been eager to go, leaving him in the dust. One wrong turn and he had lost their trail. He had followed their voices for a while, but they had gotten fainter, and finally the school was silent.

Maybe I should just hunker down here for the night, Ryouga thought miserably. But his stomach growled in protest. He wanted nothing more than a hot bath to wash off the filth from cleaning that lab, but right now he wasn't even sure that he could find the showers, much less his own home.

It wasn't like Ranma would have waited, after all.

He stumbled a bit, realizing that in his reverie he had walked into a stairwell going down. Curious, he followed it. It lead to another floor with classrooms and lockers, just like the one he had been on.

"This doesn't look like the basement..." he thought, walking towards a set of large double doors. The light shining in from them was blinding, so he pushed them open and stepped outside.

Outside!

Ryouga blinked, then looked behind him. Was... was I on the wrong floor the entire time?! He looked up at the windows of the second floor. Windows he had been walking past the whole time. How had he not noticed!? He had looked out, contemplating just throwing himself out the window! How had it not registered he was on the second floor when he looked down!?

He closed his eyes tightly and struggled to keep the tears of frustration and shame from coming. It's not fair! Mom and Dad are gone, and I'm sick of being lost all the time! What did I ever do to deserve this!? He drew his hand back to punch the wall, but held himself back, fist trembling. Finally he relaxed and let his arm drop, sighing heavily.

"That's a good idea, man. Last time you did that you got detention for a week."

Ryouga whirled to see the impish face of the pigtailed boy inches from his own. He yelped and stumbled backwards.

"What the hell, Ranma?!!" he shouted angrily. "What are you even doing here!??"
Ranma blinked. "I said I was gonna walk ya home, doofus! Geez, what're ya yellin' at me for!? You're the one who took forever to meet me!"

"You… waited?" Ryouga boggled at the pigtailed boy.

"Well duh!" Ranma folded his hands behind his head and shrugged. "I gave my word, y'know? A man doesn't go back on a promise like that. That's like… lesson one of bein' a martial artist."

Ryouga scowled, feeling potentially slighted by that last remark. It was easier for him to believe that the pigtailed boy had stuck it out just to show him up rather than any real determination to fulfill a promise. "I know that!" He stuffed his hands in his pockets and shouldered past the other boy. "Let's just go… It's late and I need a bath before bed."

"Sure thing," Ranma said nonchalantly. "Hey, uh… since you're fillin' the furo anyway…"

"Yes, you can have one too. Just… let me do mine first, okay?" He gave the other boy a sideways glance. "And wash your hair this time, wouldja?"

"What's wrong with my hair?" Ranma asked, hand moving to it self-consciously.

"It's always all greasy. It's like you rinsed it in motor oil or something," Ryouga replied gruffly.

"Oh… Uh… that's because of this… this stuff Pops makes me use on it…" Ranma replied, sounding uncharacteristically subdued.

Ryouga raised an eyebrow. "Oh, like medicated shampoo or something?"

"...Something like that," Ranma replied weakly.

Ryouga felt his annoyance flicker, smothered by a wave of self-consciousness over having stumbled on something the normally unflappable boy was embarrassed about. "Yeah… well… make sure you wash your face at least. You've got smudges or something on your cheeks."

"...Those're freckles."

Ryouga blinked, turned and gave the boy's face a closer look.

Ranma blushed and backed up a step. "H-hey, what's the deal?"

"Huh. So they are," Ryouga muttered. He sighed heavily, giving up the notion of remaining mad at his friend. He shrugged and turned, resuming the walk home. "Sorry…"

"No biggie," Ranma replied. "Pops hates 'em… says they're unmanly but… lots of guys have freckles… right?"

"Sure," Ryouga said off-handedly.

"Plus… I'll… I'll probably outgrow 'em, right?" Ranma went on. His voice sounded uncharacteristically subdued.

Ryouga glanced at him. The pigtailed boy was walking with his eyes down, looking at the pavement.

"They're faint. Probably won't be there in a year or two," Ryouga reassured him. He had no idea if that was actually true or not, but it seemed plausible enough.
"Yeah!" Ranma brightened.

Ryouga sighed. He had no idea how someone like Ranma survived. Even the smallest imperfection… at least if it was something he cared about… was always such a huge setback for him. For a guy who was such a beast in a fight, his ego was remarkably fragile at times.

They walked in silence for a few minutes. Ranma's spirits seemed buoyed and oddly, despite getting lost and the knowledge that his curse was slowly but steadily getting worse, Ryouga felt a bit better too. It was nice to know someone was willing to wait for him. Even if it was the most annoying guy in school.

"... So for dinner you up for Chilled Soba tonight?" Ryouga asked. "Still got a bunch of packs to work through before they expire."

"Sounds good!"

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(Present Day)

Ranma stirred. She felt warm and… safe - which was a new feeling for her. It was wrapped around her like a blanket, along with comforting arms, and the presence of someone familiar… no, more than one someone. The concept of names didn't register yet, but that was okay. They were supposed to be there.

There was that odd sense of surprise realizing she was sleeping. Hadn't she just been doing something? Or was that the dream? It was so hard to tell which was which… not that it mattered. The presences were there in both, so she was content to linger between the two for now. She tried to settle back into the pleasant lassitude of the dream. Where were they? The park, right? Somewhere warm and sunny…

Something kept telling her she needed to wake up, though. A… noise? Noises were bad and she wanted to sleep! "Mnh… U’chan… your turn…" she mumbled.

She felt one of the warm bodies against her stir. "Nuh… Ryo's turn…" Ukyou replied. "Ryo…"

"Nnh?" Ryouga started a little, having been more deeply asleep than they had.

"Sach'ko…" Ukyou mumbled.

"She's beeping…" Ranma added, then snuggled back into the comforting warmth.

"Beeping…" Ryouga said, sounding a bit more awake now. He groaned and shifted a bit, earning a few mumbled protests from the girls. "...Ranma, that's the alarm."

"Then take it away from her… not s'posed to be up yet…" Ranma muttered, frowning as the pleasant dream faded and ebbed, no matter how she tried to hold onto it.

"Morning already…?" Ukyou mumbled, in traitorous acknowledgement of the waking world.

Ranma could feel them both recede from the dream which made clinging to it pointless. Grudgingly, she allowed herself to be pulled from the pleasant drowse, her eyes fluttering open as her mind started to sort out reality from the dream.

She looked up a little and her eyes met Ukyou's. She smiled a little and got a smile in return. Then
she glanced up to meet Ryouga's eyes and realized that she was lying partially on top of him with Ukyou. She smiled at him as well, closing her eyes, to see if she could snatch a few more minutes of sleep, since everything seemed alright with...

…and then her mind finished sorting 'Dream' from 'Reality'.

She managed to make it nearly to the other side of the waiting room in one leap, but she stumbled over the table next to the couch and tumbled, crashing in a heap in the corner.

"Ranchan!" Ukyou sat up, quickly extricating herself from the couch and Ryouga.

Ranma peered up at her uncomfortably, currently upside-down as she struggled weakly to right herself. She noticed that Ukyou was still in her school uniform, as was she. For just a moment she felt a sense of relief at the realization that she had been fully clothed the whole time… whatever happened that resulted in the three of them being on the couch together. Then she remembered she was in a skirt.

"Aaaaugh!" She scrambled to try and right herself and recover her modesty at the same time, but only managed to get more tangled up in the process before Ukyou came over and gently helped her up. Ranma's face was burning by the time the shameful display of klutziness was finally done with.

"Okay, three questions before I go to find a nice, quiet corner where I can curl up and die of shame. First… where are we?" She rubbed her head as she looked around, confused.

"The waiting room in Dr. Tofu's clinic," Ukyou said.

"Okay…” Ranma nodded, looking around again. The lighting was different than she was used to but, now that she was waking up, she recognized it. "Second… Why were we all in bed together?"

"It wasn't a bed…” Ryouga said weakly, looking studiously at the wall next to him.

"You had an… 'episode', I guess? A bad reaction to adding me to the Link," Ukyou said gently. "We think it kicked up the Neko-ken or something and knocked you cold. Doc Tofu told us to stay with you because your ki levels were so low, and doing that had stabilized Nabiki when it happened to her, so… Well…” She glanced at Ryouga and shrugged sheepishly.

"Nothing happened," Ryouga said quickly.

Ranma closed her eyes and sighed in relief. "Okay… so third question is answered; there isn't a baby sleeping in the other room, waiting for us to take her to the park for the day…"

Ryouga's head snapped around and he stared at Ranma, his eyes widening. "I… Y-you mean… Sachiko?"

"We were having a picnic…” Ukyou gasped. "Oh my god! We all had the same dream!" She put her hand on her forehead. "No wonder it seemed so real!" She blinked. "Wait…” She glanced at Ranma, then Ryouga. "Are… is Sachiko… I mean…?"

"She's mine," Ryouga and Ranma said in unison.

Ranma blinked, then glared at Ryouga. "Hey! This was my dream Ryouga!"

"You got the name 'Sachiko' from me, Ranma!" Ryouga growled back. "Remember? You jumped through my window and woke me up because you needed to gush about your date with Ukyou!"
"You gushed about our date?" Ukyou started to smile. "I think that means 'Sachiko' is mine, doesn’t it Ranchan?"

"No!" Ryouga protested. "She’s…"

"I told you I was her mother and I could use the name if I wanted…!" Ranma protested then trailed off, her eyes widening again as her face paled. "…to…"

Ranma swallowed hard, curling up quickly into a ball. Oh god, I was Sachiko's MOM in the dream! She started rocking slowly as the full impact of that settled in. I dreamed I had a kid and I was the MOTHER and I was OKAY with it until just a second ago and that means… She shuddered as a sudden image of Mikado Sanzenin's face filled her mind's eye. Urk!

There was the sound of footsteps coming down the stairs and a sleepy looking Doctor Tofu peered out from the hallway leading to his small apartment, toothbrush in hand. "Do you three always make so much noise in the morning?"

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After giving each of them a brief examination and addressing Ryouga’s complaints of a stiff neck from sleeping oddly on the couch, Dr. Tofu declared them fit for school. Their uniforms were rumpled and slept in, but there was little they could do about that. Ukyou had, at least, had the presence of mind to remove her jacket and hang it up before they had started but Ryouga's and Ranma's respective uniforms were both wrinkled messes. They cleaned themselves up and made themselves presentable as best they could.

"Nabiki will meet you at school and bring fresh clothes," Doctor Tofu advised them. He provided them a simple breakfast and sent them on their way after reminding them to come back the next day with Shampoo to continue the experiment, and to contact him if there were any new side effects.

Ranma walked ahead of the others, keeping to herself. Her back was hunched, her fists were clenched and she was practically stalking towards school. Tentative questions or attempts at conversation from Ryouga or Ukyou had been ignored. It was fairly obvious to Ryouga that Ranma was pissed, but he wasn’t exactly sure why.

Not that there was a shortage of things that it could be, given the mess that had been their morning.

"Are you gonna talk to us, sugar?" Ukyou asked timidly, finally broaching the subject as they approached the school gates.

"Nope," Ranma said curtly.

"Look, Ranma…" Ryouga sighed. "We're sorry. I'm sorry. The whole Link thing has turned into a mess and I know that anything that triggers the Neko-ken is bad, and I realize that it wasn't exactly the most reassuring way to wake up…"

Ranma whirled on them. Her eyes were flashing with anger. "That's not it! I'm not mad about any of that!"

"I… then what did we do, Ranchan?" Ukyou asked, attempting to placate the furious redhead.

"One of you got me pregnant!"

It was important to note that, at this time of day, the streets were far from empty. Furinkan students were arriving from all directions, milling around the school gates as they waited for friends to arrive
or were just making their ways inside. Ranma's declaration was clearly audible to all of them.

And that included a knot of familiar individuals who were also just arriving: Sayuri, Yuka, Rin, Riko, Hiroshi, Daisuke, Nabiki, Shampoo… and Akane.

The silence that descended across the entire block was a like a physical thing. Even the birds stopped singing for the moment.

From Ranma's expression, she didn't need to see that Akane was behind her. The sudden shift from anger to fear told Ryouga she knew exactly who had just overheard.

For his part, Ryouga had never seen Akane's aura flare quite that brightly before.

"Oh… Hi Akane…" Ukyou said weakly, her eyebrow twitching as she tried to force a smile.

Akane's fists were clenched and her eyes were hidden behind her bangs. Her aura crackled around her like a physical thing. The rest of the group were standing behind her (well behind her) and staring at Ryouga, Ukyou and Ranma with wide eyes.

Hushed whispers were starting all around them as a crowd started to gather.

"Did you hear that?!

"I didn't even know that was POSSIBLE for Ranma!"

"Course it is, she's gone full girl, didn't you hear?"

"That was just a rumor!"

"When was the last time you saw her as a guy, huh?"

"But a BABY? At HER age?"

"Wait, how would UKYOU be the father?!"

"Toldja dude, she's TOTALLY got a curse! No WAY a girl could pull off looking that much like a guy!"

Ranma turned, slowly, stiffly and haltingly, as though her joints were all very rusty hinges. The 'creak' was almost audible.

"Umm… Hi, 'Kane…" Ranma said weakly. "L-look, I can explain…"

Akane's aura flickered, and the concrete under her feet suddenly cracked with an audible *pop.*

"You have five minutes to explain. To Nabiki. And then for her to explain to me why any of you get to live," Akane said tightly.

Ranma looked over at Nabiki who was currently leaning against the wall, coughing. The wet, brown stain on the wall and the coffee cup in her hand suggested that Nabiki was trying to recover from the attempted aspiration of a hot, caffeinated beverage. She glanced back to Akane and chuckled nervously. "Okay… can we just give Nabiki a minute to…?"

"Four minutes," Akane replied.

"Look, Akane, it's not…" Ukyou started.
"Three minutes," Akane snarled.

"Shut up!" Ranma hissed at Ukyou and Ryouga, then gave Akane a nervous smile and skirted around her to run over to Nabiki, who was still coughing.

"Okay, not much time…" Ranma said, putting a hand on Nabiki's shoulder. "I had a dream where I had a kid and either Ryouga or Ukyou was the father - I'm not sure which - and we were linked at the time, so they had the dream too and I'm mad at both of them because… because… reasons."

Nabiki coughed again, nodded and patted Ranma's shoulder. She handed Ranma her half empty coffee cup and walked over to her little sister.

Akane gave her an expectant look. "One minute," she said.

Nabiki nodded, cleared her throat, then thumped her chest. "Whew! That stuff burns when it goes down the wrong pipe! Okay, short version? Nobody is pregnant, nobody slept with anyone else, and all three of them are idiots."

"And?" Akane folded her arms and raised an eyebrow expectantly. Her aura flickered and dimmed.

"And try not to break anything. Ranma does have a game after school today." She shrugged, then called nonchalantly over her shoulder. "Ranma, could you be a dear and toss that for me? Thanks!"

Ryouga's eyes widened as Akane's aura flared back to full intensity while Nabiki casually (but quickly) retreated to the safety of the school gates. "Awwww, crap…"

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"This is all your fault, Ranma!"

The cry was a familiar one to the small group standing out in the hall with water buckets. Ranma, Ukyou and, to a lesser degree, Ryouga all showed signs having been thoroughly and freshly pummeled and Akane was standing a few feet further down the hall and glaring balefully at them.

"Why is it always my fault?!" Ranma groused. The water bucket sat balanced on her head and her arms were folded as she sulked.

"You don't just blurt out something like that at school, you idiot!" Akane shot back. Her gaze swivelled to Ryouga and Ukyou. "And you two! Shame on you for taking advantage of Ranma like that!"

"Taking advantage…!?" Ryouga sputtered, taken aback. "It was a dream!"

"It doesn't matter! Ranma was in a vulnerable emotional state, and you both should have more self control than to seduce her like that!" Akane asserted, raising her chin haughtily.

"Seduce…!? We were having a picnic!" Ryouga protested.

"So you got Ranma pregnant in a public park?!" Akane squawked, outraged.

There was more audible murmuring from the classroom.

"No! I mean, Sachiko was already born by this point…!

"So this had been going on for nine months or more?!"
Ukyou leaned back against the wall and folded her hands behind her head. "Actually… I would totally have seduced Ranchan in the park."

"So you were the one who did it!" Ranma cut in, shooting Ukyou an accusing look.

"Well I don't remember if I got to dream that part, but that's how I'd do it," Ukyou waggled her eyebrows. "But Sachiko is totally my kid."

"She's not…! How would that even work!?" Ryouga protested, rubbing his temples.

"Instant Nannichuan is a thing, sugar," Ukyou shot him a wink.

"So you did seduce Ranma!" Akane said, levelling an accusing finger at Ryouga.

"What!? No! I never…!"

"But you're insisting that Sachiko is yours!"

"Well, yes, but that's just because…!"

"Do you need someone to explain how this whole babymaking thing works, sugar?" Ukyou teased.

"Arrrgh!" Ryouga pulled at his hair.

"I think you're just miffed because I got your wife pregnant!" Ukyou crowed, pinching his cheek. "Score one for the older sibling!"

"'Wife'?"

Ukyou and Ryouga froze. It was their turn to make slow, halting turns to look at Akane.

"Ooops…” Ukyou murmured.

"'Ooops!?" Ryouga hissed at her.

"Explain. Now," Akane said tightly, folding her arms across her chest.

"W-e-ell… remember when Ranma had to pretend to be Ryouga's fiancee to get him out of the Hospital?" Ukyou said quickly. "Turns out the hospital 'helpfully' listed them as Common Law spouses so they could release Ryouga's medical info to Ranma. So legally they're now kinda considered…"

"It's not a real marriage!" Ryouga said quickly.

"It's just… for tax purposes?" Ukyou added.

"We just found out last night! We weren't keeping anything from you, we just wanted to discuss it with Nabiki first to see how serious this really is!" Ryouga finished desperately, noticing the battle aura was back.

"I see," Akane said, her eyes narrowed. "Can I ask a question? How did you three stay linked all night?"

Ryouga felt the blood drain from his face. His eye twitched as his brain realized the situation was lost, and all intelligent thought fled for the hills to wait out the impending apocalypse.
"Uhh… well… you see…” Ukyou said nervously.

"Seems to me it'd be hard to keep up holding hands in your sleep all night, wouldn't it?" Akane asked, taking a step forward, casually snatching up the handles of the two water buckets at her feet and lifting them up. "You'd roll over, twist and turn… even if you bound your hands together I doubt it'd work. But you three stayed linked long enough to share a dream all night." She stopped, her dark brown eyes hard as she looked over at each of them in turn. "So, I'm going to ask this once, and I hope I've made it clear that I'm not stupid. How did you stay linked all night?"

Ukyou winced and closed her eyes, taking a deep breath. "Ranma passed out after the link was first made. Her ki levels were low, so Doc Tofu wanted us to stay linked as long as possible to keep her from bottoming out. She didn't get to have a say in it, so don't get mad at her! We… staked out the couch in Doc Tofu's waiting room and… slept on that couch together with Ranma between us."

"Clothes on!" Ryouga added desperately.

"God yes, clothes were on. Look how rumpled everything is!" Ukyou gestured at herself.

Both of them started laughing nervously as Akane resumed stalking towards them.

"Is that true, Ranma?" Akane asked the redhead with that same eerie, disconcerting calm.

Ranma just covered her face with her hand and sighed. "As far as I know? I mean after the Link went haywire I kind of had a minor meltdown when I found myself in bed with these two."

Akane nodded, then lifted up the buckets, one balanced on each hand. "Thank you for being honest," she said to Ukyou and Ryouga.

"Uh… No problem Akane?" Ryouga said weakly.

"If you had been lying to me, I would have beaten you both to death with these buckets," Akane said with the same eerily calm menace.

"Aheh… No need for that, right 'Kane?" Ukyou said nervously, her eyes flicking towards the nearest escape route.

"Of course not," Akane said. She suddenly broke out into a sweet smile. Then tipped the buckets over each of their heads.

Ryouga's change was immediate; he dropped to the floor in a pile of wet clothing, his whole world going dark as the bucket covered him entirely. He could hear Ukyou yelp as she, too, was drenched with cold water.

The bucket tipped up just enough for him to see Akane crouched in front of it, glaring at him. "Now. If you sleep with either of my fiancées again, regardless of the circumstances, I am going to use you to practise making pork okonomiyaki." She dropped the bucket back into place, plunging him once more into darkness.

"And you!" Akane said, her tone getting less cold, more of the familiar rage seeping into it as she whirled on Ukyou. "Since you seem to like sleeping on couches so much, you can just sleep on your own! Alone!"

There was the sound of footsteps, and a startled yelp from Ranma as apparently Akane grabbed her hand and dragged her along as she stalked off to wherever she was going to vent the rest of her
anger.

Ryouga huddled down in the wet pile of clothes, shivering, and not from the damp or cold.

The bucket was lifted, the light momentarily blinding him. Ukyou crouched in front of him, soaking wet herself, as she set aside his bucket.

"Well… that went better than I expected…" Ukyou muttered, scooping him and his clothes up in her arms.

000

Akane didn't say a word to Ranma as she dragged her along. The redhead didn't resist after a few squawks of protest, and just followed along in meek silence. Akane led her up a few floors and to the roof. After the incident with Kuno, no one was supposed to be up there - her least of all, but Akane didn't really care at the moment. She stepped out into the fenced off area and closed the heavy fire door behind her, trying not to dwell on the fresh paint on the new door, or the fact that it didn't swing as smoothly, as though the door frame itself had been warped and their best efforts had been unable to fully restore it.

"Ranma…" she started, but was cut off when she felt a pair of arms wrap around her as the redhead hugged her from behind. Akane shuddered. All of the carefully chosen words she had planned to say tumbled out of her head and she slumped as the tensions that she hadn't even realized she'd been carrying in her shoulders and neck were suddenly eased, making her muscles spasm and twitch.

"Sorry, 'Kane…" Ranma said softly. "I ain't got a Link with you yet so I kinda gotta guess, but… I figured if you dragged me out here you probably needed this more'n to pound me flat?" The redhead hooked her chin over Akane's shoulder and gave her a hopeful look.

Akane turned in Ranma's arms and wrapped her own arms around the shorter girl in a fierce hug. She held her for a few minutes, shaking.

"I'm trying to do better," Akane said finally. "I really am."

"I think you did pretty good, all things considered," Ranma replied.

"I'm still so angry, though…" Akane sighed and buried her face in Ranma's hair for a moment. "Even though I know it's not what it all sounded like. Sometimes… sometimes I just feel like everyone is laughing at me and I just… I just want to…" She hugged the redhead a little tighter.

"I can still take a punch, y'know," Ranma murmured in her ear. "I mean, if it'll make you feel better…"

Akane shook her head violently. She relaxed her hold on the redhead a little, but just enough to capture her lips in a deep, needful kiss. She felt Ranma stiffen in surprise, but it only lasted for a second before she relaxed and Akane could feel Ranma's hands start to roam across her back. She smiled as she realized just how much Ranma's tendency to flinch had lessened. She broke the kiss and relaxed her arms a bit, holding her loosely as she looked into those blue eyes. She liked the blush on her cheeks - liked that it was for her - and liked that the sight of it did more to soothe her anger than hitting something or someone ever had. It was… reassuring.

"I think I'm going to start doing that when I get angry instead," Akane said softly. "If… if that's okay?"

Ranma swallowed. She was blushing a little more hotly. "I… I promise not ta use that as an excuse
made you mad…” she smiled, her expression a little timid.

Akane grinned then her expression grew somewhat more seductive. "Well then, maybe I should think of an even better reward for you if you're trying to be good? Like you are right now?"

Ranma swallowed hard.

000

Nabiki was having trouble focusing on the lesson.

Part of it was having hit a dead end on the research front. Hiroshi and Daisuke had done a remarkably good job on their background checks of the various Regulatory Committee members, trying to find out who Himura might have bought in order to get Ranma past the birth record checks, but so far there weren't any solid leads. At least, none that her limited resources could uncover.

She could almost feel that icon on her phone pulsing in her pocket.

Trying to steer her thoughts away from that issue seemed to just land her in yet another quagmire, as in her imagination, she started speculating about what might have happened last night with Ranma, Ryouga and Ukyou. She knew nothing had but, for some reason, her mind kept wandering to pleasant 'what if' scenarios that were gradually drifting into increasingly erotic territory. Ranma and even Ryouga were fair game for such things, but usually Ukyou wasn't a subject of her fantasizing, and she certainly rarely indulged in such things during school, where such vulnerable indulgences were unwise at best. However, she found herself increasingly unable to tear herself away from these thoughts as an odd warmth blossomed in the pit of her belly and she pondered tracking down one or all of the subjects of her daydreams. Right up until the chalk smacked her in the forehead.

"Pay attention, Ms. Tendo! I normally don't have to ask you twice, but for the third time, could you pick up reading at the third paragraph of page 76, please?” The teacher said crossly.

Nabiki swallowed and glanced around the room, cheeks burning from the humiliation and the loss of face as everyone stared at her. She stood, read the passage mechanically, and sat back down quickly afterwards, doing her best to appear like she was paying attention.

She was still having trouble focusing. Getting caught daydreaming in class should have been like a bucket of ice water on her libido, but she could still feel the tug on her thoughts - the tendency to drift down naughty paths and the flush that lingered well beyond her initial embarrassment. This faltering of control was entirely uncharacteristic for her. Even Shampoo was giving her a questioning look.

Her eyes narrowed as she pushed those thoughts away, a growing suspicion in her mind as to the source of her distraction. You wouldn't do it AGAIN, would you, little sister?

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Ranma felt a bit sheepish as she slipped back into her clothes, mindful that, for the second time, she had become entirely guilty of being every bit the pervert Akane had always accused her of being. And, like the last time, she had done so with Akane, who had been the one to instigate it.

Maybe there was something to that…

I'd better not let this happen too much… she thought with a slight pang of regret. No telling what kind of ammo this would give Himura if anyone found out, never mind the rumours it would start in the school. ALREADY got too much of that going on.
She glanced timidly at Akane, who was fluffing out her hair, a satisfied smile on her face.

She found herself smiling in response, some of those old heart flutters coming back. *God, she's beautiful when she smiles…*

Akane noticed her looking. A slight blush graced her cheeks, but she kept smiling. "I uh… I'm sorry, Ranma. I got a little carried away again."

Ranma shook her head vigorously. "N-no! I mean, you've got nothing to apologize for! I-I mean…"

Akane giggled and leaned in to silence Ranma with a kiss.

Ranma closed her eyes, relaxed and surrendered to Akane's soft lips, shyly slipping her arms around her again. The dark haired Tendo still had a way of putting her off-balance… she just had much more pleasant ways of expressing it now.

"Still…" Akane said after the brief kiss ended, looking into Ranma's eyes. "I know I've kind of 'neglected' part of you."

Ranma felt her cheeks burn. "I… uh… I'm pretty sure you've been real thorough, Akane…"

"Baka!" Akane giggled, then bapped the redhead on the top of her head with the flat of her hand. "I meant your male side!"

"O-oh!" Ranma blushed deeper, then ducked her head. "Umm… I thought… I mean, I know there was what happened in the furo, but… You're not really into guys… right?" She chewed on her lower lip, nervous about treading into such newly charted terrain. The landmines that could be lurking…

Akane shrugged. "Well… I mean, not really but…" she smiled, "It's you. And it's not fair to ask you to be something you're not just because I prefer it…"

Ranma shook her head. "But Akane… I am this," She gestured to herself. She swallowed nervously, feeling some of that old fear and apprehension that bubbled up whenever she strayed into such territory. "I mean… I'm a guy too, of course… that's just as much me, but…" She took a deep breath. "It's hard to explain. You don't need to do everything with both sides of me to be happy. Just like… Well, you know my problems with Shampoo's curse, right? I gotta work on that some. I know it hurts her that I'm afraid of her, but I don't think she expects me to…” She made a disgusted face.

Akane shuddered. "Let's not get into that, please. I have too much personal experience with that kind of curse problem."

"But that's kinda my point," Ranma pressed. "You don't gotta be that way with me as a guy unless it's good for you, too. I don't… I don't think I'd even like it if you weren't into it, y'know?" She cocked her head. "It's not much different than if I was smelly or sweaty before bed. You'd tell me to go take a shower first for that, right? So… same thing."

Akane's brow furrowed. "Y-yeah, but Nabiki…"

"…Is Nabiki. An' she definitely prefers me as a guy. She's just… she told me once that nobody is one-hundred percent one way or another, right? Like you stick a bunch of straight jocks in prison long enough and stuff happens, even if it wouldn't normally. She's… like a '70-30' kinda girl, I guess?"

"50-50." Akane said, arching an eyebrow and smirking. "She's got you and Shampoo. I think she
might be overestimating her preference for boys."

Ranma grinned back. "65-35. She flirts hard with poor Ryo, and I'm pretty sure she means it. She just knows he'd never do anything about it."

"60-40, final offer."

"Deal!"

They both broke out giggling.

Akane sighed and draped her arms over Ranma's shoulders. "Are you sure, Ranma? I mean… I mean I still want to be your wife. I want… Well, I want kids one day." She leaned in a bit closer, touching their foreheads together. "I think I'd still like to try. To see what it's like. Like you said, nobody is 100%. So maybe even if I'm 90-10… well… maybe a bit more than 10% where you're concerned." She winked. "I might enjoy it if I'm in the mood."

Ranma swallowed again. She felt a twinge at the mention of kids, but… not an entirely bad one. She tried to push aside the dream for the moment and focus on what was in front of her. "I-I'd… I'd like that. Whatever makes you happy, Akane."

"So… What about you?" Akane asked.

Ranma felt a cold surge of fear.

Akane held up a hand to forestall a panic. "I'm not trying to start a fight. You don't have to say anything if you're not okay with it. I'm just…" she sighed, "I guess I'm curious. I'm not going to accuse you of sleeping around with Ryouga, I swear."

Ranma closed her eyes and took a deep breath, then released it. "I'm… sorry, 'Kane," she finally replied after a few moments of internal struggle. "It's… that's like the scariest topic possible for me right now."

"That's okay." Akane purred. "But… Just remember, if I don't have to feel guilty about liking girls… you don't have to feel guilty if you happen to like a guy. Right?"

Ranma raised a skeptical eyebrow. "So what was that freakout this morning over the dream all about, then?"

Akane scowled. "I'm a work in progress, okay? Besides… you beat me at way too many girly things as it is. I swear I will never forgive you if you get pregnant before me!"

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Lunch could not have come soon enough for Ryouga.

The awkwardness of the morning had been bad enough when some of his most personal and private dreams had become a topic for public discussion.

But then shortly after Akane had dragged Ranma off who-knew-where, he had begun to get a definite idea of what they were up to - something he recognized due to unfortunate prior experience.

The mental images that came to mind, colored by what he remembered of the sounds from the locker room that day did not help the situation. He had managed by stuffing tissues up his nose until the
teacher had noticed and, aghast, had sent him to the nurse's office again (with Ukyou to escort him). Thankfully the bleeding had tapered off by then, but all the feelings that had been stirred through the Link still left him feeling anxious and restless.

*I wish I still had some of that waterproof soap*, he thought glumly as Ukyou led him back through the school. *Then I could go and stick my head under a faucet and run cold water until this goes away.*

"Stupid Ryouga..." Ukyou grumbled, arms crossed, her posture slightly hunched as she walked. "Stupid pervert brain... stupid nosebleeds..."

Ryouga raised an eyebrow, then realized there was a blush to Ukyou's cheeks. *Oh, that's right. She's part of the Link now, too. She's probably feeling it, but doesn't know what it is.*

"It's Ranma and Akane," he said, interrupting her muttered tirade.

"What?!" Ukyou stopped and whirled to glare at him.

"What you're feeling. It's the Link. It started after Akane dragged Ranma off," Ryouga clarified. "It's... not the first time they've done this."

Ukyou blinked, then her eyes widened. "Wait... you mean you can... every time Ranma has...?!"

She grabbed him by the collar. "Are you telling me you've been sensing it every time Ranma and I...!"

"Not every time. Just... I was only in the same building when it happened the one time, so I'm guessing it's a proximity thing," Ryouga said, rubbing the back of his head awkwardly.

"How do you know that's what it is?" Ukyou asked suspiciously.

Ryouga sighed heavily. "Akane and Ranma were in the locker room. I was outside waiting for them and... they weren't quiet."

"You eavesdropped on them!?" Ukyou started to shake him by the throat.

"I... didn't... have... a... choice!" Ryouga managed as the Okonomiyaki chef did her best to throttle him. "They told me to wait!"

Ukyou hesitated. Her grip finally slackened and she backed off, but not before slugging him hard on the shoulder. "Next time try stuffing the tissue in your ears, jackass," she muttered, rubbing her hand.

"I tried that. It didn't help," Ryouga replied, jamming his hands into his pockets.

Ukyou looked away, suddenly seeming uncertain. "That... must have sucked actually, huh? I mean... If it was anyone but those two..." She sighed and shook her head. "Geez, Akane really can be an insensitive jerk sometimes."

"Akane is the insensitive one? What about Ranma?" Ryouga asked.

"Don't tell me you're still defending her...?!" Ukyou shot him an annoyed glance.

"I'm not," Ryouga folded his arms. "Just curious is all."

Ukyou pinched the bridge of her nose, closed her eyes and thought for a bit. "It's... well... As much as I had to admit it, Ranma has never, ever been able to say 'no' to Akane - not when she's sincerely wanted something. You think Ranma would let me or Shampoo smack her around the way Akane
does? Akane has had Ranma wrapped around her little finger and she didn't even know it for the longest time. It was a part of what made her so frustrating. The worst part is that knowing Akane is totally clueless doesn't help! She does it to me now, too!"

"Trust me, I'm pretty well acquainted with it," Ryouga muttered dryly.

"See? Even after she rips your heart out and stomps on it!" Ukyou gestured in his direction. "Ranma doesn't stand a chance! All she has to do is give you that look with those big brown, soulful eyes and you're doing whatever her heart desires! And right now her heart is apparently making up for a lot of years of being sexually repressed because holy crap they've done it on the school grounds twice now!" She tossed her hands up in the air in exasperation. "Once Shampoo hears about this, it'll be a contest!"

Ryouga winced and pinched his nose closed.

Ukyou gave him a sympathetic look. "Sorry, sugar. I'll... uhh... I'll try and get a warning to you if I catch wind of them starting this sort of thing up."

"I'm a little surprised you're not joining in," Ryouga replied. At the nasty glare she shot him he held up a hand to ward her off. "I mean...! You usually kinda get roped into going along with whatever craziness the rest of them get up to, even before the whole fiancee agreement."

Ukyou rolled her eyes. "Yeah? Well I also am a bit more practical and level-headed than those three, and that practicality tells me that the Principal has this place wired up with more bugs and cameras than a prison. Getting a nooner isn't exactly worth the risk of it ending up on tape, especially with Little Ms. Blackmail running the show nowadays."

"I... hadn't thought of that..." Ryouga replied, brow furrowing as he started to consider the implications.

"Yeah, and neither has Akane, which is why, when she and Ranma pop their heads up again, I'm going to drag her off for a little chat," Ukyou said as she led him to the double doors leading outside.

"Just Akane? Not both of them?" Ryouga asked.

"As I said, even if Ranma was aware, she'd just cave when Akane said 'Pretty please, Ranma?'" Ukyou huffed, managing a fairly respectable imitation of Akane's pleading tone. "You can talk to her about it. Or Nabiki will, but I figure she deserves a gentler wake up call than the one I'm in the mood to give Akane."

"Seems like a double standard to me," Ryouga said. At her sharp look he stopped and held up his hands. "I'm just saying!"

"Odd that you're arguing against Ranma for once. Lately you've been pretty staunchly on her side."

Ukyou folded her arms and gave him a skeptical look.

"Ranma also hates being coddled or getting special treatment," Ryouga pointed out. "And she's super protective of Akane. She's gonna balk if she thinks you're picking on Akane and letting her off the hook."

Ukyou sighed in frustration. "I know, you're right. I just... I don't think talking to them together will work very well. I know Akane will listen to me, and I've gotten pretty good at getting her to listen even when it's stuff she doesn't want to hear. And you..." She poked Ryouga in the chest. "Like it or not, Ranma talks about stuff with you that she won't talk about with any of us. So if there's anything she's not okay about she'll probably tell you about it before she tells any of us."
"Since when did I get the job of being Ranma's confidante?" Ryouga asked, mostly to himself.

"Since you became her best friend?" Ukyou replied.

"You're her best friend."

Ukyou sighed and shook her head. "I'm her fiancee. I learned the hard way over this past year that you can't have both. I'm a lot of things with Ranchan… but a trusted outsider isn't one of them. That kind of trust doesn't survive the first kiss. Once there's that… investment in the other person, it changes things, for better or worse." She cocked her head, and gave him a searching look. "Keep that in mind, okay?"

Ryouga gave her a confused look. "Okay? But… why?"

"Just do, all right?" Ukyou patted him on the shoulder. "Now… help me think of baby names."

Ryouga blinked. "Baby names…?"

"Yeah," Ukyou grinned. "I figured it wasn't fair of me to steal 'Sachiko' from you, and since I'm obviously the father of Ranma's baby…"

Ryouga didn't hear the rest over the *smack* of his hand hitting his own face.

He was spared that awkward conversation by the arrival of another, as the door swung open and Ranma and Akane stepped out. Akane was wearing the biggest grin Ryouga had seen on her face since she managed to get a hit in on Ranma during sparring.

"Oh! Akane!" Ukyou said brightly. She hopped over and snatched up Akane's arm. "Ranma, you don't mind if I borrow our mutual fiancee for a moment, do you? Didn't think so! Keep Ryouga company for me! Thanks! Bye!"

"Wait, Ukyou, what are youuuuuuuuuuuuu-!" Akane's question became a yelp as the okonomiyaki chef dragged her bodily off around the corner of the building.

"What was that all about?" Ranma asked, frowning after the two.

Ryouga sighed. "Ranma... you remember what happened in the locker room with you and Akane, right?"

Ranma blinked, then turned beet red. "W-wait, why you bringing that up…?!"

"You remember how you could feel when I was starting to lose it when all of my 'fiancees' showed up, even though you weren't touching me?" Ryouga added, folding his arms and looking at her evenly, waiting for her to catch on.

It didn't take long. The blush drained from her face, as well as all other color. "Oh…"

"I think it's actually worse now that Ukyou is part of the Link… like it made it stronger," Ryouga said thoughtfully. "But… That's why Ukyou is dragging Akane off to have a chat. She figures it was her idea."

Ranma glanced in the direction the two had gone, and looked about ready to follow. "That's…!"

Ryouga reached out and caught her arm to stop her. "Look, let Ukyou handle this. Like it or not, she's better at handling Akane and giving her bad news than you are."
Ranma whirled, jerked her arm free and glared at him. "Since when did you end up my relationship manager, huh? I already got Nabiki doing that. I don't need it from you, too!"

"Somebody has to watch out for you!" Ryouga shot back. "It's not like you'll ever actually ask for help if you really need it! You said yourself that you've almost blown this too many times to count! Maybe you should start actually listening to other people for once, huh?!

"And you're saying I should start by listening to the guy who used to express his concern for my well being with the phrase 'Ranma Saotome, prepare to die'?!" Ranma asked sourly.

"I…" Ryouga trailed off, feeling an unexpected pang of guilt at that. Part of him had thought they were past all of that. Some uncharitable part of him pointed out it was really his fault in the first place. "I… Fine. You've made your point." He turned away, jamming his hands in his pockets.

He felt a touch on his arm, just a flicker of the Link, a brief flash of concern. He turned, blinking in surprise at Ranma's worried expression.

Ranma blushed and looked away immediately, as if she had been caught at something. "I… Okay, sorry… that… that was low. You don't do that anymore and it's not fair for me to keep using it."

Ryouga felt an odd heat in his own face, and he realized it was because Ranma had just apologized to him. Ranma never apologized… unless it was to Akane. "It's…" He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "No… it's cool. It's my own damn fault. It's not like I ever really wanted you dead, anyway."

"Oh really? Coulda fooled me…" Ranma sniffed.

"Even after all the times I could have done it, but didn't?" Ryouga asked, his jaw tightening as he felt the prickles of hurt.

"Well… I mean yeah you could have, but… I dunno… I always figured you didn't because it would be dishonorable or something…" Ranma replied weakly.

Ryouga shook his head. "I just… I just wanted you to respect me," he said finally. "I guess in the messed up way our friendship always worked the only way I thought I could do that was by being a threat. That's why I was always down your throat about Akane, too. I… I never really figured I had a chance with her, but… I want you to at least respect her." He huffed and looked away from her.

"Sometimes it feels like there's nothing you do respect, and that's probably the most frustrating thing of all."

"Izzat why you were always angry at me all the time? You don't think I respect you?" Ranma asked.

"Well… you don't, do you?" Ryouga glanced sidelong at her, raising an eyebrow. "You don't hate me. I'll even buy you think of me as a friend, but I don't think you respect me."

"That's not true!" Ranma glared at him. "I… look." She hopped up onto the railing of the landing, crouching down and wrapping her arms around her knees, perched like a bird. "I'm not… I know I'm not real good at showing it. Respect… wasn't really something I learned a lot about growing up. Pops taught me you only respected someone who was strong, an' only then until you proved you were stronger. That was why he was always harping on how I needed to show him 'respect.'" She sighed. "Thing was, when I finally did beat him… I found out that deal only worked one-way. Nabiki has been teaching me that my whole idea of 'respect' is kinda messed up."

"That's putting it mildly," Ryouga said, giving her a skeptical look.
"So… I get where you're coming from. I ain't ever shown you respect. But… that was 'cuz I didn't know how." She looked him in the eyes. "I always did respect you. In a sense. I trusted you. I do trust you. That's… that's about as close as I ever got to really respecting someone. I know that ain't the same, but..." She trailed off, her gaze dropping. "I guess I'm trying to say I'm sorry. For not showing you the respect you deserved."

Ryouga was silent for a moment, not entirely sure how to respond to that, or even properly process it. He walked over to the steps next to the railing she was perched on and sat down. He chuckled dryly. "Fine. Just don't get sappy on me," he said with a small grin.

She grinned back and the tension dissolved, the easier sense of camaraderie settling into its place. 

That's better, Ryouga thought, somewhat bemused that some things really hadn't changed much between them since middle school. Now that the feud had ended a lot of the old dynamics from those days had started to resurface.

He noticed her fidgeting out of the corner of his eye and glanced up at her. She was looking away from him and showing that restless demeanor that said she wanted to say something but was having trouble finding the words/courage for it.

He kept his mouth shut. Prodding Ranma generally didn't help things along much, and usually just triggered some kind of furious denial that she was trying to say anything at all.

"Umm… Ryo…" Ranma started. "A-about Sachiko…"

"Yeah?" Ryouga replied noncommittally. He felt a slight sinking sensation in his gut. "Damnit, I thought we had gotten away from this…"

"In your dream… not the one last night but… but the first one… well, the one you had when I came in through your bedroom window and woke you up… I… I guess you could have dreamed about her before that…. Did you dream about her before that?" Ranma started to slip into babbling.

Ryouga reached up and lightly tapped her on the knee with his fist. "Oi, ask your question, Saotome!"

She glared at him. "I'm getting to it, ya jerk!" She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "The first time you had a dream about Sachiko… who was her Mom?"

"I… urk…" Ryouga froze up. The lie would be easy. It would get him out of trouble. Heck, it would even make more sense than the truth. All he needed to do was open his mouth and say Akari's name. It was an easy name to say. He liked saying her name. He even liked the idea of her in that scenario. It was easy to imagine her as his future wife and as the mother of his children.

But it wasn't the truth. At looking up at Ranma's searching blue eyes, he couldn't bring himself to tell them the lie right away. That moment's hesitation gave Ranma her answer.

"It was me… wasn't it?" Ranma asked softly.

"I…" Ryouga struggled to find some sort of explanation or excuse. It didn't help that all he remembered of the dream itself was just fragments. "I mean it wasn't…" He sighed heavily, slumping. "Just… don't read too much into it."

He heard her move, but didn't look up, figuring she was probably going to walk off now. To his surprise, he felt a presence next to him, and the sense of her body heat as she sat on the steps next to
him. He shot her a surprised look.

She was studying the concrete at their feet. "It's not a big deal that you dreamed about me, if that's what you're panicking about," she said, her voice quiet. "It's not like you got control over it. Heck, I had a few dreams about Kuno after he said he was in love with me." She shuddered involuntarily.

"Mine… wasn't exactly a nightmare, though…" Ryouga admitted tentatively. That felt like a dangerous admission to him, edging closer to admitting things.

"I… I get that," Ranma twiddled her thumbs. "I don't think… I mean God knows with all the skimpy outfits I've paraded around Nerima in, I…" She sighed. "That's not the point, okay? It's… why dream of me as a mother?"

Ryouga blinked, giving her a confused look. "What do you mean?"

Ranma closed her eyes tightly. "I can see fantasizing about me, okay?" she said quickly. "I mean… you find me… my girl side… attractive, so… I get it. It ain't news. I mean, you straight up told me I was cute when you first found out about the curse, and I've used it pretty mercilessly against you with all my stupid disguises." She shuddered and shook her head. "B-but… but… I mean, why imagine me as-as someone with a kid?"

"What, you weren't planning on having kids one day?" Ryouga asked lightly, intentionally ignoring the context.

"Not like this!" Ranma looked up at him. Her eyes were slightly wild, pools of conflicted emotion. "Not-not… not someone who's actually responsible for a kid!" She pulled her legs up to her chest again, hugging them as she resumed staring at the concrete. "I mean… look at me. I'm a pile of issues! I can barely take care of myself, much less… much less…" She squeezed her eyes shut. "Moms are supposed to be good at taking care of their kids, right?"

"I like to think Dads are too," Ryouga replied. "They're not always, obviously…"

Ranma snorted. "Yeah. Uh huh. I got a double helping of that 'not always', thanks." She rested her chin on her knees. "But… I always figured if I had kids, whoever I married wouldn't be dumb enough to leave me alone with the kid, much less drag 'em off for fourteen years wandering Asia. But… but a Mom? A Mom's… she's gotta…" She blushed and uncurled a bit, putting her hand on her belly. "She's gotta be there for the kid right from the start. She's all the kid's got. That's like… Kasumi level stuff. Any of the girls… as rough as they get, they've all had moments, y'know? Where you can see it in 'em. 'Specially Akane… but me?" she trailed off.

"Then why worry about it?" Ryouga asked. "It's not like you're in any extreme danger of ending up a mother, right?"

"But it's not like I can't!" Ranma shot back, glaring at him. Her hand moved, her arm curling almost protectively around her midsection. "I-I mean… all the parts are there!" She shuddered again and quickly pulled her knees back up. "Nevermind! It's stupid. This is all stupid!"

Ryouga's eyes widened as he caught a flicker of understanding. "You… want to be a mother."

"No!" Ranma protested hotly, but she couldn't meet his eyes. She looked away, then curled a little tighter. "I… I mean… not… not now. Even thinking 'bout kids either way would be dumb now… b-but…" She shook her head again. "I should be able to just laugh this idea off as… as stupid! Or… or at least it should creep me out! B-but…" She rested her head on her knees, chewing her lower lip.
"Something keeps dragging me back to it. I can… I can remember what it felt like to… to hold her and…" She swallowed. "This… this is weird, right? I'm being weird. Tell me I'm being weird so I can get over this."

Ryouga folded his own arms, resting them on his knees as he regarded her for a long moment. The answer was even easier this time. It wasn't even technically a lie; she was being weird, as only Ranma could be.

"I think you'd be a good Mom."

She gave him a wide-eyed, almost fearful look.

It was his turn to study the cracks in the concrete. "I mean, you'd wanna do a little growing up first, but… You know better than anyone what growing up without a Mom was like, and what you wished for from your Mom when you finally met her. So… just try and be that."

"But… what if I can't? What if I try, but I screw it up?" Ranma gestured feverishly. "What if I start getting the same stupid ideas my idiot father got when I was born?!

"You won't." Ryouga gave her a sidelong glance and a grin. "I won't let you."

Ranma blinked.

"What, you thought I was going somewhere, Saotome?" Ryouga arched an eyebrow. "Once we get all this nonsense in our lives sorted out, that I was just gonna walk off into the sunset and not come back?" He chuckled dryly. "Mebbe I woulda actually tried that at one point but… Let's be honest. Fate or Karma or whatever… something keeps dragging me back into your life. So… I'll be around when you have kids, too. And if you think I'm gonna let you slack off with a kid around…"

"I… I get it!" Ranma said nervously, waving him off. She looked away shyly, though she was smiling now. "Umm… thanks, Ryo."

Ryouga shrugged nonchalantly. "It's what friends do… right?"

Ranma smiled and nodded, then scooted a little closer to him. "Yeah…" She relaxed a little, mirroring his pose, her shoulder just lightly touching his. Something about the casual contact was… reassuring to her.

"Just promise me we won't end up like Mr. Tendo and Pops, okay?"

"Fairly certain it's not physically possible for you to get that fat, Ranma."

"Who says I'm going to end up the fat one!?"

"Because you'd look terrible with a mustache."

"Hey! I could pull it off better'n you!"

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Nabiki still hadn't managed to shake the 'itchy' feeling from earlier, though now it was just making her irritable. She wanted to track down Ranma and find out if her suspicions were correct, and from there to decide if she was going to get angry about it. She was leaning towards getting angry, to be honest.

As it turned out, though, she didn't need to find Ranma, as someone else had beaten her to the punch.
She rounded the corner to find Ukyou confronting a subdued-looking Akane. Ukyou's arms were crossed, her foot was tapping and she generally looked rather annoyed. All of which just confirmed Nabiki's suspicions.

_REALLY_ baby sister? Nabiki sighed heavily, loudly enough to announce her presence, then folded her arms, leaned against the wall and waited for them to notice her.

Akane turned, saw her older sister looking as cross as Ukyou had been, and ducked her head, turning beet red.

"I guess Ukyou already gave you the lecture about the side effects of mixing the Link with irresponsible behaviour at school?" Nabiki asked.

"Does _everyone_ have to know?!" Akane protested stubbornly, adopting one of her typical sulking postures.

"This whole arrangement comes with compromises, baby sister," Nabiki replied.

"I just wanted some time alone with Ranma! Is that so wrong?!" Akane shot back, clenching her fists. "Why am I always last?!"

Nabiki narrowed her eyes. She was in no mood for an Akane 'me-too!' temper tantrum, especially when she had been getting precious little time with Ranma herself. "You really want the honest answer to that, Akane?"

Ukyou held up a hand, giving Nabiki a stern look that surprised the Middle Tendo into silence. She took Akane by the shoulders and turned her to look at her.

"Listen, sugar. I know it's frustrating, especially since it's that potential you've always had finally getting developed that's put you last in line this time," Ukyou said gently. "But you won't always be last, I promise. It's like a recipe right now… you know how some ingredients need to go in at different times because they cook at different speeds? None of them are unimportant, but you have to do it in the right order to make the recipe work. That's kind of what we all are right now. Does that make sense?" She cocked her head, waiting for the youngest Tendo's response.

Akane sighed heavily. "You're right, Ukyou. I just… It's hard sometimes, you know? _Especially_ when you and Ryouga come back joking about having a baby with Ranma."

"That's fair," Ukyou replied, nodding. "I'm sorry. Look, you'll understand better once it's your turn. I was a bit giddy this morning and I wasn't really thinking. And… nobody is mad at you for sneaking off with Ranma, love. It's just the place and the timing were a little inconvenient."

"So… Next time I kidnap Ranma, I should take her further away?" Akane asked, a smile tugging at the corner of her mouth.

"Probably best. Actually, to be safe, just invite me along and I'll tell you for sure when you've gotten us far enough away." Ukyou winked.

Akane smiled and leaned in and gave her a quick kiss on the lips. "I'll keep that in mind. Now… I have a very _very_ awkward apology to make to Ryouga. Excuse me." She stepped around Ukyou and slipped past Nabiki, heading down the hall towards the doors.

Nabiki raised an eyebrow. "Nicely defused," she said.

"I get to talk a lot of people down in my restaurant," Ukyou replied. "I'm basically the bartender for
the lunchtime crowd. Besides, I kind of understand Akane better than most."

"I've noticed," Nabiki replied. "Thank you. I probably was about to make that whole situation worse. I wasn't in the right frame of mind for this." She sighed and shook her head. "Which I can't afford to be since this sort of thing is supposed to be my job…"

Ukyou walked up to her. "Don't be too hard on yourself, sugar. Everyone has an off day and it's not like that's your only contribution. Besides, you've basically been killing it every other time." She patted Nabiki in the shoulder.

There was a spark at the contact that made them both gasp, like a jolt of static electricity, except it was accompanied by a sudden rush of perception as the Link suddenly opened up between them.

Ukyou jerked back her hand reflexively, breaking the connection, then looked at it, confused. "Woah…"

Nabiki steadied herself against the wall. "Well… I guess that answers the question of whether you and I are Linked or not. Though it's usually less… uh… abrupt."

"I think Ranma was talking about this happening," Ukyou said. "We should probably tell her about it." She tentatively extended her hand. "Uhh… test? To make sure."

Nabiki nodded, swallowing and reaching out tentatively to touch Ukyou's fingers with her own, ready to jerk back if there was another jolt. There wasn't. This time the Link simply flowed smoothly into being, and she became aware of the ebb and flow of Ukyou's emotions.

"That is weird…" Ukyou said, blinking a few times. "I mean, I know I just spent all night linked to Ranma and Ryouga… but it's still weird."

Nabiki felt a bit self-conscious. Ranma was one thing… even with Ryouga there was that playful interest… and she was eagerly anticipating being able to peek into Shampoo's emotional landscape. But it was a bit uncomfortable to be sharing such an intimate thing with Ukyou. The girl was a friend, to be sure, but knowing she was seeing her emotions and seeing Ukyou's in turn made Nabiki feel more than a little awkward.

"You okay, sugar?" Ukyou cocked her head. "Your… ummm… I don't even know the right words for it. It got kinda spiky over there."

Nabiki closed her eyes and sighed. You're going to have to deal with this, Nabiki. "I'm feeling self-conscious," she forced herself to say. "Because this is all a bit awkward, because we're not… you and I aren't…"

"'Knocking boots'?" Ukyou asked with a grin.

"Not quite what I was going to say, but… it gets the point across, I guess," Nabiki sighed.

Ukyou nodded, drawing her hand back. "Yeah, I can see that. Sorry. I guess it's kind of like having to strip down in front of a casual acquaintance, huh?"

Nabiki took a deep breath and held her hand back out. "Yes. But we're not casual acquaintances, Ukyou. We're…" She frowned, not sure of the right word. "I don't know just what we are, but this is a factor in our lives now, right? We should probably try and get used to this… this… level of awareness now, before the option to not be in close proximity gets a lot more scarce."

Ukyou regarded Nabiki's hand, then nodded and took it, closing her eyes as the Link flowed once
more. "I guess… It's kind of like one those things you need to get accustomed to living with another person?"

"Maybe a *tad* more intimate, but… yeah," Nabiki replied. She took a minute to 'listen' to Ukyou's emotions. The Chef had a much more stable underpinning than Ranma or Ryousha, though there was definitely a more volatile surface layer to her.

"Is that going to cause us trouble?" Ukyou asked, a look of concentration on her face. "That… things aren't… I dunno, 'even' between us all?"

Nabiki considered her answer before she said anything. She could sense an increase in 'spikes' from Ukyou's emotions, which she assumed were anxiety in some form. Not critical, but this was obviously something Ukyou was concerned about.

*Which is good, because I WANT everyone thinking about this.* Nabiki closed her eyes. "I think, to borrow Ryousha's term for it, we have to treat this like a family… and to understand that relationships aren't always equal or the same in a family but… it all works out in the end somehow." Nabiki sighed with frustration at her inability to articulate it more clearly. "I think that as long as we are *aware* there's always going to be ebbs and flows and the occasional disparity, and that the relationships each of us have with every one of the others is going to be unique and it's own 'thing'," she shrugged, "Well, we're probably still doomed, but it won't be from tearing each other apart."

Ukyou snorted. She leaned against the wall beside Nabiki, her hand settling into a less awkward clasp. "Okay, that I can handle. I was a little worried that the Link would… 'push' things in a direction I didn't want things to go."

"In my experience those sorts of fears are kind of silly. If you don't want to go in that direction, then you won't go in that direction," Nabiki said as nonchalantly as she could.

"Like how you didn't want to fall for Ranma but did anyway?" Ukyou asked, eyebrow arching.

Nabiki scowled. "That… that was more *denial*. Why, are you worried about suddenly developing a deep and uncontrollable longing for me?" She raised an eyebrow of her own.

Ukyou blushed and looked away. "N-no! No, it's… I was kinda worried about things getting weird with Ryousha, you know?"

"With Ryousha?" Nabiki frowned, confused. "Okay, aside from the obvious complicated mess that would cause… what would be the big problem with that?"

Ukyou closed her eyes. Nabiki could sense more turmoil in her emotions and kept quiet to let the other girl gather her thoughts.

"Hindsight is 20/20, right?" Ukyou said softly. "Sometimes you get so caught up in chasing after something, you don't realize what you've trampled on to get there. For the longest time I've wanted Ranma to see me… well, *romantically*. It used to frustrate me how I kept getting 'friendzoned' with him. But at the same time, there was… this sort of easy trust he had with me. And I really valued that. But the more I tried to get closer to him, the more it eroded that trust. I mean… he still trusts me, but… it's all wrapped up with obligations and the physical side of things. I realized afterwards that it had lost that… *simplicity*. I kinda felt like he had just wanted a 'guy friend.'"

"And you feel guilty for changing that?" Nabiki asked.

Ukyou shook her head. "No… well, *yeah*, a little, but… it's not like it would have been fair to either of us to pretend things were actually that way between us. As much as he wanted a 'guy friend',
that's not what he ever was to me, and trying to be that for him was just tearing me up inside. But," she sighed heavily, "but the stupid thing is? I want a 'guy friend' too. I just didn't want it to be Ranma. And... at some point... that's what me and Ryouga ended up becoming."

"Really? No interest at all?" Nabiki asked playfully.

Ukyou gave her an annoyed look. "Trust me, sugar. With the amount of time we've spent alone together? If something was gonna spark it would have." She chuckled. "He's... he's what I need more than anything else in my life right now, and that's family. I've got plenty of romantic entanglements. And so does he, to be honest." She made a sour face. "Even if some of them are in common."

"So... what does that make us?" Nabiki asked playfully.

Ukyou gave her a bemused look. "I'm still figuring you out, sugar. Currently? Business partners. Though don't think I didn't notice those spikes when I mentioned Ryouga. You're interested in him."

"You don't have a problem with that, do you?" Nabiki asked archly. "Considering your current relationship with my baby sister?"

Ukyou looked surprised. "Not even gonna deny it, huh? Well, I guess 'blunt' is kinda your thing, isn't it? In that case it depends on what you plan to do with it," Ukyou replied. "Even now, I'm still not sure I get you, Nabiki Tendo. I just wanna make sure Ryouga doesn't get hurt, and that's gonna be hard enough with him..." she trailed off, "Y'know, with him and Ranma."

"If you're worried I'm going to string him along and use him, I won't," Nabiki replied. "It's hard to be blind to the feelings of someone who's emotions can literally knock you to the ground from the other side of the school. Ryouga and the Link are a crash course in empathy. But... ultimately, what I do hinges a lot on him and Ranma. I'm curious what your take on things between them is." She cocked her head. "What do you think? Just 'guy friends'?"

Ukyou sighed heavily. "Dear god, no." She shook her head, unconsciously squeezing Nabiki's hand as more of that dark worry bubbled up. "Before all this Link stuff, he and I used to talk a lot. Not even plotting, just... talking about stuff with someone who didn't have totally competing goals, but kinda understood your situation, you know? Ryouga had two topics: Akane Tendo and Ranma Saotome. Akane was the usual nonspecific mooning and zoning out until I smacked him over the head so, weirdly enough, it was usually Ranma he'd settle on."

"A lot of fantasies about beating Ranma into a pulp, then?" Nabiki asked.

"No... that's the thing. I'd probably just smack him for that too," Ukyou's gaze was on the ground. Emotions Nabiki recognized as guilt and worry continued to bubble forth. "Everything... and I mean everything... had an undercurrent of getting Ranma to respect him, and frustration about when Ranma didn't. It wasn't enough to beat Ranma... I mean, Ryouga's done that. It was always about respect. Even when he complained about how Ranma didn't respect Akane... it was like it was all outrage about seeing someone else experience what he was experiencing. And that was something I kinda had in common with him, too. That should have set off warning bells... especially when Ryouga would complain about Ranma vamping him like she does. He was always furious about how she was making fun of him rather than being upset about the whole 'come on' in the first place. I always asked him why he never seemed to be able to see through her disguises - and I never got a decent answer out of him. Part of me always wondered... Well, 'what if'? You know? What if Ranma wasn't teasing one time?"

"It already happened," Nabiki said casually. "Ranma got tagged with some sort of magic fishing rod,
fell madly in love with Ryouga and started doing all the creepy stalker-ish stuff love potions seem to always make people do." Nabiki shrugged. "Aside from things being really awkward, nothing happened."

"Yeah, but that's magic. That doesn't count. Like you said, it's pretty obvious and creepy," Ukyou replied. "I mean, Ryouga isn't the fastest on the uptake and he figured out it was bogus. But… there's no love spell or potion in play right now... is there?"

"Not so far as I can tell. And I've been checking," Nabiki tried to sound unconcerned. "No, as far as I can tell, all of this..." she gestured around vaguely, "is just... the next stage of The Madness, I guess?"

"'The Madness'. It worries me a bit you have a term for it," Ukyou said, sounding a little bemused. "But I guess that makes sense. You seem to be the one person who has a grasp on actually managing all this chaos."

Nabiki sighed heavily. She suddenly felt very tired. "I thought I did. I jumped on the tiger's back thinking I could tame it and make it do tricks. It seems I've convinced everyone else that I know what I'm doing too." She pinched the bridge of her nose. "And now I'm in way too far over my head to let on that I haven't the slightest clue what I'm doing."

Ukyou looked at her for a moment, then gave her hand another reassuring squeeze. "You wanna talk about it?"

Nabiki glanced at her from the corner of her eye, quizzically.

"I'm a pretty good listener. Almost a professional you might say," Ukyou said with a wan smile. "You can't keep all this stuff to yourself. Then you're just making the same mistake Ranma made, right? Trying to shoulder it all?"

"It's not like it's really stuff you guys can help with," Nabiki muttered.

"Firstly, that's not the point of talking about it with someone," Ukyou replied. "Most of the people who lay out their problems to me at Ucchan's don't expect me to actually do anything to fix them. And secondly? Try me." She nudged Nabiki with her elbow.

Nabiki took a deep breath. "All right... to start with, Himura's Grandfather has turned this whole volleyball thing with Ranma into a test for her... and me. If we lose? Well... probably not going to end well. But if we win? The Yakuza are probably going to want to chat with me for one reason or another."

"I'd think something like that would be right up your alley?" Ukyou asked.

Nabiki shot her a horrified look. "Are you insane?! I'd think the myths and legends about them would be enough to worry even you. Me... I know just enough to know that the myths are myths, the reality is actually a lot worse, and that I am an insignificant fish in their big pond. And once you're in that pond, you're in it with the sharks forever."

Ukyou shrugged. "So we'd be sunk unless we could find some Master Mercenary Genius to help us deal with them." She reached over and poked Nabiki's shoulder with her finger. "Oh, hey. I guess we're good then?"

Nabiki shuddered. "Don't joke. I'm not on that level. I don't want to be. That's why I wanted to go into business, not crime! Business has rules, it has structure and if you screw up the worst thing they do is come for your money. Maybe there's prison time if you really mess up... But they don't come..."
for your family."

"Depends on the business, sugar," Ukyou replied. "I've set up shop in the same neighborhood as some pretty shady outfits."

"Not like this," Nabiki shot back.

She reached into her pocket and fished out her cell phone, swiping to the new app that had been added. She then held it up for Ukyou to see. "I've also come to the attention of some people who want Himura's Grandfather and his company to go down. They're offering to swap their hacking services for any information I might be able to get in this meeting I was promised - should I happen to 'beat' Himura. Basically, they want me to turn stoolie on a major player in the local branch of the Yakuza."

Ukyou frowned. "What do you need a hacker for?"

Nabiki sighed and looked at her phone contemplatively. "I haven't been able to dig up anything on what Himura is doing behind the scenes. She's been out of town a couple of times, including a few trips to the airport. There's this whole issue about how Ranma's birth gender should have disqualified her from playing volleyball competitively but hasn't, and the fact that Himura is so supremely unconcerned about all of this, even with how easily Ranma's team is trouncing other high-ranking teams. She's way too smart not to be worried… unless she's already got a rock-solid play. But I haven't got the contacts to find out what she might be up to. Except… this one."

"What would taking that deal mean?" Ukyou asked softly.

"Most likely scenario? Some sort of Witness Protection. New identity for me and the family. Move to a new place. It'd affect you guys too… anyone who's connected to me, really. Worst case, we all end up hunted by the Yakuza."

Ukyou looked thoughtful a moment, then shrugged. "Okay. That's it?"

Nabiki gaped at her. "'That's it'!? Ukyou…!"

Ukyou rolled her eyes. "Yeah, I know what you're gonna say; 'Guns on one side, Martial Artists on the other results in a lot of dead martial artists.' Look, I've dealt with punks with guns before, even a couple of Yakuza trying to get protection money. You don't have to beat all the guns in Japan, you know. You just gotta be too much trouble to be worth taking down. All of us together? We're easily more trouble than the Yakuza want. Trust me."

Nabiki opened her mouth, closed it again, then looked at her phone. "But…"

Ukyou turned to her, squeezed her hand and reached out and tapped the icon. "There. It's my fault now. You do what you need to do with that to take Himura down and let us worry about the heavy lifting parts, okay?"

The cat icon animated, giving a thumbs up before going back to being static. Nabiki stared at it for a moment, then looked over at Ukyou.

"I… thank you," Nabiki managed finally.

"We've been relying on you pretty heavily of late to make the tough decisions. I thought it was about time we took some of the load off," Ukyou replied.

Nabiki's phone buzzed - an incoming text message with no originating number.
She swallowed nervously, then squeezed Ukyou's hand. For once she was grateful to have some support. *Huh… look at me relying on others,* she thought as she brought up the message, which was simply a notification that they'd be calling her at the end of the school day. *The old me would be appalled.* She thumbed her phone off and gave Ukyou a tentative nod.

She felt a reassuring squeeze in return, and the warmth of reassurance from Ukyou through the Link. It helped, somehow. Nothing had changed - all of the factors were still *exactly* as bad as they were before - but somehow they seemed more manageable. As though a big part of what had made them seem so hopeless and insurmountable was… just loneliness.

*I think… I think I'm glad I'm not that Nabiki anymore.*

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Konatsu was sweeping in front of the shop, letting his mind wander. There was a pleasant zen to chores. It had been a solace and a refuge for him when he had lived with his Stepfamily at the Red Hot Tea House. Naturally, his family had abused the zen-like state he adopted for such tasks to plant a number of rather powerful subconscious suggestions but, with them gone and Ukyou's support, he had made quite a bit of progress in asserting himself. Still, it was nice to be alone and not have to keep his guard up - and when it was quiet like this he could settle back into that pleasant trance that made the work fly by.

"Konatsu!"

*Or… perhaps another time,* Konatsu thought regretfully, looking up from his sweeping to see Mineko trotting towards him. He leaned the broom against the wall and bowed formally. "Mineko-san, it's a pleasure to see you again."

Mineko looked around nervously. "Konatsu, I need to talk to you. But… Can we go somewhere else to talk, please?"

Konatsu blinked. Despite her demeanor, he did not sense anyone threatening in the immediate vicinity. "Is something amiss?"

"I… just don't want to talk here," Mineko shook her head. "Please?"

Konatsu considered. Technically, *Ucchan's* was still open, though it was dead slow at this time of day. He had seen Ukyou close the shop briefly for errands or even for personal reasons but he had never considered doing so himself. Still… Mineko was a friend, and obviously unsettled. Loyalty to Ukyou and a sense of duty warred with the impulse to help a friend, and ultimately the latter won out.

He lifted the store's *noren* off its rack, furled it, slid open the door and placed it inside. "It is slow right now. I can afford a few minutes if it is something urgent," he said, turning to Mineko after having secured the restaurant. "Where would you care to talk?"

"Anywhere… just… not here," Mineko took his hand, looking around for a moment. "I guess the park will do. Come on." She started to lead him at a brisk pace. Once they were a block away from the restaurant, she seemed to relax a little. "Himura has that place bugged. I didn't want her to overhear what I have to tell you."

Konatsu scowled. "I was not aware she had stooped to such lows in her conflict with Ranma and my Lady Ukyou."

Mineko laughed, a bitter, almost hopeless sound. "Oh god, Konatsu, you have *no* idea! She's gone
off the deep end. Really, really gone off the deep end." She led Konatsu to the small park, finally releasing his hand. She turned and sat down heavily on a bench, clasping her hands in her lap and shuddering.

"What has happened?" Konatsu asked, gently prompting her to speak. He felt an odd, growing sense of worry.

"Please, please understand before I say anything that I didn't want any of this," Mineko said, giving him an imploring look. "I just… I just wanted to play competitively. I wanted to go to the Olympics. I… started experimenting with… substances. Not seriously, but… but I had heard so many athletes use that stuff that I figured… I needed to know what it did and what it felt like; if it was something I could overcome with regular training or… or if I was going to have to accept that it was part of what I needed to do to get where I wanted to be. Himura… Himura found out. She covered it up without me even needing to ask. Said I was too promising to allow something like that to get in my way. I… I believed in her. I believed her when she said she could get me where I wanted to go without the drugs."

Konatsu sat down next to her. "You feel she has betrayed this trust, then."

Mineko clenched her fists. "It was just supposed to be volleyball. It was just supposed to be a game! But… But now that Himura has power." She shuddered. "She's started getting in over her head, I think. She made a deal with some scary people from China. She's got students at Furinkan working on some sort of… of potion. One that changes people."

"Changes them?" Konatsu asked.

"Man to woman, human to animal, that kinda stuff. Like the curses Ranma and the others have, except… except the changes are one-way and permanent. And they affect you up here," Mineko tapped her temple. "Convince you you always were whatever it is they turn you into. I think they also make it so other people can rewrite your memories. Something about a 'suggestible state'."

"That's horrible!" Konatsu's eyes widened. As someone who had always had a disparity between mind and body, he could well imagine the agony that could come from being forced into a form not your own, especially if the knowledge of what had been done to you was taken. You would never be quite right, and never know why.

"She's… she's looking for test subjects," Mineko said. "People who… who she thinks might actually welcome the change, at least on some level, I guess." She swallowed. "Konatsu… you're on the list!"

"She… wishes to target me for her experiment?" Konatsu was taken aback.

"You and a number of other martial artists who have… she called it 'gender dysphoria'. I think she wants to test it so she can use it on Ranma, so she wants someone with… with a similar mindset? I don't know." She dropped her head into her hands. "I don't know anymore! It's all so crazy now!"

"I see." Konatsu put a comforting hand on her shoulder. "You needn't worry about me. I am more than capable of protecting myself." He paused as he considered the import of what Mineko had told him. "They… are seeking someone who they believe would welcome the effects of this potion?"

Mineko nodded, glancing at him. "I… don't know why, I mean, obviously no one wants their memories rewritten, even if they do want to… transition I guess. Right?"

Konatsu was silent a moment.
"Konatsu?" Mineko asked after the moment stretched on.

"Some memories... I would not miss," Konatsu said finally. "There have been times I have dearly wished I could... rewrite who I was. To be more assertive, to be more sure, to be..." His eyes flicked down. His form was feminine in all of the right places, and all of it the artful use of padding and deception. "To be more genuine. My life since my parents died has not always been easy. Sometimes I wonder... who I might have become had I not fallen to my Stepmother's care."

"You'd... actually want this?" Mineko asked, her voice a little hushed.

That comment brought Konatsu out of his reverie. He smiled and shook his head, eyes closed. "No... no, I do not. The idea is tempting on the surface, but the price..."

He felt a prick on his arm. His eyes snapped open and he turned to see a small spot of red on his forearm and Mineko holding what appeared to be some kind of tranquilizer dart in her hand. Her guilty expression filled in the rest for him.

He bolted to his feet, lurched and stumbled, but his legs were already numb and heavy. He managed a few steps before falling to the ground.

Mineko ran over to him, kneeling near him as he struggled against the poison. "Just... just relax, Konatsu! Please? It's... It's for the best! You have to trust me that this is for the best..."

"Mnnrrrrgh..." Konatsu tried to speak, but already his tongue was thick and unresponsive. Spots were dancing across his vision as the darkness closed in from the edges. Part of him wondered what kind of sedative could possibly work so fast without killing him. Part of him wondered if it was actually a sedative at all.

_Ukyou... I'm sorry..._ His last thoughts faded into the darkness as his consciousness was ripped forcibly from him.

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The noise and confusion of the game made an almost comforting distraction for Nabiki when her phone finally did ring.

She excused herself from her seat. Ranma's team was winning handily; well enough that Ranma was feeling comfortable enough to show off. The crowd was eating it up.

And Himura, sitting on the team bench, looked _happy_ with the development.

Something was up. Nabiki hadn't been able to relax as the sense that she was missing something fundamentally important gnawed at the back of her mind.

As soon as she felt the buzz of the phone in her pocket, she tapped Hiroshi on the shoulder and motioned for him and Daisuke to follow her. Ignoring his confused look, she got up and fished the phone out of her pocket.

"Nabiki Tendo," she said as she deftly slipped through the crowd and out the side exit into the cool night air.

"We were worried you weren't going to take us up on our offer," the highly filtered voice said on the other end of the line. "Are you alone?"

"No," Nabiki stated matter-of-factly. "But they're associates and I trust them, and I'm done flying this
solo. Before we discuss anything I want to be clear any protections need to extend to all those associated with me."

"That's... a tall order," the voice of Alibaba said hesitantly.

"It's that or no deal," Nabiki replied. "You get full cooperation from me, whatever it takes, but I need them shielded from reprisals and scrubbed from any official records."

"...N-Nabiki?" Hiroshi asked, eyes wide as he listened to her side of the conversation. Daisuke was gaping at her silently next to him.

Nabiki held up a finger to keep them quiet until she got the answer she wanted from the hacker.

"We... will do everything in our power. Records are easy, but we've got limited resources, you understand."

That was the answer Nabiki had expected. She settled into negotiation mode. "That's understood. I have the resources to handle physical protection, as long as I get sufficient forewarning. But I need their anonymity maintained. No cops coming to them asking them to testify or anything. Clear?"

"We can do that," Alibaba sounded almost relieved through the filtration. "So can we assume we can do business then?"

"On two conditions. Firstly, I'm introducing you to my two associates because I'll need you to work with them on this. They're my eyes and ears on the ground when it comes to all things Himura. You'll deal with them and their requests." Nabiki took a deep breath. "And secondly, I need you to get me Ranma Saotome's Family Register and Birth Records. Copies of the unaltered originals."

"Ranma Saotome? But..." The voice sounded confused.

"I think Himura has altered Ranma's records, so I'll need to know what she's done, as well as have backups of the originals to fix it. Which means it's not just enough to get me access to the Hall of Records," Nabiki stated.

"That would require access to the actual physical records. We can get you in for that, but..." Alibaba started.

"You need someone to actually go in and do the research," Nabiki glanced at Hiroshi and Daisuke and gave them a wink. "I think you see why I wanted to introduce my associates?"

"I see. Yes, we can do that."

"Good. Give me a moment, please." She tapped mute on her phone, then looked Hiroshi and Daisuke in the eyes. "So now comes the part where I ask the two of you how deep down the rabbit hole you're willing to go?"

"You mean we're getting into Yakuza territory," Daisuke said.

Nabiki nodded. "This is... way outside of what you two signed on for," she admitted. "Going this route locks me in long-term. It's not just about beating Himura in a game of volleyball. It's about taking down Tanaka Pharmaceuticals, torpedoing important Yakuza operations in this part of Japan, and probably angering a lot of people that it's not particularly smart to anger."

Hiroshi and Daisuke exchanged a glance.
"It's dangerous. We might die," Hiroshi said matter-of-factly.

"The same could be said of trying to get curry bread at lunch at this school," Daisuke responded.

"We could end up on a Yakuza hit list," Hiroshi countered, again with that calm tone.

"We live in Nerima and know Ranma Saotome. We probably already are," Daisuke parried. "If we pull this off, though, it might be our break into real detective work."

"If we screw it up, no Law Enforcement Agency or Detective Firm will touch us with a ten foot pole."

"They weren't going to anyway. Furinkan High, remember? They wouldn't even come out here for Career Day because of safety concerns."

"I remember that. Wusses. I suppose that if they're scared of a few martial artists then the Yakuza would seem pretty intimidating."

"Right? So when it comes time to save those Martial Artists, who's gonna do it?"

"Us, of course."

"Exactly. Who else can?"

"So then it seems we're in agreement."

They turned to her as one. Daisuke gave her a thumbs up.

"Angering people it's not smart for us to anger is kind of our thing," he said with a grin.

"That and detective work," Hiroshi added.

"And tutus."

"I think the tutus go without question at this point."

Nabiki chuckled and shook her head, feeling immensely better as she unmuted her phone. "Well, it seems they're on board if you are. I hope you're ready for the ride."

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Getting the wheels in motion with Alibaba had made Nabiki feel better, but she wasn't quite ready to return to the crowd and noise of the gymnasium. From the roar of the crowd she could tell that Ranma's team was still winning handily. She'd let the team give her the play-by-play later on anything important that she might have missed. She sent Hiroshi and Daisuke back inside and decided to take a short walk to clear her head.

Coming around to the parking lot, she noticed there were two limousines taking up an obscene amount of space. One she recognized as belonging to the Kuno family, and the other she assumed was Himura's. She noted with some amusement that the Kuno Limo had boxed Himura's in.

Well, good to see Kodachi has decided to continue pursuing her beef with Himura. If nothing else that'll be a distraction for her. Nabiki smiled a little, but it faded quickly. Still not sure how I'm going to defuse things with the Kuno siblings, though.

"Nabiki Tendo?"
Nabiki froze. The voice was familiar, of course, but it had a tone and inflection to it that she hadn't heard in a very long time. She turned slowly to see a tall figure step out from the shadow of the nearby tree.

It was a bit unusual to see Tatewaki Kuno in a regular school uniform. It made him seem lankier and taller. He looked a great deal healthier than when she had seen him last in the hospital, though she noticed that he still moved with a slight stiffness.

She crossed her arms and raised a skeptical eyebrow. She had heard Ranma and Ryouga's account of the 'new and improved' Tatewaki Kuno, but she remained unconvinced. "If you're looking for your Pig-tailed Goddess or my little sister, they're both inside."

Despite the dim lighting, the wince was visible. "Did I really insist on calling her that?" He asked rhetorically, then shook his head. "No matter. I've spoken with Ran about my past behaviour and… I fear I am not quite ready to make my amends to your sister yet. I am here simply because my sister wished to watch Ran play. I… did not feel comfortable making an appearance."

"Yet you broke out the old uniform anyway," Nabiki noted.

"It seemed appropriate to wear it while here, even if I'm not ready to come back," Tatewaki replied. He tugged at the collar and chuckled. "Not that I wore it overmuch when I was here. I have also discovered that my wardrobe is somewhat lacking in attire that is not more appropriate for the Feudal Era."

Nabiki frowned. "Fair enough. But why come here? It's not like Kodachi can't ride in the limo by herself."

"I gave the driver the night off. It seems he has gotten precious few of those as neither my sister nor I have been terribly attentive to the needs of our staff. I drove the limo."

"You drove…" Nabiki echoed with flat incredulity.

"I suppose you are entitled to your surprise, but yes, I do have my license. It was something of a matter of pride at the time as I recall. The rigors of it seem to have forced some form of clarity on me as it is one of the few things I remember clearly from the past few years. Or, at least my last few attempts once bluster and posturing had failed to get me what I wanted." He tucked his hands into his pockets. "I… am told I made quite a scene the first time I failed the test."

Nabiki's mouth twitched into a slight grin in spite of herself. "I'm sorry I missed it. But you just happened to give your driver the night off on a night you knew Kodachi needed a ride? Sorry, but you're still a terrible liar Kuno-baby."

He chuckled dryly. "I… suppose I deserve that. You're right… I did want to be here. Some notion of somehow finding the words or the courage on the drive over. A pleasant fantasy that did not come true, leaving me cowering here. It seems that outcome did not satisfy fate, though."

"If you're expecting me to go in and drag out my sister so you can soothe your conscience…" Nabiki started.

"I would do no such thing," Tatewaki said, perhaps a little more sharply than he intended because he paused and took a breath. "Forgive me… I fear I am… unprepared. Yours is by far the hardest atonement that I must make."

"Mine?" Nabiki gave him a confused look. "What apology do you owe me?" She found herself taking a few steps closer, wanting to see his expression in the dim light.
"My recollection of many of the things I have done is dim. A… trick of brain chemistry, I am told. I am like the drunkard waking up from half a decade of indulgent torpor. But… When I first chose to heed my father's wishes and throw away my medication…" He pulled his hand from his pocket, displaying a small orange pill bottle, which he studied briefly, "When I chose to throw away my sanity… it was not abrupt or sudden, and I remember each moment as I felt my restraint and control peel away from me. It was… freeing at first. I suppose intoxicating is an appropriate analogy. And I remember confronting you and…" He trailed off.

"That was ancient history, Kuno," Nabiki said. "I got my pound of flesh back for that and then some."

Tatewaki shook his head. "So I wronged you and tossed you a yen coin as payment, though the amount was revised upwards over time. Even if you are satisfied that covers my debt, I am not." He looked at her with an intensity and clarity in his eyes she hadn't seen from him in a long time. "I said hateful things to you… things that were not meant for you, but were born of my resentment of my mother. You had been nothing but supportive. Perhaps you were the only one who truly did support me… and the first time you showed vulnerability to me I attacked it."

Nabiki blinked.

"And even afterwards, I continued to dismiss you. To use you as an avenue to feed my obsessions. I barely acknowledged you as a person. I called you a mercenary and a gold digger."

Nabiki's eyes narrowed. "If we're being honest, I did earn that on my own merits."

"And how much responsibility do I bear for setting you on that course?" Tatewaki asked. "I remember clearly the girl I knew in middle school, before the haze, and the girl I see now, and…"

"Tachi, stop."

"What if I had not forgone my medication?" Tatewaki asked. "What if I had even just listened? You… you were asking me to…"

"I said stop," Nabiki said sharply, cutting him short. He blinked in confusion.

"I'm not doing this, Tachi," Nabiki said firmly. "I know you're all fired up to make your amends and to make things right, but I am not going down the 'what if' trail today." She walked up to him and poked him in the chest. "Yes, you ripped out my heart and stomped on it. I was thirteen. That was bound to happen. No, you are not the driving force that led me to become the Ice Queen of Furinkan. There are a lot more important factors in my life that have led to that than you. I was angry and hurt. And I got over it. And I forgave you for it. And I knew something was wrong and I didn't do anything to help you, so if anything…" She closed her eyes and sighed. "If anything, I owe you an apology."

"Nabiki…" He gaped at her.

She sighed and turned away, wrapping her arms around herself. "You have the worst timing, Kuno. Of all the times to pick to get your head straight…" She laughed bitterly and shook her head. "Do you know how long I waited for exactly that apology?"

"Five years?" Tatewaki offered.

"Two," Nabiki corrected him. "The first year was because I was angry and wanted you to prostrate yourself in front of me so I could grind your apology back in your face. The second year was because I was lonely and I just wanted my friend back. And then after that… I realized I didn't need
an apology anymore." She turned to look at him. "It's only been recently I started to realize that I didn't deserve one."

"Didn't deserve… How on earth do you figure that?" Tatewaki asked, appalled.

Nabiki turned to look at him. "Kuno… Tachi. If a thirteen year old boy is being ordered by his sole legal guardian to do something, no matter how stupid or self-destructive… how long do you figure it'll be before he does it? Parents are supposed to be the ones who know what's best for us. It's hard not to listen, even if in our guts we know they're wrong. God knows I've gone along with enough of Daddy's stupidity, not to mention what Ranma has let his insane parents talk him into. What you said to me… You said it because you weren't in control, and you weren't in control because someone took it away from you. I understood that and figured it out by the time we ended up in the same homeroom class here. But… I didn't do anything."

"And what, pray tell, could you have been expected to do?" Tatewaki asked gently.

"Something?!" Nabiki shot back, throwing her hands in the air. "Something other than whoring out my little sister and… and our houseguest to you when it was obvious you weren't well?"

"There was nothing you could have done," Tatewaki replied.

"I didn't even try," Nabiki sighed. "You were supposed to be my best friend, and then the instant it seemed like I needed you more than you needed me…" Nabiki trailed off, rubbing at her forehead. "I didn't want to dig into all of this yet. I have so much else going on…"

"I didn't intend for this to cause you strife, Nabiki Tendo." Tatewaki took a step forward and put his hands on her shoulders.

She gave him a startled look, and he immediately released her and stepped back.

"I… I apologize, I overstepped…" he stammered.

Nabiki gaped at him for a moment longer then shook her head and chuckled dryly. "You know… When Ranm… Ran told me how much you had changed, I didn't believe her."

"I don't believe I have changed overmuch," Tatewaki replied. "I am just… aware now, I suppose." He took a small step towards her, extending a hand. "I do not wish to overstep again, but… are you all right? I have been focused on my needs, but… I understand you and your family are in a serious situation, and you yourself have been under considerable stress."

Nabiki closed her eyes. The idea of being able to unload some of what was weighing on her was tempting, but she reminded herself that as reasonable as Tatewaki seemed now, he was not a neutral party.

And he's only a few skipped pills from being a maniac again, a dark voice whispered in the back of her mind.

That's not fair! another part of her protested.

Are you going to just forgive him so easily? After what he did to you and to your sister? After what he put Ranma through? YOUR Ranma? What his father and even his sister are putting you all through? the voice continued, cold and merciless. Are you willing to take that much of a risk just because you want your childhood friend back?

Nabiki's shoulders sagged. No… I can't, she realized.
She looked back up at Tatewaki. She couldn't muster any real hate in her heart for him, but neither could she afford trust. "I'm sorry, Tachi. I am. But... I'm not your middle school friend anymore. And more importantly, you're not mine. My problems are my own and, like it or not, you and your family are part of those problems. And until I can trust that your grip... your commitment to your sanity is a little firmer, I have to keep you at arm's length for now."

A hurt expression crossed his face. His hand dropped to his side and his eyes fell.

"Yes... yes of course. You're right," he said softly. "Your circumstances demand... pragmatism."

Nabiki felt an ache in her heart, an old hurt prodded awake. She clenched her fists. "Tachi... If I was being my old cynical self, I would be selling you some sob-story right now to try and manipulate you into selling out your father and sister to help me. I'm still not entirely sure why I'm not... If this is you... if you're really back... I want to believe it. I want it to be real... but I can't afford to trust that it's real. Not just because you're suddenly saying all the right things, anyway. So I'm being honest right now, even if it makes me look like a total bitch because..." she took a deep breath, "because I'm hoping you'll prove to me you're back."

"You wish for me to earn your trust once more?" Tatewaki asked hopefully.

"That's not your cue to do something stupid and impulsive," Nabiki said quickly. "But... yes?" She gave him an uncertain look, not entirely sure of her own feelings herself. "Look, just... take your pills and keep doing what you're doing. I guess I just want to see that this is going to last before I'm willing to dredge up the past."

Tatewaki looked thoughtful for a moment, his expression solemn. Finally he nodded and gave her a stiff, formal bow.

"Thank you, Nabiki Tendo," he said. "I... am not sure what I expected, meeting you today. But you have offered me some direction and a willingness to give me a chance to prove through deed what words find insufficient. I will not squander that, I promise."

Nabiki schooled her expression to one of careful, businesslike neutrality, wrestling back emotional control, and nodded in return. "Good. If you'll excuse me..." Her voice cracked a bit at the end and she covered by turning and walking quickly away.

000

"Match point! And the winner is Furinkan High!"

Ranma pumped her fist in the air, giving an exultant shout as the crowd roared. She was quickly joined by the rest of her team while practically the entire school was roaring in the stands.

Ranma decided that she was never going to get tired of this part.

"That's three!" Riko crowed. "They were really good, too!"

"Yeah, if I was Himura, I'd be getting a bit worried," Yuka said smugly. "These guys were all the teams that gave her 'Championship Team' a tough time last year and we're trouncing them! Probably not so confident about beating our 'little team' now, huh?"

Sayuri scowled. Ranma noticed her expression and followed her gaze to where Himura was already leaving. She was chatting and joking with the other members of her team, seemingly unconcerned.

"I'm not so sure," Sayuri murmured softly.
"Awww, that's just her fronting," Yuka replied. "You know how it is. She's gotta maintain her precious facade even if she's headed home to smash every plate in the cupboard."

Ranma's brow furrowed. While Himura wasn't exactly easy to read, she had to admit that the older girl seemed rather carefree, all things considered.

Her train of thought was cut off as someone else tackle-hugged her from behind. She yelped and turned her head to see Akane grinning over her shoulder at her. She was quickly joined by Shampoo and Ukyou, which was more than Ranma could sustain, and they ended up tumbling to the floor.

"They gonna be this enthusiastic when we win game five, or we beat Himura's team?" Riko asked, watching the impromptu wrestling match.

"Oh no, for that the clothing is going to come off," Yuka said with a sly grin.

Rin blinked innocently at her. "Why would their clothing come off?"

"Well, you see when two or more martial artists love each other very much, they- -mmmmmmpphh," Yuka started, but Sayuri had slapped a hand over her mouth.

"Please don't corrupt the Rin any more than is absolutely necessary?" Sayuri said in a tired voice. "We managed to go the whole game without breaking her brain this time."

Ranma extricated herself from the bottom of the pile. She was entirely used to getting dogpiled, though it was a lot more pleasant now that it didn't immediately spark a fight. "Okay, okay! I need to breathe!" She giggled a bit as she was reluctantly released. "Besides, I'm all smelly. Lemme take a shower, okay?"

She turned towards the showers, but immediately found herself wheeling about onto a different course when someone hooked her arm and redirected her towards the exit. She blinked and turned to see Ukyou, arm looped through hers, and a determined expression on her face as she marched them towards the exit with conviction.

"U-Ucchan?" Ranma asked, a little startled by the sudden move. "Where are we going?"

"You're taking your shower at my place, sugar," Ukyou said.

"B-but…!"

"No buts!" Ukyou said, still looking resolutely forward as they made it to the door. "Akane line-jumped once already today. I haven't had any alone time with you since we got linked and I can only be so patient, so it's my place and a shower, or right here in the parking lot!" She turned and gave Ranma a glare that told her that the okonomiyaki chef was deadly serious.

Ranma swallowed hard.

000 (Chapter 28 End)

This is a shorter chapter, but it made sense to end here because it was the end of the day.

More soon!
Permission

(Three years ago)

"Geez, what's with her?"

Ranma sat on the ground and nursed the red handprint left on his cheek by the slap he'd gotten from a dark-haired girl. He stared after her, perplexed, as she ran off trying not to cry.

Ryouga rolled his eyes. He was leaning against the wall, arms crossed. "She likes you, dumbass," he said dryly, though his affected tone of disinterest and scorn couldn't quite hide the note of jealousy. Why are all the girls in so interested in HIM?!

This year their school had elected to make the school festival more interesting by holding it jointly with a local girl's school. Since the boys' school was larger and more centrally located, the festival was held on their campus - which meant that, for the past week, their school had been overrun by an invading force of schoolgirls. It had been just as awkward as it had promised to be as well. (The loss of half of their bathrooms for the girls' use had not been popular, for instance). It had also lead to all kinds of insanity as the normally segregated populations, fueled by adolescent hormones, tried to cram a year's worth of flirting, exploration and dating into a single week.

In short, things had been rather dramatic of late.

"She does?" Ranma asked, blinking in surprise. He turned and looked at Ryouga for confirmation. "Really?"

Ryouga sighed heavily. "You know, you should probably go after her."

Ranma gave him another confused look, then kickflipped back onto his feet. "…Why?"

Ryouga gaped at him. "What do you mean, 'why'?! To apologize!"

"Why am I apologizin'?!" Ranma replied. "I didn't do anything!"

Ryouga clapped a hand over his face. "That's the point, Ranma! She was asking if you wanted to share lunch with her!"

"Yeah, and I said 'no' because I barely got enough for me!" Ranma shot back.

"She was going to share her lunch with you!" Ryouga poked him in the chest to punctuate his words.

"Oooooooooooohhhhhhh..." Ranma's eyes widened with comprehension. "Uh… you think if I went after her now…?"

Ryouga's eyes narrowed. "Depends. Are you going after her because you like her? Or are you going after her because it's a free lunch?"

"Well, free lunch of course! Duh!" Ranma replied with a grin.

Ryouga bopped him on the head, hard. "What the hell is wrong with you!??"

"Ow! Now what'd I do?!" Ranma shielded his head and ducked away from any further abuse.

"How dare you manipulate a girl's heart just to fill your stomach!" Ryouga growled, incensed.
"Hey, I didn't ask for any of this!" Ranma protested. "This isn't fair! I'm in trouble if I say 'no' and I'm in trouble if I say 'yes'! So what am I supposed to do, huh!?"

Ryouga shrugged. "Don't ask me. You're the popular one. It's not a problem I have."

It was Ranma's turn to scowl. "Gee, thanks." He crossed his arms and leaned heavily against the wall next to Ryouga, sulking.

Ryouga was silent a few more minutes. "...well I wouldn't be such an insensitive jerk about it, at least."

"Oh yeah?" Ranma raised an eyebrow. "How would you tell a girl you're not interested?"

"Why would I tell her that? Kanna is pretty cute," Ryouga said thoughtfully.

"Then you go have lunch with her." Ranma nudge him with his elbow.

"I'm the creepy delinquent, remember? She gets this scared, nervous look whenever I talk to her and ducks out. Besides, I overheard her and her friends talking about me. Nothing good." Ryouga sighed. "Doesn't help that I turn into a stampering mess whenever I talk to a girl."

"Why? It's just a girl," Ranma replied. "I don't get what the big deal is."

"Yeah, well that's probably because you're a late bloomer," Ryouga muttered.

"I am not! I'm totally bloomed! I'm more bloomed than you are!" Ranma protested hotly. "I'm just... I mean..." He trailed off uncertainly. "I-it's just that Pops said that sort of thing was... was a distraction from the Art! Yeah..."

Ryouga snorted and didn't reply. He had learned from experience that Genma Saotome's interests seemed to consist of food and Martial Arts and precious little else - and he was very strict about enforcing the same in Ranma. It made Ryouga wonder idly how the man had managed to even have a kid. Or what happened to his wife.

"So... You like Kanna then?" Ranma ventured after a few more minutes of awkward silence.

"Well... I don't really know her," Ryouga admitted grudgingly, "So... not really, I suppose. It'd be different if she liked me, but just being cute isn't enough to make me hang about where I'm not wanted."

"So that's it? As long as she's cute and likes you?" Ranma quirked an eyebrow at him.

"No!" Ryouga protested. He looked away and raised his chin. He crossed his arms tighter and ground his teeth but, for some reason, found himself again admitting more than he normally would. "I... I'm not the kind of guy who gets to be choosy, okay?"

"Why not?" Ranma pressed.

"Because of my curse," Ryouga replied.

"Awww, c'mon, curses aren't real!" Ranma protested, tagging him lightly on the shoulder with his fist.

"Really? You think it's normal to get lost in a straight hallway?" Ryouga glared at him.

"Well..."
"Doesn't matter if it's magic or not. A curse is a curse," Ryouga replied testily. "Girls aren't exactly lining up to date a guy who can't even find his own house half the time."

"Your parents did okay, right?" Ranma asked.

"Have you met my parents?" Ryouga asked in an incredulous tone.

"No… why?" Ranma replied, confused.

Ryouga simply stared at him and waited for it to sink in.

"… Oh," Ranma seemed to slump a little. "I… just kinda figured I was always missing them."

"Last postcard I got, mom was in Egypt. And Dad…" Ryouga trailed off, "… they're not here is the point."

"Yeah, but… they got together, right?" Ranma pressed the point. "They're still together, right?"

Ryouga rolled his eyes. "Yeah… for all the good it does," he muttered darkly.

"Then there's hope! C'mon man, you gotta be positive about this kinda stuff!" Ranma flashed him a confident grin.

"This from the guy who didn't actually realize a girl liked him even after she hit him over the head with the fact?" Ryouga sniffed disdainfully. "And her fist, he added silently.

"Hey, confidence always works!" Ranma replied. "So… forget the curse for a sec. What's your dream girl like?"

"Why do you even want to know?" Ryouga gave the boy a skeptical look.

Ranma looked a bit like a kid who had been caught at something. He started fidgeting nervously. "I… I just wanna know, okay? It's not like I really get to talk about this kinda stuff with anyone else."

Ryouga considered. A big part of him wanted to tell the other boy to take a hike, but he had already dug himself this deep. He sighed heavily. "Fine… meeting a girl who's into martial arts would be nice…" He folded his arms and considered, eyes closed and brow furrowed in concentration as he tried to imagine it. "Someone nice, but… not a pushover either. Someone with passion, I guess."

"Kinda sounds like a tomboy," Ranma quipped.

Ryouga opened one eye to glare at him in annoyance. "I'm sorry that my ideal woman doesn't meet your standards, Saotome."

Ranma held his hands up. "Hey, hey, that's not what I meant! Tomboys are good! I-I mean…" he rubbed the back of his head awkwardly.

Ryouga grunted, closed his eye again and tried to bring back the image.

"Short hair or long hair?" Ranma prompted after a moment.

"Either is fine," Ryouga replied.

"Tall? Short?"
"Doesn't matter," Ryouga muttered.

"Geez, you're not narrowing this down much," Ranma groused.

Ryouga sighed in frustration. "Short, okay? Well… not super short, but… petite? But…" he felt the heat rise to his cheeks, "but… curvy, I guess? Hair… short, maybe? Or… or tied back? Or…" he trailed off. "What's the use?" He opened his eyes and looked up at the sky. "It's not like I'd ever meet a girl like that."

"Why not?" Ranma asked. "Doesn't sound too out there. Betcha there are more than a few girls at the festival that match."

Ryouga's eyes fell to the ground. He studied the bits of gravel and debris scattered about. "I don't know. I just… I feel like it would take an incredible amount of luck with my curse. My Mom was always really lucky, and when my parents told me how they met, it was like one stroke of luck after another. It kinda counteracted the curse for her. But me?" He scowled. "I'm not lucky. Unless it's bad luck."

"Aww, c'mon. Not like it's all bad," Ranma replied, folding his hands behind his head and leaning back against the wall again. "After all, you met me, didn't cha?"

Ryouga scowled at him. "You're way too short to fit that much ego, Saotome."

"Hey! You're the same height as me!"

"Nope. I've got half an inch on you at least."

"Bull! Besides… I'm a growing boy! I'll catch up to you no problem!"

"Yeah right. I'll have a full inch on you by the end of the semester."

"Not a chance!"

"You wanna fight about it?"

"Yeah!"

000

(Present day)

Ranma was only wearing a bathrobe when his phone started buzzing. Ukyou was still asleep on her bed, a smile on her face and her thoughts and dreams peaceful and happy through the Link. She had been quite insistent on working out the frustration Ranma and Akane's little midday tryst had caused, which had led to quite a bit of experimentation as they discovered how the Link enhanced such experiences. There had been several changes back and forth and they had probably managed to make use of every single room in Ucchan's in the process.

Thankfully, Konatsu had apparently taken the night off to be somewhere else. Ranma had chalked it up to some sort of ninja prescience.

He flipped open the phone to see a message from Nabiki that read simply, 'Will be there in a few. Need to talk.'

Uh oh… Ranma swallowed, wondering what might be wrong. Granted Nabiki had yet to really lose her temper with him, but that didn't stop his mind from conjuring up the worst, especially since he
had vanished with Ukyou with nary another word to anyone else.

He glanced at Ukyou and elected to let her sleep. He recovered his school bag from the corner of the room and dug out the spare set of clothes he'd stashed inside it. The black pants and blue silk shirt felt like old friends; ones he had not gotten nearly enough time with.

He finished just in time to hear the knock from downstairs. Quietly, he made his way down, unlocked the front door of the restaurant and slid the door open.

Even without the Link, it was obvious that something was wrong. Ranma was not the most perceptive person in the world, but one area he was well versed in was evidence a girl had been crying. Nabiki had obviously tried to hide the fact, but he could see the puffiness around her eyes, the slight redness and the faint tracks left by her tears.

"What's happened?" he asked immediately as he stepped outside and slid the door closed behind him.

Nabiki laughed weakly then rubbed self-consciously at her eyes with the heel of her hand. "Is it that obvious? And here I was trying to be composed…"

"For me it is," Ranma replied quietly. "C'mon Nabs, you're here hours before it's time for school, sending me a text asking to talk without saying what it's about… what's wrong?" He frowned. "Is… Look, I know I kinda ran off last night after the game…"

Nabiki laughed a little more convincingly this time. "No! No, this isn't you, Ranma, and it isn't any of the others." She brushed a stray lock of hair behind her ear and looked away. She seemed uncharacteristically subdued. "This is… this is just me. And… I'm being stupid. I just spent all last night alone, breaking my own rule about not being alone, and… and…" She looked like she was on the verge of tearing up again and was trying very hard to hide it.

"Want to go somewhere and talk?" Ranma asked.

"…Please?" The request was in a small voice that didn't sound like it should belong to Nabiki Tendo.

Ranma quickly slid the door open again, grabbed one of the order pads that Ukyou kept around and scribbled a quick note. He pinned it to the doorframe, then slide the door closed behind him again. "Okay, where to?"

"Somewhere quiet? With… with water nearby?" Nabiki asked timidly. "I mean, I know a beach is too much to ask for, but honestly I just want…"

Ranma didn't let her finish. He scooped her up into a bridal carry and, before she could even protest, leapt for the rooftops.

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School would not start for several hours yet. The sun had just started to peek over the horizon to paint the tops of the houses in bright yellow light and reflect off the water of the canal, and the birds had begun to sing those songs that only those who were up far too early in the morning got to hear.

Ranma and Nabiki sat on the bank of the canal. Nabiki had settled between Ranma's legs and leaned back against his chest with her head nestled on his shoulder. He had his arms loosely draped around her. Neither spoke. They had shared this silence for a while now.
"You're not going to ask me what's wrong?" Nabiki finally asked.

"I figure you'll tell me when you want to tell me," Ranma replied. "It felt more like you just needed me to be here with you."

Nabiki closed her eyes and sighed softly. "Yeah…” He noticed the edge of her mouth curl slightly in a faint smile. "Is that the Link, or are you actually getting that perceptive?"

"Ummm… lucky guess combined with not knowing what to say so keeping my mouth shut to avoid putting my foot in it?" Ranma offered sheepishly.

Nabiki giggled. In fact, Ranma was paying close attention to the Link. It was reassuring to see the dark-colored negative emotions gradually ebb as they sat, easing his worries that he might not be handling the situation correctly.

Still feels a bit like cheating, he thought. Still, it wasn't really much more than a magical mental mood ring and it didn't do anything to let him know what the actual problem was. That meant he was still going to need to risk saying something dumb sooner or later.

"So… uhh…” he started, taking the chance that she was, in fact, ready to talk.

"It's Kuno," Nabiki said, cutting him off.

"Oh…” Ranma replied. Then he blinked as the moment of relief at having successfully managed to be a supportive boyfriend gave way to confusion. "Wait… Kuno?"

"Yeah… Well… more accurately Tachi," Nabiki replied.

Ranma hugged her a little tighter. He wanted very much to prod for more information, but he was learning that there were times to just shut up and listen, and this seemed like one of them.

"You told me he was different; that he was taking his medication, but…” she trailed off a moment, as if searching for words. "I didn't know that a little pill could make such a big difference. I mean… I knew he must have had some sort of brain chemical imbalance to make him act the way he did, and I figured proper medical treatment would calm him down, but I didn't expect…” She seemed to struggle a bit. "I didn't expect him to be Tachi again."

"I'm sorry I didn't warn you better," Ranma said softly. "But… yeah, it was kind of surprising how much like the person you described him as being in middle school he was."

"It's not your fault," Nabiki replied. She huddled back against him again. "Damnit! I'm doing it again - just like Shampoo says. I keep forgetting that I have feelings too, and pretending that I don't have them. Pretending I can just turn the 'Ice Queen' on and off like a faucet when it's convenient. But I can't."

"That's probably for the best," Ranma said reassuringly. "Turning your feelings on and off sounds more like a Himura thing."

"Maybe it is," Nabiki murmured. "But… Ranma… He was my best friend in school. Maybe… maybe he was on the verge of being more than that. But then he got in trouble. He needed help. He needed his medication and his family was denying it to him and… and when it was obvious something was wrong with him I… I just walked away. Just because my feelings were hurt. I turned around and manipulated and used him for money and justified it because he'd broken my heart… and he wasn't even in his right mind when he did it." She hung her head. "I got used to the idea that I was a terrible person. I figured I knew people well enough that I could rattle off all the
reasons they might give for why I was a terrible person, and I thought I was okay with it. None of the reasons they could give really mattered. Then I realized I didn't really want to be a terrible person, and I started trying to be a better person by dealing with all of those reasons I assumed people had."

She huddled down a bit more. "Now I'm starting to get that I'm still a bad person, but not for any of the reasons I thought I was, and I don't know anything about people."

"You're not a bad person," Ranma said, gently flicking her on the forehead. "Yeah, you've done bad things, but you're trying to do better, right? Pops used to tell me that the difference between a bad martial artist and a good martial artist is that a bad martial artist doesn't try to get better at the stuff they're not so good at."

"You know, that would sound great except for where it came from," Nabiki muttered.

"Yeah, well, Pops said a lot of stuff that's actually pretty smart. He just never seems to be any good at applying it to himself," Ranma said with a chuckle. "And when it comes to martial arts, he does know his stuff."

They were quiet a few more minutes before she spoke again.

"Kuno was part of the plan, you know," Nabiki said softly. "The one I had before I fell for you."

"What plan?" Ranma asked.

"The one where I go off to business school, end up being brilliant and breezing through all the courses, get snapped up by some high-powered firm, then roll back into Nerima in a BMW and an Armani suit," Nabiki said. "I was going to swoop back in right about when you and my little sister were gone and Kuno was starting to get desperate enough that I'd look good, snap him up with some kind of ironclad prenuptial, then use his money to start my own company. I figured I'd get him a proper psychiatrist, but I didn't expect too much from it. God, I'm an idiot."

"You wanted to marry Kuno?" Ranma asked, shocked.

"I wanted to marry his money," Nabiki replied softly. "Just like I imagine his mother did to his father. And it probably would have ended up the same." She hunkered down a bit more. "He wasn't… he wasn't a person in The Plan. No one was. Not even me…" She pulled her knees up to her chest and hugged them. "And now he's Tachi again… and he's alone. And part of me wishes he had just started taking the damn pills a year ago… but then I realize that the Nabiki from a year ago wouldn't have cared… and even if she had, then she wouldn't have ended up with you and…" She shuddered. "And I don't like who I am without you. And then that makes me feel like I'm just using you, and using Shampoo and everyone else because I can't find it in myself to be good on my own."

Sensing the black spikes returning to her emotions and feeling her curl in, Ranma hugged her more tightly. "Hey… hey… It's not like I'm all that great without you, you know?" He sighed. "Look at what I was doing to Akane…"

"What you were doing to each other," Nabiki corrected him. "And… you probably would have worked it out eventually."

"No… we wouldn't," Ranma said finally. "We're both… missing too many of the same bits. I mean… I love Akane…" He smiled wistfully. "I couldn't even say that a month ago. Neither could she except when she broke it off with me. And eventually I would have destroyed Shampoo… left her honor a smoking wreck assuming she could even ever go back home at all. Ucchan… maybe Ucchan would have been okay… but she'd have hated me… not because I didn't choose her, but because I was stringing her along and using her. I was using all of them, just like you. Just… to feed
my belly or my ego instead of my wallet. If you're a terrible person, then I'm worse."

Nabiki turned to look at him, an expression of outrage on her face. "You are not! You had no idea what you were doing! All of your life lessons came from an emotionally stunted idiot of a panda, and... and..." she trailed off, scowling at him. He got the sense that he had struck some sort of perverse nerve with the middle Tendo. "You are not on my level of awful, Saotome!"

He laughed out loud at that. "What, is this a contest!?"

"No, and don't you dare take that as a challenge!" Nabiki retorted quickly.

"Neither of you awful!" a familiar voice protested. They looked up to see a lavender blur drop from the footbridge that crossed over the canal to land lightly in front of them.

"Shampoo..." Nabiki said softly.

"Pintou break own rules!" Shampoo said sternly as she stalked towards them. "'Not supposed to spend night alone', Pintou say! Find out from Xiao mèimei that Pintou lock self in room, toss and turn all night, then gone before breakfast!'" She knelt in front of them and poked Nabiki in the forehead. "Then find out Wo de qíngfù ba wo de àirén cóng qìn'ài de rén nàli dài zou, ba ta dài dàole zhèlǐ!..."

"Woah, woah, woah!" Ranma held up a hand as Shampoo slipped into angry Mandarin. "Can we keep this in a language I understand?"

"She's mad because I stole you away from... Ukyou is 'Qìn'ài de', right?" Nabiki gave Shampoo a quizzical look.

Shampoo huffed and looked away, folding her arms. "Not change subject! Pintou understand what Shampoo said! Problem still the same; Nabiki trying to shoulder burden all by own self!"

"You're right..." Nabiki admitted, her head drooping. "Heh... some 'Mistress' I am, huh? I can't even keep myself together."

"That not problem!" Shampoo protested. She crouched before them and took Nabiki's face in her hands. "Nobody strong alone. Even strongest warrior standing alone must rely on ground to hold them up, yes? Pintou need learn to trust us to be that ground. Need learn to trust me."

Nabiki smiled weakly, putting a hand over Shampoo's. "I'm sorry... I keep thinking of you all as people I need to take care of. I avoided getting too close to anyone because I saw what taking care of everyone did to my sister, and I..." she trailed off.

"Is go both ways," Shampoo said softly. She glanced at Ranma and locked eyes with him. He nodded slightly in return. "Take care of, get taken care of in return. Share weaknesses rather than hide, so can make stronger. Not just to Airen, okay?"

Nabiki chewed her lower lip, then nodded timidly. "Okay..."

Shampoo smiled, then carefully crawled into Nabiki's lap, wrapping her arms around her. Ranma shifted to make room for her and stretch his arms out in and effort to encircle them both. They had to shuffle a bit to get comfortable but finally managed to fit themselves together reasonably compactly.

Nabiki closed her eyes and slumped against Ranma's shoulder. "Thank you."

"Maybe not wait for things to get so bad to do this next time, hmmm?" Shampoo admonished gently.
"This one kind of snuck up on me, kitten," Nabiki replied, idly running her fingers through Shampoo's soft hair.

"Still think pintou keep too much to self, try to carry too much," Shampoo replied. "Shampoo know Nabiki is…. Mnnn, how say…? Private person? But… Shampoo can't help if not know!"

"She's got a point, Nabs," Ranma said. "Besides… it's gonna be hard for you to keep all this stuff bottled up if we're all Linked, right?"

Nabiki sighed heavily. "I know. I know, okay? Really, I promise this time." She held up a hand as though taking an oath. "It's just… telling someone too much… even if I do trust them… feels dangerous to me. Especially if it's not information that does them any good. I've used information as a weapon for so long that I guess I'm always worried about its power to hurt me or the people I care about."

"Then teach," Shampoo murmured as she looked into her eyes. "Teach us to use and understand in the way pintou use and understand."

"That… will take a while," Nabiki replied. "I think for now I'm just going to focus on not letting stupid stuff like this blindside me so badly."

"Is not stupid," Shampoo corrected her. She cocked her head. "Overhear pintou talk about marrying idiot sword-boy? Is true?"

Nabiki chuckled. "It was… one of those plans that worked on the assumption I didn't have human emotions anymore. Maybe it became part of the plan based on some echo of how I used to feel in middle school, and his being rich was just a convenient excuse. But…" She looked out at the water, watching the eddies and currents as it flowed through the artificial riverbed on its journey to the sea. "But I think it was just the last step in 'getting back at him' for breaking my heart - to lock him into the same kind of loveless and manipulative marriage that had driven his father nuts." She closed her eyes and chuckled weakly. "Wow… The more I think about it the more I really don't like myself from a year ago…"

Ranma hugged tighter as he felt some of that icky, cloying darkness creep back into Nabiki's emotional landscape. "Hey… hey. I wasn't so great a year ago either, y'know."

"We've already established that you didn't know better because all of your life lessons up until that point came from an idiot," Nabiki snorted. "But… It's like I had forgotten all of the lessons Mom taught me and everything Kasumi tried to teach me after that. And then, when I finally realized that I had feelings and that other people had feelings and that I was sick of everyone being unhappy, I was still arrogant enough to think I could fix it all." She studied the edge of the water quietly for a few moments. "But… even if this works… Even if we somehow spit in the face of what a thousand years of society has told us - if we go up against the world and win and make this work… make us work… Even if we can tie up Mousse and ryouga's romantic problems in neat packages, cure ryouga's curse and save his mother and magically get Ranma's parents to approve of this whole mess… somebody always gets left behind, don't they? Like Kasumi, who never found the right person, or tachi, who got cheated out of his chance, or kodachi… God I'm sympathizing with kodachi, something really is wrong with me…"

"Pintou regret choice?" Shampoo asked softly. Ranma blinked and looked at her, but the Amazon's eyes were focused on Nabiki.

He felt a ripple through the link. Complex emotions, accompanied by a tensing of her shoulder muscles, and then… her emotions evened out. The darker emotions receded, and he felt her relax.
A smile crossed her face and she shook her head. "No. Even if this is crazy and doomed. Even if this doesn't fix everything. Even if this doesn't fix anything. Despite the inevitable repercussions. This feels worthwhile. I want to see where this takes me more than I wanted that other life. I'm tired of loving money. It doesn't love me back."

Ranma sighed in relief and let himself relax. He gave Shampoo a grateful look, glad she had been there to articulate what he couldn't. "Is it weird that someone who doesn't speak the language all that great can still talk about this kinda stuff more easily than me?"

He tightened his arms around them both. It was scary how easy it was to get upended. In a way, he kind of missed the simplicity that came from just being on his own with nothing but the Art. But… there was that awful hollowness that came with that, too. The concept of being alone again was terrifying.

_Ukyou was alone for a lot of years. Ranma remembered. And Shampoo, even though she had her whole village, she was kinda alone too, right? Probably why it was so easy for her to just up and leave it all behind. He considered. And Akane… that stupid date challenge thing singled her out. I remember that until everyone found out about the engagement, the girls at school were super stuck up around her, and the guys were basically idiots... and I guess Nabiki was alone too, with that whole 'Ice Queen' thing._

Suddenly their desperation for his attention made a lot more sense. _I guess it was something I didn't even realize I was missing until Nabs showed me._

His mind drifted to others. Mousse, the Kunos… they all seemed isolated too. Not to mention Ryouga. The thought of the Lost Boy caused an uncomfortable pang.

_Is that why we're all so nuts? We're just… lonely? _he wondered.

"... Maybe I'm not totally over money," Nabiki said finally. "Might still have the occasional fling. Y'know, a weekend tryst now and then? A candlelit dinner, a bottle of nice wine, just me and the stock indexes..."

"If Pintou feel enough better to make stupid jokes, is enough better to go to school," Shampoo snorted and disentangled herself from the two of them. "If hurry, may still have time for shower and for Airen to change."

"So Ranma and the others aren't walking with us today?" Riko asked as the group made their way along the sidewalk. It was still early, so their pace was leisurely.

"Akane said 'Fiancée Stuff' came up and they would be running a bit behind and didn't want to make us late," Sayuri replied.

"'Fiancée Stuff','" Yuka repeated. "What, sneaking off on school grounds isn't good enough anymore, they're gonna play hooky for nookie now?"

"Yuka!" Riko admonished. "I'm sure it's nothing like that… Is it?" She gave Sayuri a questioning look.

Sayuri rolled her eyes. "Not that it's any of our business… but I heard that Nabiki had a bad morning and Ranma was busy making sure she was okay, and the rest of them are waiting in the wings to
make sure they're both okay."

"Including Ryouga?" Yuka asked skeptically, noticing the absence of the Lost Boy.

"Well… I mean… Isn't he kinda part of 'the group' now as well?" Riko said a little timidly.

"What, as in a fiance?" Yuka replied. "No! No way."

"Aren't you the one who's constantly teasing Ranma and Ryouga about their 'relationship'?" Sayuri asked archly.

"Yes! Teasing! Because I refuse to believe that Ranma Saotome has managed to get a boyfriend before me!" Yuka growled.

"You don't have a boyfriend because everyone thinks you're with Daisuke," Riko replied with a grin, seeing a rare opportunity to needle Yuka.

"That's ridiculous! Why would anyone…!?"

"She's right, everyone is already trying to guess the names of your first three kids," Sayuri added. "I'm pretty sure the better pool favors the first being a boy…"

"That's ridiculous…" Yuka huffed again, then looked up and spotted something. A Grinch-style grin spread across her face. "… And also look! A Rin-shaped distraction escorting a Mousse-shaped change of topic! Let's all go tease them and forget all this unpleasantness!" She quickly hooked their arms and dragged them towards the pair before either could recover.

Rin was walking next to Mousse, the pair of them deeply involved in a discussion of the papers he was holding. Rin was pointing out things on the page while Mousse nodded attentively.

"Do we have to tease them?" Riko whispered, hesitating. "They actually look kind of adorable like that…"

"Pffft. All lasting relationships must be tempered in the fires of red-hot shame first," Yuka replied. "We are simply doing our sworn duty as Rin's friends and besties."

"So… about why Ranma got a boyfriend before you…" Sayuri muttered.

Rin glanced up, seeing them approach. "Oh, hi!" she said brightly, though she took a noticeable half step away from Mousse as she did so.

"Sorry, are we interrupting someth-ooolooogghf!" Yuka started to say, but the breath was driven from her lungs by forceful elbows to the ribs from both Riko and Sayuri, who were flanking her.

"Good morning Rin. And Mousse," Sayuri said brightly after shooting Yuka a warning glare. Yuka gave her a sullen look in return, but remained silent, rubbing her side.

"Are you finally going to enroll at Furinkan, Mousse?" Riko asked hopefully.

"Yes. That's what Furinkan needs. More insane martial artists," Yuka muttered, then shied away as Sayuri positioned her elbow for another jab.

"No, Ms. Rin…" he paused as Rin shot him an annoyed look, "… Rin is helping me deal with a difficult personal issue. She is helping me write a letter to someone."

"Is this 'someone' gonna come knock down a few walls at school like all of Ranma's 'someones'?"
Yuka quipped with a smirk. Her smile faded as she noticed Rin's expression.

"She… ummm… already has?" Rin said nervously, glancing at Mousse then back at them. "You remember the circus lady, right?"

The three of them gaped at Rin.

"That's your 'difficult personal issue'!?!" Yuka yelped. "She's a psychopath!"

"Yuka…" Riko admonished timidly, glancing at Sayuri.

"No, I'm with Yuka on this one. She wrecked half the school yard and nearly killed Ryouga. The Principal needed a tank to do that!" Sayuri said, folding her arms and glaring at Mousse. "At least when Ryouga's harem showed up they had the good grace to keep the giant animal mortal combat nonsense off the school grounds."

"Ryouga…" Mousse started, surprised. "It seems Saotome is a bad influence on him."

"You've not got a lot of room to talk, to be perfectly honest," Sayuri replied coldly.

Mousse sighed. "Young Mi isn't… Fair enough," he deflated a bit. "She didn't used to be this way, but… I am well aware that love can lead you down a dark path."

"Obsession is more like it," Yuka muttered.

"Yuka, that's enough!" Rin said firmly, surprising everyone. "Mu Tsu is trying to make this right. He didn't end his relationship with her in the best way, but he isn't responsible for the actions she took afterwards." She stared the three of them down with surprising ferocity. "He's coming to school today in case she shows up again to make sure she doesn't attack Senpai or anyone else. And if she doesn't show up, we're working on a letter for him to send to try and explain things and apologize."

"And you think he's gonna be able to keep his cool seeing his 'Darling Shampoo' draping herself all over Ranma all day?" Yuka asked skeptically. "You think he's gonna be able to keep himself from pawing all over her if Ranma isn't there?"

Mousse's glasses flashed as his gaze switched to Yuka, the thick lenses opaque in the light. "And what would you have me do, then?" he asked, his tone equally cool.

"Go away, maybe?" Yuka replied, putting her hands on her hips. "She's after you, after all!"

"Yuka, isn't that going a bit too far?" Riko asked timidly.

Yuka's eyes narrowed. "No, it isn't, Riko! I'm tired of having all this crap piled on us by a bunch of super-powered maniacs who can't behave in public! It was bad enough when it was Ranma and Akane, and they're at least students at our school! This whole mess doesn't have anything to do with us, we've got more than enough of our own problems, and Mousse here should take his mess somewhere else."

Mousse's jaw tensed. "Very well. If that's your wish, I won't impose further," he said in a tight voice. Without another word, he turned and leapt up onto a nearby lamppost and then away.

"Wait! Mu Tsu!" Rin called after him, then sighed. She whirled and glared at Yuka. "Why do you have to be such a… such a jerk, Yuka?!"

"Someone has to," Yuka replied. "Do you know how many times Mousse has come flying into the
school to fight Ranma and wrecked things? He's not exactly careful with those blades of his, either. A few students have almost gotten hit. A lot of students have gotten hurt from all these stupid martial arts battles, and now that Ranma has finally calmed his own nonsense down I don't want anyone else bringing theirs in!

"You haven't been this hard on Ms. Shampoo, or Mr. Ryouga!" Rin protested.

"Yeah, well they're students now. They're here every day. We can hold them accountable and, for the most part, they've dialed it back. Even Kodachi is playing nice and there was a time when she put our whole Rhythmic Gymnastics team in the hospital. Now we're the ones doing the challenges. I don't want Mousse and his crazy Circus Freak girlfriend screwing that up!" Yuka growled.

"That's cold, Yuka," Riko said.

"Yeah? Well excuse me for wanting to graduate without suffering a life-altering zoo animal inflicted injury," Yuka huffed. She tugged on her bookbag straps and stomped off in the direction of school, not waiting for the others.

"Yuka…!" Sayuri called after her friend, then trailed off with a sigh.

"I-I'm sorry…" Rin hung her head. "I shouldn't… shouldn't have…"

Sayuri held up a finger, silencing her. Rin blinked, staring at it and her apology ground to a halt.

"Two things, Rin. First? Don't apologize. You didn't do anything wrong. You had a different opinion. You're allowed to have those. Yuka is out of line and I'm going to have a talk with her... when I'm a little less peeved myself for the way she shut you down when you'd finally started to speak up for yourself." She took a deep breath. "Second… She does have a point. Your being involved with Mousse is starting to... well, feel kind of dangerous."

"Yeah… I mean… it was scary sometimes when crazy suitors or rivals went after Akane. She's one of the strongest people we know and can usually take care of herself," Riko added. "Not that we're saying you can't... Well…"

Rin slumped a little, eyes on the ground as she nodded. "I-I know…" she mumbled. "B-but… that's why I have to help Mu Tsu resolve things! Young Mi has already attacked Senpai and Mr. Ryouga, and neither of them had anything to do with this!"

"Well, yeah, because she's crazy," Riko replied. "Are you sure helping Mousse talk to her will... well, fix that?"

Rin looked up and clenched her fists. "Sh-she's upset, I know. A-and being that upset makes people do... do things they're regret otherwise! Ms. Shampoo, Mr. Ryouga and Ms. Ukyou all did a lot of the same stuff, and they're much better now that they're not upset anymore. A-and... and you're right; I can't fight. But I can do this, so... so I'm sure she'll come around!"

"The problem with that is helping in this way means you're spending a lot of time with Mousse. Alone," Sayuri replied. "And that's always been a major trigger for crazy jilted martial artists in my experience. Plus... well…"

"You like Mousse," Riko finished.

Rin blushed brightly. "I-I... we're... we're just..."

Sayuri put a hand on her shoulder and smiled. "Rin, it's okay. You're allowed to like him."
Rin sighed in frustration. "No. Please listen!" She gave Sayuri an imploring look. "Nobody believes me when I say that I'm not doing this because I w-want to be Mu Tsu's g-g-g-g-girlfriend!" She struggled to get the last word out, like it was fighting with her tongue. She was flushed, but not all of it was embarrassment.

Sayuri blinked and held up her hands placatingly. "I'm sorry, Rin, I didn't mean to…"

Rin huffed and crossed her arms, pouting. "Y-you always assume people do things to get something!"

"We didn't mean it that way, Rin. We just… I mean, it's pretty obvious you like him…"

Rin sighed, her shoulders slumping. She was quiet a moment, then spoke. "A few years ago I really really wanted a cat. But… my Mom and two of my sisters are allergic, so I can't have one. So instead, I started feeding the strays in the neighborhood. It was almost as good as having my own cat because they'd all come over for pets and to play with me. All of them except one. He would always hide in the bushes and watch when I put out the food, and no matter what I did I couldn't coax him out. He was beautiful and I wanted so badly to pet him, but he'd just run away. I could see he was skinny, though so… So I started putting out the food and leaving it, and just watching from far away. A-and… and then he came out and ate. I did this every day, even though I knew he wouldn't ever let me pet him because… because it made me feel good knowing I could still help him. I found out later that he used to belong to a little boy who lived in the neighborhood, but moved away and left him behind. He was waiting for someone, even though I think he knew that the boy would never come back. So I kept feeding him and keeping my distance. Mu Tsu reminds me a bit of that cat. A-and he's… h-h-h's b-beautiful too, but I know he's like that cat. He won't let anyone near him because he's waiting for someone who he knows, deep down, will never come. But… but that's okay. I just… I just don't want him to suffer. I don't need to get anything out of this."

Sayuri sighed and patted Rin on the back. "Rin… that's very noble of you, but… I think you need to learn to be a little selfish once in a while. It's okay to ask 'what am I getting out of this?' once in a while." She shot a glare in the direction Mousse had gone. "...Especially when the other people involved are selfish jerks themselves."

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Ranma felt refreshed after her quick shower and change of clothes. She had unbound her hair again after switching to her female form; She found it counterbalanced her petite stature and made her look a little more mature. She wasn't sure when seeming more 'mature' as a girl had started to be important, but it felt right.

Ukyou had been grumpy that Nabiki had run off with Ranma so she and Shampoo had corralled the middle Tendo between them and were lecturing her sternly as they walked. Amazingly enough, Nabiki actually looked genuinely remorseful and repentant. Akane had fetched Ryouga once she learned Nabiki was safe and sound, and for once the two were actually chatting amicably. Ranma drifted towards them to see what they were talking about.

"...don't understand why I can't do it if you and Ranma can so easily!" Akane huffed, looking at her hands. "I mean… I'm supposed to have a lot of ki, right?"

"It's more than just having a lot of ki and a lot of emotion. It's… well, you've got to be in control of it," Ryouga replied. "You have to be able to focus and channel it."

"Are you saying I'm not in control of my emotions, Hibiki?" Akane asked, a dangerous note entering her voice.
Ryouga folded his arms and smirked. "If I say 'yes', are you gonna prove me right, Tendo?"

"Okay, okay, okay, enough, you two," Ranma squeezed herself between them to head off the potential conflict. "We haven't got time for the two of you to smash up the street."

"I wasn't…!" Akane protested.

"We weren't…!" Ryouga said at the same time.

The two of them glanced at one another, then looked away to scowl at the ground on opposite sides.

Ranma snickered. "You know, you two make a way cuter couple being all tsundere like this."

"We're not a couple!" both of them protested in unison.

Ranma grinned. Without thinking about it she looped her arms through theirs. "Nah, you're both taken."

There was a very long beat, where Akane stared at her in confusion and Ryouga simply gaped. It took a second for the gears to catch in Ranma's brain and for it to point out that she had just effectively laid claim to Ryouga.

Panic gripped her as she realized she had likely just lit the fuse on a massive powder keg. "I mean by Akari! Ryouga, I mean! Being claimed! Not by me! Not that there's anything wrong with Ryo! I mean, I wouldn't do that to Akari! She's a good friend! Best friend…! Actually I hardly know her, but…!"

"Ranma…" Akane attempted to interject, a growing look of concern on her face.

"Not that that's a point of honor or nothin'!" Ranma said hastily, looking at Ryouga. "I mean, I didn't mean… it's just slipped out, I wasn't…!"

"Ranma, calm down…" Ryouga said, shooting a nervous glance at Akane as the redhead babbled.

"Ranma!"

Ranma trailed off, eyes widening as she slowly turned back to Akane, fully expecting rage, blue battle aura and a mallet.

Instead, Akane just looked mildly exasperated. "Ranma, hush. It's fine."

"It's… I… what!?!?" Ranma gaped at her.

Akane rolled her eyes. "It's fine, Ranma. I know you didn't mean anything by that. You've said more eyebrow raising stuff trying to scam free ice cream."

"You're… really?" Ranma said.

"Honestly, you probably should have run with it," Akane replied, shrugging. "It would have been funnier."

"Okay, seriously this time, who are you and what did you do with the real Akane?" Ranma asked, only half-jokingly.

Akane scowled. "What, I'm not allowed to be reasonable now!? Do you want me to get mad?"
"Nope, that's the real thing," Ryouga said quickly.

"Watch it, Hibiki!"

Ranma hugged their arms a little tighter. "Hey! Stupid foot-in-mouth disease aside, I was trying to stop you two fighting!"

"Sorry…" Akane said, deflating quickly.

"Yeah, sorry, Ranma," Ryouga added, rubbing the back of his head sheepishly.

Ranma blinked, then a slow grin spread across her face as she realized she had just successfully de-escalated her first fight. It felt like mastering a new kata. She felt the warm, satisfied glow of accomplishment. "Well… good!"

They walked a little while longer, until it became apparent to Akane and Ryouga that she had no intention of relinquishing their arms.

"Ummm… Should… we be marching to school with you holding my arm, Ranma?" Ryouga said nervously, spotting the school wall in the distance. "I mean… the rumors are already pretty bad…"

"Who cares what they think?" Akane huffed. "Nothing I ever did changed their minds or made it any better. The three of us could probably make out in the schoolyard and it'd be tame compared to whatever rumor is circulating right now."

"Urk…" Ryouga stumbled a bit, and started fumbling desperately. Ranma twigged to his problem and fished a handkerchief from her pocket, releasing Akane's arm a moment to hold it to his nose. She waited until his surprise passed and he took over holding the kerchief to snag Akane's arm again.

Akane cocked her head. "You two really are in sync now, aren't you?"

"We are not!" the two of them protested in perfect unison.

Akane giggled. Ranma took in a breath for another angry retort, her plan to de-escalate forgotten, when she felt Akane's weight shift. She was leaning into her, holding onto her arm tighter. It was a subtle change, but enough to short out Ranma's outraged reflex.

"I wonder what it would be like?" Akane said thoughtfully.

"What what would be like?" Ranma asked.

"If Ryouga really did join us."

Ryouga made a noise that was a cross between a squawk and a snort, and the red began to spread across the handkerchief he was holding to his nose. "Akane?!

"I don't mean that!" Akane said in exasperation as she noticed Ryouga's wild-eyed stare and the growing bloody patch on the fabric of the handkerchief. "I mean… just… how it would work as… a family I guess? Just… day-to-day living with each other."

"I…" Ranma blinked then trailed off. She made a brief attempt to conjure an image of some kind of future life, but her mind rebelliously kept on straying to the half-remembered dream with Ryouga and Ukyou. Where she had been a girl and… a mother.

"That's… kind of a complicated question, Akane…" Ranma mumbled.
"I don't know… it actually sounds kind of nice to me," Akane replied.

There was another muffled snort and what sounded like a whimper from Ryouga.

"I mean… I guess… I'd miss Ryouga if he left, and with the whole entourage showing up to claim him I started feeling jealous and I didn't know why, and I think it's because… well, I sort of got used to the idea of Ryouga being with us." She glanced at Ryouga. "Not that way, hentai!"

"I didn't… I wouldn't…" Ryouga mumbled through the cloth. "I mean… A-akane… I didn't think… you'd want me around anymore. I mean… after…" he trailed off, looking away guiltily.

Akane sighed. "I'm learning it's very tiring being mad all the time, Ryouga. I also know you end up with a massive nosebleed seeing a cute girl in a T-shirt. It was why I was okay with you being in my bed when I realized you were P-chan, and… I owe you a lot of apology for it all as well. Maybe I resented you a bit for the fact that I did owe you an apology. And… I keep inventing reasons to be mad at you and it's getting silly. The truth is… I miss you. Not just P-chan but… having that guy around who was always so nice, and… I mean I knew you liked me, but you always worried about how I felt, and that was nice. I know I took advantage of that because I'm not interested in you that way, but… but I didn't want to lose it, either."

"Heh… well…" Ryouga ducked his head bashfully. "… I mean… I didn't do anything special…"

"Are you kidding?" Akane replied. "You spent so much time with me! And… a lot of it was just… just being there. You seemed happy to just be training or fixing a fence or whatever with me, and you never asked for more. Everyone else expected something from me, even my friends at school. The only other person who was like that was Ranma, and usually one of us would say the wrong thing eventually and start a fight… well, Ranma would say something and I'd fly off the handle because I was so worried about how I looked to her. But… I fell apart around you so many times Ryouga, and… you never judged me. Even now, with all this rival stuff, you're still trying to teach me and help me. You're… you're my best friend, Ryouga." She beamed at him, giving him the full 1000 Megawatt smile, the one that gooified even the most hostile of people.

Ryouga, not being at all hostile and already being badly susceptible to The Smile, sagged against Ranma as his walking grew a bit erratic and a goofy smile crossed his face.

Ranma scowled, feeling a surge of… of… something at that. She glared at Akane. "Hey! I'm his best friend!"

Akane gave her a taunting smirk. "You can't be his best friend, Ranma."

"What?! Why not?!"

"There's way too much sexual tension between you."

"There's…" Ranma's mouth moved silently a moment as she flushed red with outrage. "There is not! Where did you hear that?! Was it Nabiki?! That sounds like a Nabiki thing to say! Nabiki, stop teaching Akane to be like you!" she yelled over her shoulder.

"What did I do now!?!" Nabiki shot back. Having been engrossed in conversation with Shampoo and Ukyou, she hadn't caught any of what was going on with the other three.

"Nabiki's not the only one who can point out the obvious!" Akane huffed.

"It's not obvious!"
"You dreamed about having his baby, Ranma!"

"That's not fair, he dreamed that first!"

"How does that prove there isn't sexual tension between you?!"

"It… I… shut up!"

Seeing Ryouga leave for school was an odd mix of melancholy for Akari.

Part of her was overjoyed to see him getting proper schooling, bettering himself and having a wider circle of friends in his life (even if a large portion of them were distressingly pretty girls). She was painfully aware of how crushingly alone he was all the time, and how happy he was just for her presence in the room - a happiness that was born more from a desperation for human contact than it was boyfriend/girlfriend affection. Guiltily, it had always made her a little apprehensive, wondering if he was just with her out of loneliness rather than genuine love. Being isolated on the farm just made it worse and added to her guilt, making her feel like she was cutting him off just to save herself from being lonely.

But the other part of her missed being so central to his life. She had always known that he wandered - that he knew many people and had many adventures, but she had always thought that if she got to be there with him she could be part of them.

But here she was, waving goodbye to him from the doorstep as he left for school - so close and yet still a world away.

Maybe I should enroll myself? she pondered. She had always been homeschooled, and her career path had never been in doubt - so making the trip to the nearest high school had never seemed worth the trouble. What could they teach her about sumo pig training, after all? But… if Ryouga was so determined to go, then maybe…?

Akari heard a heavy sigh and glanced to her right. She could see the foreign girl, Anna, staring off just as she had been and wearing an expression of longing that tugged at her heartstrings.

Poor girl, she thought. It had occurred to her to be jealous of Anna, and perhaps even a bit cross with Ryouga for not telling her about the American girl, but from what Ryouga had told her afterwards, he had definitely broken things off with Anna when he left. Anna had come all this way just for the faint hope of rekindling things. She must be very lonely where she was from too. It's a shame I can't talk with her.

She frowned and considered that for a moment. She had very little to do; the chores of a small one-family house were minor compared to the workload on a sumo pig farm and she was generally done before midday. Chatting with Mrs. Hibiki was pleasant, but Mrs. Hibiki had to frequently switch languages between the two of them.

"Ummm… Ms. Anna?" Akari asked, touching the girl's shoulder.

Anna started a bit, then ducked her head, blushing as she fumbled for her phrase book. "[Oh! Mah apologies, I just need… darnit, where is it!? Aha! Umm… ummm…]" She flipped frantically through pages. "[Here we go!] Wh-what can I doing… do… to helping?" she stammered, her thick accent mangling the words almost into recognizability.

Akari smiled and motioned to the book, then herself, smiling in a way she hoped was reassuring.
Anna frowned, looking a bit confused, but tentatively handed over the book.

Akari bowed slightly as she accepted the book then flipped through it. As she had hoped, it went both ways, and she quickly found the phrase she was looking for. She hoped her own accent wasn't too terrible.

"[Please teach me English,]" she said.

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The day was relatively quiet, and most of them had a free period after lunch (Owing to one of the all-too-frequent stress leaves teachers at Furinkan were known for taking) so Sayuri had called for a practise session. Yuka hadn't shown up, which was odd, but no one on the team except Ranma commented on it, beyond 'She'll be back when she feels up to it.' So they had split up into pairs and were working on their rally game, which had evolved into quite a competition.

Ryouga had tagged along, partly because Sayuri had mentioned she wanted to investigate the idea of ki-infused volleyball serves more. But that had fallen by the wayside in favor of the more involved group play, leaving Ryouga on the sidelines to watch. Which, to be fair, wasn't all that unfamiliar to him. There were many times he had been on the sidelines watching Akane play some sport or engage in training (Usually as P-chan). It had always been enough just to be there. Seeing her happy and knowing he was, for the moment, not lost had been enough for him back then.

Of course, it wasn't Akane playing this time. It was Ranma. Ryouga was perched on a railing next to the outdoor courts, near the pile of the girl's bookbags, ostensibly there to 'watch their stuff'. He realized he wasn't even sure which class Akane was in right now, which was odd because at one point he'd had her schedule memorized.

He caught Ranma's eye as she scooped up the ball to serve for another rally. She flashed him a grin. "Hey Ryo! Watch this one!" She reared back, leapt up gracefully to drive the ball over the net and gave it a sidespin that nearly caught Sayuri off-guard, forcing her to scramble to recover it.

He felt a smile tug the corner of his mouth. He watched Ranma run to intercept the return, smiling and clearly enjoying herself, so bright and full of energy at that moment that it was hard to imagine her life having so many problems.

He sighed wistfully.

"Now that is a familiar sigh if ever I heard one," said a familiar voice from his right.

He whirled and lost his balance on the fence. His arms windmilled frantically as he tried simultaneously to see who had snuck up on him and to correct his balance. He succeeded at neither and tumbled onto onto the ground in a heap.

He peered up to see Ukyou smirking at him, arms crossed. "Well, sugar, I can definitely see the benefits of your Rhythmic Gymnastics training."

"Shut up…" he muttered as he disentangled himself from the railing and brushed himself off, hoping no one else had seen his clumsy display - particularly Ranma.

"Oh come on, I'm just teasing," Ukyou said, moving to lean on the railing next to him. "It's kind of cute how distracted you get when someone you like is doing something they love. You used to moon over Akane like that all the time."

"I did not…" Ryouga started gruffly, then sighed and gave up posturing. With the link it was
pointless anyway. "It's not like you're much better."

She poked his shoulder. "I am too. I have to be. If I didn't have better situational awareness than a drunken lemming, Kodachi would have taken my head off ages ago - or Shampoo even. All you had to worry about was Ranma, and she tended to just try and get you to pay attention to her instead."

Ryouga blinked, then gave her a horrified look. "You make it sound like she was more interested in me than keeping me away from Akane!"

Ukyou shrugged a bit, giving him a wan smile. "Well, it's is interesting, isn't it? How the tactics she used on you half the time were the same tactics we used on her as a guy? Look, I'm not here to bust your chops, but… I just wanted to ask - are you finally going to tell her?"

Ryouga grunted and leaned on his forearms on the railing, clasping his hands. "Are you nuts?! I… I couldn't even tell Akane how I felt… back when it actually mattered… and this… this! This is so much more complicated that… that…"

"'That... what?'" Ukyou prodded. She scooted a bit closer, letting their shoulders touch and sparking the Link between them. "Seriously… not telling her isn't an option, Ryouga. Even if you know that she doesn't feel the same way. Even if she does feel the same way, but you can't be together. You have to get it out and deal with it if you're going to be part of each other's lives in some way."

"Hnh," Ryouga grunted noncommittally.

"And you being a part of our lives isn't negotiable, either!" Ukyou said quickly.

"I know," Ryouga replied. "I already gave Ranma my word on that. It's just…" He reached into his back pocket and pulled out an old, worn billfold picture wallet. It had been mended where it had been torn down the middle. One side held a picture of Akari, the other side a picture of Akane. He looked at the two pictures a moment and sighed. "It's just… I keep doing this."

Ukyou looked at the pictures, then at him. "Doing what?"

"Running from something I have to something I can't have." He traced a finger along Akari's picture. "Anna showing up reminded me of that. I could have stayed with her and her father… been happy. But I walked away to go back to Akane, even though I already knew I didn't have a chance with her - that… that she didn't feel that way about me. Deep down, I knew. Now I could just go home with Akari. Live on her farm with her grandfather and be happy. And I walked away from it again." He turned to look at Ukyou. "So… even if I do tell Ranma I… I… you know… Where is my win? Ranma could hate me for it. Ranma could not feel that way, but we stay friends. And then I'll just do what I did with Akane and sit on the sidelines and obsess and be miserable. But… if somehow… she felt the same way?" He looked back down at the ground. "I'd walk away… wouldn't I?"

Ukyou was silent a moment, which caused his heart to sink as the truth of his own words settled on his heart like a cold blanket.

"You never walked away from Akane."

He blinked and stared at her.

"You tried, but you were never able to," Ukyou continued. "I think… you jump too fast whenever someone says they want you. Like it's a miracle anyone does at all and you need to grab them before they change their minds. You don't stop to ask if it's what you want."

"So… what are you saying?" Ryouga asked, brow furrowing in confusion.
Ukyou smiled again. "I'm saying… if Ranma feels the same way… you won't run. You won't be able to. Because it's something you want."

Ryouga considered, then sighed heavily and slumped. "Yes I will. I'll have to. Otherwise Shampoo at the very least will kill me, even if you don't."

A mane of lavender hair and a pair of bright reddish-brown eyes interrupted his view of the ground. "Shampoo not kill Shagua! Just so long as Shagua accept proper place in harem."

"Daaaaaaat!" Ryouga recoiled, looking down to realize Shampoo was lying on the ground and had slipped between his feet to pop into his field of view. He stumbled backwards and ended up landing on his butt - which, admittedly, was a step up from landing on his head but still wasn't pleasant or graceful.

Shampoo sat up and cocked her head, giving him a confused look. "Why Shagua always so jumpy lately? Maybe drink too much coffee? Shampoo know great place to get nice, calming herbal tea!"

Ryouga groaned and scrubbed his hand down his face. "I really AM losing my edge!

Ukyou turned and leaned back against the railing, grinning. "She's even given you a pet name, sugar. Pretty sure by Amazon Law that means she's claimed you."

Ryouga paused, peering through his fingers at Ukyou. "I thought that required I beat her in a challenge by combat."

Suddenly Shampoo was right there, face to face with him. "That only for if Outsider want to claim Amazon wife. Amazon Warrior can claim whomever she wish."

"Hrk!" Ryouga managed to avoid flinging himself backwards and compounding his clumsiness, but it was a near thing. "What do you mean 'claimed'!?!"

Shampoo poked his nose. "Airen claim. But Shampoo approve. Shagua just being silly about whole matter."

"We've talked this over, Ryouga. All of us," Ukyou added. "Nabiki saw this coming a mile away, and even Akane can see it coming now, so literally only you and Ranma are dense enough to not see it." Ukyou pushed off of the railing, stepped closer and crouched next to him. "Ranma… after getting added to the Link, I can feel how much she's struggling for balance. And… more and more it feels like you're part of that balance she needs. So… we accepted this much to make this work. Accepting you isn't that much of a stretch." She held out her hand to him, offering him a hand up.

Ryouga considered a moment. His eyes dropped, returning to the redhead still playing the game, oblivious to all that was going on on the sidelines.

"That's her decision," he said finally, accepting Ukyou's hand. "Not yours, and not mine."

"All right," Ukyou stood up and pulled him up to his feet. "But you should still let her know it's a decision she needs to make."

Ryouga shook his head. "You don't give up, do you?"

Ukyou smirked. "Stubbornness is a family trait. Little brother."

Ryouga scowled. "We're back on that again?"
"Maybe if you showed some guts and told the girl you like how you felt about her…"

"That girl is your fiance!"

"Technically she's my wife, but that's okay, I'm willing to be a proper elder sibling here and support you in this…"

"What sort of proper sibling would support…?! And you are not the elder sibling!"

Shampoo glanced back and forth between them, then giggled. There was a twinkle in her eyes, like the one she got when she was hatching a devious plan.

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The more the day had drug on, the more it ground into Yuka what a jerk she was being. Avoiding her friends had gone from angry snubbing into awkward avoidance, and she knew eventually she was going to need to talk with them. But… talking would mean apologizing and her pride wasn't ready to let her do that just yet.

She knew they were outside on the courts practicing and so she found herself prowling the halls as far from that side of the school as she could get. She was so deep in her funk that she almost stumbled around the corner before she heard the voices.

"… okay, that will get us in but isn't there any way to speed up…? Huh… Okay, but… I mean, I KNOW what microfiche is, but…"

She stopped dead and put her back to the wall, listening. That was Daisuke's voice! Carefully, she peered around the corner.

Hiroshi and Daisuke were standing alone in the hallway. Hiroshi was looking the other way, as if keeping watch while Daisuke was talking on a cell phone.

"Look, I've got a dust allergy, okay? I don't… Look, you don't gotta call me names!" he huffed. "Fine, fine… You're right, we can't trust anything on the computers… no I don't need you to change my surname to 'Bakamoron' on my official transcript to prove it, thanks."

Yuka snickered in spite of herself. Unfortunately, in the quiet hallway that was enough, and both Hiroshi and Daisuke's heads snapped around and they spotted her immediately.

Well, when you get caught out, play it like you meant to be, right? Yuka stepped around the corner and crossed her arms with a confident smirk. "Well well, what are you boys up…?"

She never finished. Both boys all but tackled her. Daisuke's hand slapped over her mouth and the two of them dragged her into the hallway with them and then into a nearby empty classroom.

"Was there anyone else who overheard?" Daisuke hissed, looking hunted as Hiroshi closed the door behind them.

"I don't think so. That was stupid, though. Sorry, I should have kept better watch." Hiroshi said, leaning his back against the door.

"It's okay, we shouldn't have risked a call in the school-YEEEEOOOOWWW!" he trailed off into a howl of pain as Yuka bit his hand with enough force to draw blood. She wrenched herself away from him and slapped him hard across the face. "Watch where you're putting your hands, pervert!"
Daisuke stumbled, his hand coming up to hold his cheek. He glared back at her. "I wasn't grabbing you anywhere perverted!"

"You grabbed me. That's enough!" Yuka shot back.

"Geez! Keep it down!" Hiroshi hissed, glancing nervously at the door at his back. "We're not supposed to be in the vacant classrooms!"

"You're gonna ruin everything if you don't pipe down!" Daisuke snarled at her. "You get to explain to Nabiki why we got busted before we ever got to the Hall of Records!"

Yuka blinked. "Hall of Records? Why are you two going there?"

"Good one, Daisuke," Hiroshi muttered. "Why not blab the rest of it to her while you're at it?"

Yuka smirked and crossed her arms again. "Tell you what. You tell me why you're going to the Hall of Records, and I won't scream."

Hiroshi blanched. "You wouldn't."

"Try me," Yuka shot back. "I imagine it'd look real good if the hall monitors find two boys holding a single girl hostage in an empty classroom…"

"That's cold, Yuka. even for you," Daisuke said, his tone and expression hard as he glared at her.

Yuka was a bit taken aback by his reaction, but then swallowed as she realized that she had just slipped into using the same sort of tactics that Himura had used to blackmail Ranma into the whole mess they currently found themselves in. "All right, all right… that wasn't okay. I'm sorry." She sighed and dropped her arms to her sides. "But still… tell me anyway? You two are up to something and I could really use a caper to distract me right now."

Daisuke's expression softened. "You don't want in on this one, Yuka," he replied, his tone surprisingly soft. "It's… Look, it's stupid that we're involved, to be honest. But unlike you, we haven't got any other real talents to bring to the table in this whole mess."

"That and we tend to leap before we look," Hiroshi added.

"I'm already in a martial arts sports grudge tournament with Ms. Psycho Sycophantpants. How much worse can it get?" Yuka asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Yakuza. Shadowy underground hacker groups. Illegal access to government records. Stuff that makes Nabiki nervous," Daisuke said.

Yuka blinked. "Okay… so why are you involved?"

"Because… because I think they're in trouble. Ranma, Nabiki, Akane… all of them. The kind of trouble that martial arts isn't going to get them out of," Daisuke said. "And maybe… maybe this is our chance to do something instead of just sitting on the sidelines and making jokes."

"Not that we aren't still going to make jokes," Hiroshi added quickly.

"Just… a lot more gallows humor, maybe," Daisuke shrugged.

"Fair enough. So what makes you think I don't want in?" Yuka replied, narrowing her eyes. "They're my friends too!"
"Because we might get shot at?" Hiroshi pointed out.

"I'm used to people making the street explode with *paint brushes*. Regular guns and regular bullets are easier to…" Yuka began.

"You sure?" Daisuke said, suddenly stepping forward and causing her to trail off. "Have you ever heard a gun go off? Ever fired one?"

"H-have you?" Yuka tried for defiance, but something about his manner was robbing her of her usual bravado.

Daisuke sighed. "My Uncle works for the police. He snuck me onto the firing range a few times. He even let me take a few shots." He rubbed his hand self-consciously. "It was loud… louder than anything - even with the ear guards on. You feel it all through your arm when it goes off. It's not like TV at all. Then I saw the holes I made in the target… I remember I was pretty proud of myself back then, but now? Thinking about what that would do to a person? Even someone like Ranma…" He trailed off, looked down, then lifted his chin and looked her in the eyes. "I don't want you anywhere near any of this."

Yuka frowned. "Why not? If Nabiki and Hiroshi and Ranma are in the line of fire…"

"I don't want *you* anywhere near this," Daisuke repeated. There was a slight flush to his cheeks. "I… I just don't, okay? Just leave it alone."

Yuka blinked. She felt off-balance and flustered and wasn't entirely sure why, so she responded with what she knew best - outrage. "A-and you think it's okay for *you* to be? What, is this some chauvinist 'protect the damsel' nonsense?! Uh uh!" She crossed her arms and glared at him. "I'm *going*. I'm *in*. Or I'm gonna go find Nabiki, tell her you screwed up and blabbed all of this stuff to me, and then get her to assign me to be your minder *anyway*. So stop being stupid and tell me when we're meeting to go to the Hall of Records!"

Daisuke scowled. "*Fine*. Hiroshi can give you the meeting place." He turned and opened the door with maybe more force than was necessary. "Don't come crying to me if you get shot or something." He stepped through and closed it loudly behind him.

Hiroshi watched him go then sighed. He gave Yuka a sidelong glance. "I really thought you were faster on the uptake than this. It's like watching Ranma and Akane but without all of the cool special effects."

"What are you talking about?" Yukagrowled. "Don't say stupid stuff to me right now." She fished out her phone. "Just give me your number and you can text me the meeting time and place later."

Hiroshi shrugged. "Sure. You want Daisuke's number too?"

"I-I… yes… for… for the *mission*, jackass!"

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"All right Miss Himura, that should be enough for now."

Himura sighed in relief and lay the script down on the podium. She opened the door, stepped out of the cramped soundbooth and stretched. "Thank goodness! That booth is *entirely* too cozy."

"I apologize, Miss," The student from the Audio/Visual Club bowed deeply. Himura was sure she'd remember his name if it was important. "You *were* very insistent that clarity and adherence to the
"That I did," Himura said brightly. "You'll send me the tape once it's all cut together, yes?"

"Of course," He bowed again. "If… If I might ask… the script is quite unusual?" He wrung his hands, not meeting her eyes.

Haven't quite learned not to ask questions that have dangerous answers, have you? Himura thought a little darkly. Sometimes she forgot that she wasn't dealing with her grandfather's wonderfully trained aides. Still, there had been fantastic progress made at Furinkan, and so she reminded herself to be patient and tolerant. "Oh, it's a kind of self-hypnosis tape for a friend who's a bit of a method actor, and this is to help them get into character.

"Oh! I see!" he said, brightening and looking quite relieved.

Himura smirked. So easy to please, even when the cover story is so flimsy. She rewarded the tech with a wink and then made her way from the club room.

Mineko and Sanae met her at the door and took up positions flanking her as she walked. She smiled at them but did not give them the nod that indicated it was alright to speak. Unlike the rest of the peasants at the school, Himura had been careful to properly educate her inner circle in the ins and outs of etiquette and procedure regarding discretion that her Grandfather had drilled into her.

She took her time. She could see Mineko was fidgeting and seemed anxious, but that was of no concern. She knew to hold her peace until Himura signalled. It wasn't just ego; the walls had ears, after all, and it was important that they spoke in safe places, and so nothing was discussed until Himura deemed it safe.

They rounded a corner, into an empty stretch of hallway, most students having fled to their classes at this point. Himura decided it was safe enough, but opted to make Mineko wait a bit longer, as a test of discipline. "Sanae, how goes the search for our circus friend?"

"Omi's managed to track her down. She's found an old warehouse to lick her wounds, along with her big cat," Sanae said, sounding disinterested. "We haven't made contact yet, I thought you would want to make the final call before we tipped our hand."

"Oh? Hoping I might have reconsidered?" Himura asked brightly, thought there was a dangerous note in her voice.

Sanae sighed. "You know how I feel about the freaks in this place, darling. Having them work for us just feels like… encouraging more of their atrocious behaviour. But… I also see the necessity to fight fire with fire sometimes. Still, I'd recommend being cautious. This one seems even more unstable than most of her ilk."

"Oh, I don't know. She's volatile I'll admit, but her motivations are fairly simple. Go ahead and make contact with her. Let her know what we can offer. Maybe give her the address of Ms. Ito as a show of good faith, but make sure she knows we can assist her far more effectively if she opts to coordinate with us. Dip into the treasury funds and bring her a few dozen pounds of raw meat for her pet as well. That should soften her somewhat, I think."

"I'll… let Omi handle that part," Sanae said with a look of distaste. "'Raw meat' is something she would… appreciate more, I believe. What if she refuses to follow the plan and opts to go after the little waif instead?"

Himura shrugged. "It'll prove a distraction. I am sure that Ms. Tendo has already taken precautions,
so I doubt it will be much more than that. In all truth that is all I really expect Ms. Young Mi to be
good for in the end. I just hope she accepts our offer so that distraction can be more precisely timed."

Sanae nodded. "I'll take care of it then," She turned and broke off from Himura and Mineko, heading
down another hallway.

Himura was pleased to note that Mineko's discipline had held. Good girl. You have potential. "So…
I'm judging from your expression you want to talk about our 'volunteer'?

"I… I have some concerns…” Mineko said nervously. "I was hoping you could let me see Konatsu.
Talk with him."

"Whatever for, sweetie?" Himura asked, feigning bafflement. In truth, she had expected Mineko to
get cold feet; She still hasn't learned not to get emotionally invested. This will be an educational
experience for her, I suppose. "You were quite certain that he… or rather she was unhappy with
certain aspects of herself that only we had the capability of changing?"

"I… I know, but… But he… she never would have chosen this…” Mineko said nervously. "I… I'm
worried I misread the situation, and that will affect the results and…”

Himura held up a finger. "Now now. I trust your intuition on this. Dear Konatsu would have turned
down our offer because of our… regrettable conflict with the people she mistakenly believes are her
friends. Did you not say yourself how upset you were at the pittance Ms. Kuonji pays her? That
Konatsu keeps trying to deny what she truly is inside in a vain attempt to please her? From what you
dug up, Konatsu has a long history of being manipulated and used by selfish people. It's no surprise
she ended up trading one set for another."

"Yes… but… A-are you sure the tape is necessary?" Mineko fidgeted.

"You said yourself Konatsu seemed intrigued by the idea of new memories. This is just to help her
transition… help her be what she's always wanted to be and to believe it without reservation. What
we are doing cannot change how she feels… perhaps only awaken her to her true feelings." Himura
put a hand on Mineko's shoulder, giving her a carefully crafted reassuring smile. "Being a good
friend means sometimes making hard choices when those we care about cannot, when we know their
judgement is compromised."

"I-I understand that, it's just…” Mineko wrung her hands in uncharacteristic uncertainty. "It
feels… wrong."

"I know," Himura said, though she suppressed a pang of disappointment at the girl's emerging
conscience. "But trust me. We are the heroes of this story, Mineko. We just need to prove it. You
know as well as I do what the true story is. But we have to carefully craft all of this to get them to
accept it. Ranma most of all. Konatsu is the only one who can help us do that, and for that we have
to give her the push she needs to see the truth for herself."

Mineko closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "I… I know." Her expression resolved itself. "I'd
still like to be there, though."

"Are you sure? It isn't likely to be pleasant to watch, even knowing she won't remember it," Himura
said.

Mineko nodded slowly.

Himura maintained her concerned expression, though inside she was smiling. Well, I suppose we'll
find out if you're ready for this step, Mineko-chan. "All right… I'll have my driver pick you up
Ranma felt good. A little vigorous activity in the middle of the day made the school day so much more tolerable and, now that it was over, she could enjoy the walk without some immediate crisis.

There was some mild apprehension about the coming attempt to add Shampoo to the link, especially after what had happened with Ukyou. At Shampoo's suggestion, they had elected to meet Tofu at the Nekohanten to make things more comfortable for the recovery, though Ranma worried that Shampoo had an ulterior motive.

Not that Shampoo's ulterior motives are all that bad, Ranma thought, glancing over at the purple haired Amazon as she chatted and laughed with Akane. She felt a little heat rise in her cheeks as she remembered some examples. Especially now that things are calmer and letting her have her way won't ruin my whole life. It's just… She glanced over at Ryoga who was walking slightly ahead of her, near the middle of the group (As had become custom to keep him from wandering off). I mean… it's awkward with Ryō there. I don't want him to feel… feel…

She hastily scrubbed the words 'left out' from her mind before they conjured even more awkward mental images. But she was left struggling to find a replacement. Where DOES Ryō fit now?

She considered him a moment. Despite being in the middle of the group, he was mostly on his own, hands jammed in his pockets. Ranma wondered if doing that was a way to close himself off from the Link.

She felt a small pang at that, though she didn't fully understand why. She sped up a bit to come up beside him.

"Whatcha thinkin' about, Ryō?" she asked, folding her hands behind her back and leaning into his field of view.

"Hmm? Oh… nothing serious," Ryōga lied badly.

"Uh huh. Because you get all deep and brooding about what to have for dinner," Ranma quipped. "You worried about this Link thing?"

His head snapped up and he looked at her, then seemed to realize she wasn't talking about what he was thinking about. "Oh… you mean Shampoo. Uhh… No… Pretty sure it'll be fine. Nabiki will be glad she's part of the Link I'm sure." He jammed his hands deeper into his pockets.

Ranma's brow furrowed. Okay… so it IS the Link, but it's not about Shampoo? Or not in specific? "You sound like something is buggin' ya."

"I'm fine," Ryōga growled. He glanced at her, then looked away, but Ranma noticed a bit of color on his cheeks.

Ranma chewed on that a minute. It's definitely about the Link… Ryō doesn't want me touching his hand and finding out how he feels… but it's not about adding Shampoo, or at least not that SPECIFICALLY… And it's got to do with me… Maybe about Ryō's… uhh… 'confusion'? She felt a bit of an uncomfortable twinge at that idea, but that suggested a very familiar concept to Ranma - Jealousy.

The Link used to just be me'n Ryō. Then all these other people started piling into it… yeah, that makes sense. But… we're doing this to help him and his Mom, doesn't he get that? She pondered a
moment, but her experience with Akane and her jealous fits suggested something different, even if
Ryouga's way of reacting to it was different. No… he probably does, but… that didn't mean a lick
with Akane either. It's probably why he's trying to hide it, right? He feels put out, but he knows we're
trying to help, so he's bottling it up.

Ranma felt a moment of pride at having puzzled it out. She felt like she had come a long way in
understanding other people. Okay, so… how do I fix it? Mebbe… he just needs to feel like he's not
being replaced?

"Look… I know it kinda sucks having everyone piling into the Link, but… You know that isn't
where our relationship comes from, right?" Ranma said, picking her words carefully in an attempt to
emulate the way Nabiki would phrase things.

Ryouga blinked at her, eyes widening. "R-relationship?"

"Yeah! Like, we've been friends forever, for as long as I remember, anyway, and you're still the best
rival I've got, and all of that was before the Link anyway, so… It's not like you gotta worry about
that changing." Ranma said brightly.

Rather than the look of relief Ranma had been hoping for, Ryouga's face fell, like she had just said
the exact opposite of what she intended. He looked away from her and scuffed his shoe slightly.
"That's… that's what I am to you, right? Rival… friend…"

"I…" Ranma felt another one of those odd pangs. She had an insane feeling like she should be
saying something else. "L-look, Ryo…"

"I just wanna be clear about how you feel about me," Ryouga said. "So… friends. Rivals. That's…
that's good. I can deal with that." He took a deep breath. "Everything works out for the best that
way."

Then why aren't you looking at me? Ranma thought. It felt like there was a ringing in her ears, like
she was struggling with something important but she just couldn't get it to come into focus. Why can't
I say I agree with you? What do I WANT, even!? "Ryo…" she swallowed, "L-Look… we'll… we'll
talk about it when this is all over, okay?"

He glanced at her and forced a smile. "Yeah… yeah. Of course."

Ranma wasn't at all convinced by that answer, but she couldn't think of what else to say. Her pace
slackened and she dropped back a bit, her eyes falling.

Why is it getting so hard to talk to him now? Why do I keep saying things that hurt him when I don't
mean to? she thought glumly. It reminded her a lot of how things had been with Akane before… she
shook her head and quickly banished that thought.

That CAN'T be it, so what is it? She sighed and decided to put it aside for now. She glanced back at
the rear of the group, where Nabiki was chatting with Rin about something.

"... And Dad is really enjoying it too! He says they've asked him to stay on full time and he thinks
he's going to do it!" Rin gushed.

"And the team is doing well?" Nabiki asked.

"Oh yes! Dad says as soon as they realized he was serious about training them, they dove right in!
He said he thinks they just needed someone to believe in them." She bounced slightly. "I haven't
seen him this happy since… since… well, ever! He looks like he did in the pictures of him before he
was hurt!"

Nabiki chuckled. "I guess this counts as a couple of acts of charity then, huh? Guess that clears me for the rest of the year."

"I don't think anyone is gonna buy the 'Ice Queen' bit at this point, Nabiki," Ranma said, slipping in against Nabiki's side. She felt a little better at the bright smile that flashed across Nabiki's face and the feel of her arm around her shoulders. There, I CAN say the right thing! A year ago I'd have made a crack about charity scams or something. But jokes don't have to be hurtful like that. Her eyes flicked back to Ryouga. So why is it when I've got one part figured out I end up screwing up another part?

"See, that's the beauty of it. In a year I can reintroduce the Ice Queen as 'Nabiki Classic' and business will be better than ever!" Nabiki said.

"Not happening," Ranma replied, turning to kiss her cheek. "We're brand loyal to the New Nabiki."

"Yeah… aheh… because… it's…" Rin blushed and looked away, fidgeting. "Like… umm… soft drinks…? That was the joke, right?"

Nabiki sighed and ruffled Rin's hair. "Yes, but if you explain it it ruins it."

"O-oh."

"So… uhh… Did you come up with any ideas how to keep Akane from being left out?" Ranma asked, flicking a glance nervously towards Akane, who was pantomiming some martial arts move to Ukyou and Shampoo.

"Once the Link is made, it only takes a couple of people to see it through, so after Shampoo is linked Ukyou and I are taking Akane shopping, and then maybe a movie." Nabiki replied.

"You're going too?!" Ranma yelped, more loudly than she intended, then covered her mouth as the others glanced back at her curiously.

"You're going too?!" Ranma hissed. "You're not staying with us?!"

"I don't get many days off, thanks to the… 'honored elder'," Nabiki said, her eye twitching a bit as she choked out the honorific. Ranma imagined there was a story behind that. "You and Ryouga are Ki Nuclear Reactors compared to the rest of us. You'll be fine. I haven't had a chance to hang out with Ukyou much, and I haven't spent much time with my sister doing normal sisterly things. It'll keep her from feeling left out, and I get a normal night out like a regular teenager who isn't the new epicentre of chaos in Nerima."

"Yeah, but…" Ranma fidgeted herself much like Rin had. "It'll be awkward!"

Nabiki smirked. "It's going to be awkward no matter how it goes down, Ranma." She poked her nose. "And it's gonna keep being awkward until you resolve things with Ryo."

"What's to resolve? Things are resolved!" Ranma protested. "We don't fight anymore! We talk stuff out! We… we…"

"Cuddle instead?" Nabiki asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Yes! NO! I mean we… we… We're friends now!" Ranma stammered. "Stop trying to make it more than that!"
"Ranma, let me ask you this. And…” she took Ranma's hand in hers, the warm flow of her emotions becoming clear as the Link snapped into place between them, "No lying. You used to share the furo with Ryouga, right?"

"Yeah, so? There's nothing weird about that! I mean, I go to public baths! I share the furo with lots of people!" Ranma said defensively.

"Of course it wasn't," Nabiki said reassuringly, and Ranma calmed a bit when she felt that Nabiki was being honest. "Playful innuendo aside, you were just taking a bath."

"Right!" Ranma nodded sharply.

"Could you do it now?" Nabiki asked. "Y'know, before we start with the Link stuff, just go freshen up using the Nekohanten's bathroom with him."

"I…” Ranma trailed off, her eyes widening at the concept. She glanced at Ryouga, slightly panicked that he might have heard that. "I mean… that's… I mean, Akari…!"

"And that's what I mean," Nabiki said. "It's not a problem of you being a girl in his head anymore. When you're around him you're a girl in your own head. He's noticed, you know… that you haven't been a guy around him once since the Shi shi Hokodan."

"That's… that's just coincidence," Ranma muttered, crossing her arms and pulling away from Nabiki a little.

"So, if I got you a kettle of hot water when we get there?" Nabiki asked.

"It… that'd just make it more awkward!" Ranma huffed, hunching down a bit. She wasn't sure why, but she didn't like where this was going.

"Really? So when you're both guys you can share a bath, but you can't lie on a futon with a cute girl between you?" Nabiki asked.

"It's… it'd be weird for him," Ranma said finally. "B-besides! It's my body, and I get to decide if I wanna be a boy or a girl, and right now I wanna be a girl, and… and you should just respect that!"

Nabiki sighed and rubbed her forehead. "Fine. I'm not going to push. That would just lead to you doing something stupid and making this worse. Just… think about it, okay?" Nabiki put a hand on Ranma's shoulder and squeezed. "I'm not saying there's anything wrong with it, even. Just… be honest with yourself why you're doing it. Okay, Ranma?" She gave the redhead's shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "I'm going to hash out the plans with Akane and Ukyou. Keep Ryo from getting lost until we get there, okay?"

Ranma glanced guiltily at Ryouga again. "Yeah… sure, no problem."

Nabiki released Ranma's shoulder and moved towards the front of the group to join Akane, Ukyou and Shampoo.

Ranma glanced to her left, and noticed Rin was still there, blushing and fidgeting.

Ranma sighed. "Sorry if the conversation got a little strange, Rin," she said.

Rin cocked her head. "Strange how?" she asked. "I mean… I'm sorry I overheard! I was trying not to listen but… you were right there, and…" She wrung her hands. "But… I hope things work out for you and Mr. Boyfriend-san…"
Ranma sighed. "Rin, he's not…"

"A-actually, I… I was hoping you could help me with… my… my own problems with this sort of thing?" Rin blushed and kicked at the pavement. "You've known Mu Tsu a while, right?"

"Well, 'known' is kind of a strong term," Ranma replied, latching onto the change of topic. "I mean, he was usually trying to kill me… at our friendliest he was usually lecturing me at best. I think Akane probably knows him better than me. I mean, besides kidnapping her once or twice to get to me, he was one of the few people around not trying to kill or marry her."

"O-oh… well… I mean… maybe I'll ask Akane Senpai too, b-but…" Rin fidgeted. "What do you think of him? A-as a person I mean? And his relationship with Shampoo senpai?"

Ranma was tempted to launch into a comfortable and well-worn tirade about the homicidal nearsighted idiot, but she caught herself.

"He's… well, he's a whiz when it comes to gimmicks and tricks," Ranma started carefully. "I mean, some of 'em are stupid, and they're not really good enough to deal with someone like me, but they can catch you off-guard. He, uh… he plays with sharp stuff more than I'm really comfortable with." She scratched the back of her head, remembering a few close calls. "He's devoted to Shampoo… but he's never really been able to pick up that she's not interested. An' telling Shampoo she doesn't really want something she wants is not a good way to get on her good side. He always kinda came at it like Shampoo was already his girl an' I stole her. If he had actually tried to win her over… mebbe? But he just kinda 'laid claim' to her. Which… sorta makes sense considering what I know about how Amazons do things, but it ain't something males are supposed to do. Come to think of it, he's like that a lot… Males aren't supposed to learn martial arts or challenge people to duels in the Amazon village."

"Hmmm… so… it sounds like he was acting out against it?" Rin asked thoughtfully. "You know… chafing against his gender roles, kinda like it is for girls in Japan?"

"Yeah, but the Amazons are traditionalist. Like, 'follow our traditions or die' kinda traditionalists," Ranma added. "Probably a lot rougher for him. I don't blame him leaving, honestly. I'm not so hot about the idea of living there, even if I am half girl and got some sort of special exemptions as a guy 'cuz I'm strong."

Rin nodded, giving that some consideration. "Do you think that might be why he resents you, Senpai?"

Ranma blinked. "Huh?"

"Maybe… maybe it's about more than just getting the girl he loves? If it was that bad for him that he had to leave, even though he was trying to live life how he wanted to… then a 'strong outsider' shows up and is given everything he struggled for and was denied… m-maybe, deep down, he figures that if he could prove himself stronger than you, he could prove them wrong. About him, a-and… well, everything. Maybe that meant more to him than running away?"

"So… You're saying that might be it wasn't just obsession for Shampoo, but obsession with… I dunno, proving he can be an equal to the women of his village?" Ranma asked.

"Or at least that he deserves to be, and they were wrong all those years for denying it to him," Rin said. "Y-you…" She glanced around and ducked closer, lowering her voice. "You've heard him talk about Ms. Elder Cologne-Sensei, right? He doesn't like her… and he doesn't respect her. He calls her
'old mummy' and 'dried up old monkey'."

"Well… to be fair, I kinda call her 'Old Ghoul'..." Ranma admitted sheepishly, scratching the back of her head.

"Yeah… but you're not an Amazon. A-and she challenged you a bunch when you first met, right? So she's more of a rival. But for Mousse? It'd be like insulting a member of the Diet, wouldn't it? But it makes sense if Mousse doesn't like how she leads the village." Rin nodded, satisfied with her own logic.

"So… you're saying all of Mousse's obsessive behaviour is because, deep down, he's a closet political activist?" Ranma asked incredulously.

"I…" Rin's face fell as she realized how silly that sounded. "W-well… n-no, but… but! But maybe it's still got a lot to do with proving himself to those who are in charge… right?"

Ranma considered. "Well… I guess I can't fault the guy for having something to prove. He's still a jerk, though."

"I know. But maybe if we can get him to see why he's doing what he does, it'll help him?" Rin asked, recovering her determination.

"Ranma shrugged noncommittally. "I guess…"

"Just like how it helped Mr. Boyfriend Ryouga Senpai!" Rin finished, beaming proudly.

"Ryouga isn't my… He's… wait, how did what help Ryouga?" Ranma replied, confused.

Rin cocked her head. "H-he… ummm… realized that he was always so obsessed with you because he was in love with you?"

The ensuing reboot of Ranma's brain failed to reload the navigation software in time to recognize the streetlamp ahead as an obstacle and prevent her from smashing into it - face first.

"A-ah! I'm sorry!" Rin gushed. "I-I thought… M-maybe he hasn't confessed yet! Oh no, I'm so sorry Senpai! I didn't mean to mess everything up!"

Ranma rubbed her sore forehead, not sure if the pain was from the lamp post or not. "Rin, look… I mean, I know stuff looks a certain way with me and Ryouga…"

"Oh no he hasn't!" Rin squeaked. "I'm sorry! Don't tell Mr. Ryouga Senpai! Please forget I said anything!" She waved her hands frantically, then darted off down the road, turning off towards her own house and away from the group.

Ranma sighed and shook her head. I wish there was some way to let her know she's got the wrong idea about me'n Ryo. Gently, anyway. Ranma resumed walking. Come to think of it, EVERYONE seems to have the wrong idea.

She walked a bit further, wanting to drop the idea but, like a terrier with a bone, her mind kept returning to it. I mean, sure he's ATTRACTED to me… to my girl side! That's pretty normal. Hell, I've used it against him a few times to fool him! I always knew, back from when he called me cute…

Ranma slowed a bit. … He DID call me cute, didn't he? It was backhanded and snarky, but… Maybe even before he really fell for Akane. 'Course… I was also the girl that dumped him in the Heitowennichuan. Still… he was super pissed at me and STILL thought I was cute. That's… kinda
She felt an oddly warm rush at that. **Stop that! Since when did I care if Ryouga thought I was cute? That's irrelevant! It doesn't mean he l-lo...** She swallowed. That was still a very scary word for her. **It doesn't mean he LIKES me! Not THAT way!**

She glanced up, eyes falling on Ryouga's back

… **Right?**

Cologne had already cleared the restaurant for the day before they arrived. She had moved around several of the tables and chairs, and made a comfortable place in the middle of the floor large enough for all of them, with futons arranged so that they could recover comfortably. Dr. Tofu had set up some equipment in the corner of the room to record the procedure at the request of Dr. Hirano. Nabiki had pulled both Cologne and Dr. Tofu aside to discuss a similar set up at the Tendo Dojo when it was Akane's turn.

Ranma felt a little fidgety. This was becoming far more involved than she had expected. She could already feel a hum from Nabiki and Ukyou's emotions, being in close proximity to them, and some worrying instability from Ryouga. **How intense is this going to be with two more people? Especially with the kind of ki that Akane can produce? And is that gonna change as Akane trains? Or Nabiki for that matter?** She chewed on her lower lip as she stood out of the way, feeling oddly disconnected from the bustle.

She noticed a movement in the corner of her eye and looked up to see Mousse watching from the kitchen doorway.

"Oh. That's probably not good..." Ranma glanced at the rest of the group, but they hadn't noticed the bespectacled martial artist yet. Ranma sighed, steeled herself for a confrontation and hoped she could get the conflict outside before too much damage was done.

She walked over to where Mousse was standing. At first she thought he simply didn't see her, but she noticed the reflection of light on his thick glasses change, indicating he was tracking her movements.

"Uhh... hey, Mousse. What's up?" Ranma asked, attempting nonchalance, though Mousse's uncharacteristically calm demeanor given the circumstances unnerved her.

"'What's up', as you put it, is that you are about to violate my darling Shampoo in the most profound way possible," Mousse said, though his tone was flat, devoid of the usual snarl. "And not only does she welcome it, but it apparently has the approval of the old..." the reflection shifted as his gaze flicked to the corner of the room where Cologne and Dr. Tofu were conversing with Nabiki, "...of the 'Honored Elder'."

"So... uhh... you know about the Link business then, huh?" Ranma continued. She knew Mousse couldn't see without his glasses, but the way the light was filtering in through the windows made those lenses almost totally opaque from this angle, effectively hiding his expression. She would have preferred to have a better idea of what was going through the other martial artist's mind.

"I've overheard enough," Mousse replied. "It certainly explains Ryouga Hibiki's sudden and dramatic shift in demeanor towards you."
Ranma's eyes narrowed. "Look, I'm kinda sick of people accusing me of brainwashing people, you most of all. The Link is Ryo's thing, and it's been there since Middle School. I ain't done nothing to him, just like I ain't done nothing to Shampoo! She and the others… we're all doing this to help Ryo's mother. Me'n Shampoo? That was decided way before this. But if you really wanna beef over this, then step outside and we can have it out somewhere quiet."

Mousse's gaze switched back to Ranma and, for a moment, the angle changed enough for her to see his eyes past the reflection. There was none of the usual rage there, however. If anything, his expression seemed more… resigned. There was a flicker of surprise in his eyes as well, as if he had heard something he hadn't expected.

"I'm not interested in fighting you, Ranma Saotome," Mousse said finally, looking away. "I won't interfere. I've lost. I know that and as… satisfying as beating you within an inch of your life would be, it wouldn't accomplish anything. I'm just here… to observe."

Ranma raised an eyebrow. She relaxed her stance a little and crossed her arms. "Observe?"

"If this is what Shampoo wants… then I want to see it," Mousse replied. His gaze shifted again, to the purple-haired Amazon. "Rin Ito has scolded me for not acknowledging what Shampoo wants. For not seeing it. I suppose something that will finally close the door on my chances with her is as good a time as any."

Ranma sighed. "Listen… It's fine if you wanna be here for this, but… you're just winding yourself up, y'know? You gotta know by this point that whether we do this or not, it ain't gonna change things between you and Shampoo, right? That's got nothing to do with me."

"Could you just walk away, Saotome?" Mousse asked tightly. "If it were Akane Tendo? Or Ukyou Kuonji? Or Nabiki? When faced with the task of picking one you refused. Do you expect me to believe that you could just let them go?"

Ranma paused a moment then looked down. "I almost did, once."

Mousse's eyebrows climbed above the rim of his glasses, surprise obvious despite the reflection.

"There was this guy… Shinnosuke. Akane met him as a kid in Ryugenzawa. He couldn't remember anything half the time… but he remembered her. He had the guts to tell her how he felt when I didn't and… and she was willing to stay with him. I almost… I almost walked away right then."

"But you obviously didn't," Mousse pointed out.

"Wasn't my choice. Akane was willing to stay with him because he was dying… probably didn't have much time left… and it was her fault. Old injury he got saving her when they were kids. When we figured out a way to heal him… she said goodbye and came home with me." Ranma shuddered a bit, not liking the memory.

"But you obviously didn't," Mousse pointed out.

"There was this guy… Shinnosuke. Akane met him as a kid in Ryugenzawa. He couldn't remember anything half the time… but he remembered her. He had the guts to tell her how he felt when I didn't and… and she was willing to stay with him. I almost… I almost walked away right then."

"And what do you want, Saotome?" Mousse asked quietly.

"Why do I gotta want more than that?" Ranma glanced back at him with a scowl.

"Because a life lived for another is an empty thing, Saotome. Trust me," Mousse fairly spat.
Ranma's scowl deepened. Then she remembered what Rin had said. "Bull."

Mousse gave her a second surprised look. "...What?"

"I said 'Bull'!" Ranma continued. She walked up to him and poked him in the chest. "You know why? It's not about 'living your life for someone else' with you. Because Rin has you pegged! She's figured out what all of this obsession is about. You're trying to prove yourself."

"Of course I am!" Mousse shot back. "I've never stopped trying to prove myself to my darling Shampoo."

"No," Ranma cut him off. "It ain't about Shampoo. She's just the... uhh... the figurehead for it! You're trying to prove yourself to the Amazons. Trying to prove to them that you deserve to live your life the way you wanna live it... and that's why I piss you off so much. Not just because of Shampoo, but because they're basically handing me the kind of life you've wanted all along and been told you can't ever have." She stepped back and gave him a self-satisfied smirk. "Tell me I'm wrong."

"I..." Mousse started, then closed his mouth. His gaze fell and she could see his eyes over the rim of his glasses, wide as he digested that notion.

He finally straightened and pushed his glasses back up with his middle finger. "Perhaps. I'd have called you a fool and a liar if that had come from you, but... Rin is perceptive sometimes."

"Sounds like you notice a lot more about her than you usually do about people, Duck-boy. Mebbe you should go talk all of this stuff over with her instead of lurking here in the shadows?" Ranma raised an eyebrow.

Mousse bristled slightly at the old slur but settled quickly and let the tension go. "I think... that if I am to follow her example and consider other people... I should probably settle matters with Young Mi first."

Ranma relaxed a bit and leaned against the wall. "Y'know... I know something about fiancee troubles. Do you wanna talk about it?"

Mousse scowled at her. "You aren't serious," he said flatly.

"Hey, she took a pretty good piece outta me and she damn near suffocated Ryo! I'd be overjoyed to help you with your love life if it cuts down on the number of attempts on mine, thanks," Ranma growled in return.

"You haven't much to fear from her now that she knows her mistake," Mousse replied. "Shampoo, on the other hand..." Mousse glanced at her again and sighed. "I've been trying to locate her so I can talk. Rin has been helping me to try and figure out what to say to her, but I worry that Young Mi might attack her as well."

"Nabiki figured that much out," Ranma muttered. "So... what's your play? So you were engaged to her, right? Not like, an arranged thing, but something you agreed to? From how Rin tells it, you were pretty serious about her. You gonna try and patch things up?"

Mousse was silent a moment.

"I don't know," he said at last. "It seemed like such an easy decision at the time, when it didn't look like I had any other options. But then I heard of Shampoo's disgrace at your hands and suddenly..." He sighed. "I don't know."
"Yeah, but… do you love her?" Ranma pressed.

"I don't know. I want to talk to her again to figure that out," Mousse said.

"And what about Rin?" Ranma said after a minute.

"What about her?" Mousse said, blinking.

"You can't have missed that she's got the world's biggest crush on you!" Ranma insisted. Her eyes widened as she noted Mousse's blank expression. "Oh my god, you did…"

"What are you talking about, Saotome?!" Mousse asked in frustration. "Rin has said nothing to me about any romantic intent…"

Ranma's sigh cut him off as she rubbed at her temples.

"It's obvious - even to me, Duck-boy. Why would she need to say anything?" Ranma asked, irritated. "That ain't exactly how these things are done, you know?"

"What are you talking about?" Mousse repeated in an exasperated tone. "That's exactly how they're done. When a woman desires a man, she states her intent to claim him and then does so. It's been that way in my village for generations."

"Newsflash. We ain't in your village!" Ranma protested.

"That was how Young Mi made her interest known, even if her approach was more… diplomatic than most Amazon women. She actually gave me the choice," Mousse replied, his scowl deepening. "Even given that, Rin has given no such indication…"

"Young Mi is…" Ranma bit down the urge to say 'crazy' or 'insane', or any of the other things that came readily to mind, "…very bold about the things she wants. Maybe I don't know how they do things in Korea, but here in Japan…"

"I have witnessed many other females here doing exactly the same thing, and in a very Amazonian manner. The approach that seemed at all atypical was Akane Tendo's, though she has shown the proper intent to assert dominance," Mousse replied. "Given your own self-admitted lack of understanding of females, I am wondering if perhaps you are the one who doesn't know how this is supposed to work, Ranma Saotome?"

"I… arrgh!" Ranma threw up her hands in frustration. "You know what? I give up. Sort out your own crap." She turned and stalked back to the group, fists clenched.

Three heads immediately popped up as she approached; Ryouga's, Ukyou's and Nabiki's. Ranma
noticed them all looking in her direction with conspicuous synchronization, took a deep breath and forced herself to relax. She realised that she must be radiating enough frustration to come through the Link, even at range. *Note to self: Find a good place away from everyone when I need to be grumpy.*

"Everything all right?" Nabiki asked, approaching her with a look of concern. Her eyes flickered momentarily towards Mousse.

"Yeah, Mousse is just being his usual infuriating self," Ranma muttered. "I'm trying to see his side of things, I really am, but every time I think he's making progress he steps back into his aura smug, self-superior bullshit."

"Well… not everyone is reachable, Ranchan," Ukyou said with a shrug. "Something you learn listening to people's problems is that sometimes fixing their problems matters less to people than it does to be right."

"So why is he here, anyway?" Ryouga narrowed his eyes. "Should I ask him to leave?"

"No putting holes in the roof, Ryo," Nabiki replied. "I have to sleep here most nights."

Ranma shook her head. "No, no… He wants to see what this 'Link' business is all about. I figure if it keeps him from butting in, let him watch. He seems pretty resigned about it all anyway." She quirked an eyebrow at Ryouga. "Besides… I'm more than capable of 'asking Duck Boy to leave' on my own, Ryouga."

Ryouga blinked then flushed. "I… uhh… I didn't mean… that is… uh…"

"Now, now, Ranma, don't be hard on the poor boy," Nabiki chided her. "Boys like to feel useful, after all. You have to throw them a bone now and then."

"Hey…" Ryouga protested weakly.

"Yeah, like we used to do with you," Ukyou added, winking at Ranma.

"Wait, what? What do you mean 'like you used to do with me'?!" Ranma demanded.

"'Oh Ranma, save me! Defeat this horrible fiend and rescue me!'" Ukyou put the back of her hand to her forehead in a feigned pose of dramatic distress.

"I was saving you!" Ranma protested.

Ukyou rolled her eyes. "Uh huh. Except when Akane was in trouble too. Then me and Shampoo had to fend for ourselves!" She folded her arms and glared at the redhead.

"I… hey! That's not fair!" Ranma shrank back a bit as her danger sense kicked in.

"To be fair? I'm pretty sure Ranma knew you'd be okay when he did it," Nabiki replied. "When the porch collapsed and he had to choose between catching me or Akane, he caught me because he knew that she could land it."

"I'm not sure I like your implication we're somehow complicit in this 'Damsel-in-distress make-work' scheme," Ryouga muttered.

"Or that I should be using it on Ryo!" Ranma added.

"Y-yeah…" Ryouga agreed weakly. Something flickered in his eyes as he glanced at Ranma. "It's not like we're in the sort of relationship where that'd be appropriate…"
"Yeah!" Ranma agreed. "I mean… aside from the cover stories…"

"Which are just cover stories!" Ryouga added quickly.

"And that whole 'Common Law' thing…" Ranma scratched the back of her head sheepishly.

"Technicality!" Ryouga chimed in. "B-besides, Ranma's a guy!"

"W-well…" It was Ranma's turn to be sheepish. "I mean… I'm not right now…"

Ryouga frowned and turned to face Ranma fully. "What, are you saying that different rules apply to you just because you look like a girl right now?"

"I don't look like a girl, I am a girl! Different plumbing, different bathroom, different rules!" Ranma said with a scowl.

"So you get to play by the girl rules when it's convenient, like getting to boss me around?" Ryouga growled.

"Oh yeah, convenience," Ranma shot back. "Tell you what. I'll drop the bossing around part if I also get to ditch having to get fitted for bras… do you have any idea how tough it is for me to find one that fits right and isn't something custom?! Or having to see the gynecologist? Yeah, the school nurse has me down for that now, too! Fun! Or… hey, maybe even just not having to have my period anymore, huh?!"

"I… uhh…" Ryouga blinked. "Does that mean…?"

"No, I am not having my period right now, you jackass!"

"Should… we stop them?" Ukyou asked uncertainly as they continued their verbal sparring.

Nabiki offered her a rice cracker. "I've learned that it's usually better to just let them go and watch. And take notes."

Ranma glowered at the two, then folded her arms and sulked.

Dr. Tofu cleared his throat. "Ahem… we're ready for you now. If you are done with your personal conversation?"

"Yeah, sure, let's get this over with," Ranma muttered. "Don't say I don't do nothin' for ya, bacon breath."

Ryouga looked like he wanted to retort, but bit it back.

Probably because this is for his Mom's sake, and he's more worried about curing the family curse and saving her? some guilty part of Ranma's mind reminded her. She ground her teeth a bit, stalked over to the pile of cushions and plopped down next to Shampoo, who had been laid out on them. Her shirt was rumpled and open slightly, and she had several visible adhesive sensors applied to her upper chest.

"Since Shampoo has a much higher ki pool, I've had to increase the dosage, so I'll be monitoring her more closely," Tofu said. "Make sure to talk to her and keep her awake."

He intercepted the others as they approached and guided them to sit in a rough circle around Shampoo. "Make sure you're not touching each other. The point is we are trying to force your aligned ki, which seeks to mingle, to use Shampoo as a conduit and thus align her ki. If you are
making contact with each other, it'll create a short and retard the process."

Cologne hopped over on her staff, watching with interest as the doctor arranged Nabiki, Ukyou, Ranma and Ryouga around Shampoo. He put Ranma and Nabiki on one side, with Ukyou and Ryouga on the other. Then he instructed each of them to put a hand on one of Shampoo's wrists or ankles, until each had a good hold.

"Fascinating," Cologne commented, hopping about to observe. "Are you sure this will result in a link? Such a thing has been encountered a few times by the **Joketsuzoku**, but none of our attempts to create a link intentionally have borne fruit."

"I believe Ryouga Hibiki's family has a unique quality that facilitates this 'alignment'," Dr. Tofu replied as he checked his equipment. "I imagine it's an incredibly rare quality."

"And valuable. I can see the potential applications," Cologne mused, giving Ryouga an appraising look.

Ranma's eyes narrowed. She knew *that* look! "He's not breeding stock for the Amazons, old bat! Keep your marriage schemes to yourself!"

Cologne chuckled, her ancient eyes bright with amusement. "Of course not, child. I can see that he is already spoken for. I wouldn't dream of interfering."

"You'd better not!" Ranma huffed, still eying her suspiciously.

Nabiki sighed and shook her head at Ranma.

"…What?" Ranma gave her a quizzical look.

"You're happier not knowing," Nabiki replied.

"Mmmm… Medicine very strong…" Shampoo murmured, her eyelids drooping. "Is okay for Shampoo to take nap?"

"It would be best if you remained awake," Dr. Tofu replied. "I expect the process does rely quite a bit on an *emotional* connection. You will need to be aware of the others for best results."

"You'll feel better once the Link is in place, sugar," Ukyou said gently, smiling at the Amazon girl. "Just try to focus on something."

"Like… what?" Shampoo asked muzzily.

"Well, it helped me to focus on how maddening Ranma and Ryouga are to deal with," Nabiki said playfully.

"*Hey!"* Ranma and Ryouga replied in synchronized outrage, earning a giggle from the drowsy Amazon.

"This… is safe, right Dr. Tofu?" Akane asked nervously, with a glance at Shampoo then at the machine. Its screen showed a mass of wavy lines and confusing numbers that she didn't understand, but she was aware that the machine's beeping was slowing and that many of the numbers were going down.

"The dosage is *high*, but not dangerous," Dr. Tofu replied. "She's in little danger from the herbs."

"But the herbs aren't the only part of this…" Akane pointed out.
Dr. Tofu sighed. "Nabiki's introduction to the Link was relatively low-risk. However, as the ki required increases, so do the risks involved. I do not believe that Shampoo is in any real peril from this, but there are a number of unknowns, especially if the poisoned ki that comprises Ryouga's directional disability should find a way to bridge the gap and cross over to one of the others."

"Do you think that's possible?" Akane asked softly.

Dr. Tofu took a breath. "With the current procedure? No. As long as Ryouga's own ki is at a high level, there doesn't seem to be any transmission. It's almost as if his own ki reserves act as insulation, or a form of natural quarantine. But when we reach the natural end stage, and his own ki has ebbed and left the poisoned ki exposed…" He shook his head. "We could end up spreading this curse amongst all of you."

Akane nodded and resumed watching, looking thoughtful.

Ranma herself was concerned about that idea. It was certainly a sobering thought… the idea of never being able to find her way, even along a simple path.

"And Ryouga's been alone with that for his whole life, Ranma thought with a glance in his direction. Right now, this Link is the only thing that can save him and his mother from spending their whole lives alone. She closed her eyes and nodded. No… we're not going to lose to this! Ranma Saotome doesn't give up, and doesn't lose! Not even to some stupid 500 year old curse!"

"Whatever Airen doing… keep up," Shampoo murmured. "Is nice… warm… feels like…" she trailed off with a gasp.

Almost in unison, Ranma, Nabiki, Ukyou and Ryouga gasped as well, the block that had kept them all separated crumbling suddenly, like an earthen dam eroded by the waters of a rushing river. Turbulent surges of emotion and ki dissolved that barrier and washed it away.

Shampoo's eyes went wide. She sucked in a deep breath and then another, as if she couldn't get enough air. Ranma leaned closer, taking hold of her shoulder with her free hand and Ryouga did the same on her opposite side, concentrating on keeping her steady until her breathing stabilised.

"S-so much!" Shampoo whispered, eyes flicking back and forth between them. "Ahhn… loud but no noise… shapes but not shapes… colors that not colors… ã€¡!" She squeezed her eyes shut.

"Stay calm, you three," Nabiki said sternly. "Ki is emotion, remember? So reign it in and keep calm until she can get used to it."

Ranma nodded and steadied her own breathing to focus on Shampoo. She could sense the chaotic swirl as all of their ki poured into Shampoo, filling the void left by the heavy dosage of herbs. Emotions so intense as to be almost physical things flooding into the girl and overwhelming her control. She focused on her feelings for Shampoo, and tried to send her that warm, reddish emotion that she had always found so comforting. She felt the others following suit, though Ryouga's emotional flow was tinged with sheepish pink.

Shampoo started to relax as the rush settled and their ki replaced what had been suppressed by the medicine. "Better…" she smiled at Ranma. "Shampoo worried Airen… can feel… Can also feel…" She blushed and closed her eyes. "Shampoo knew, but… didn't… didn't know know. Airen have much warmth inside. See now why Nabiki think we need this."

Ranma smiled and reached out to stroke Shampoo's cheek. "Yeah, yeah, don't get too sappy on me, Shampoo. Not in front of Ryouga. He's still a bit uncomfortable with the personal displays of
affection… especially when it's two girls, you know?"

Sure enough, Ryouga was blushing and trying to look anywhere but at the two of them.

Shampoo grinned. She was perking up now that her ki levels were returning to normal and she had that mischievous glint in her eye again. Before Ranma could stop her, she slipped her hand from Ranma's grasp and reached over to gently turn Ryoga's head to face her, sitting up in the process.

"Shagua should not be embarrassed. Have nothing to be embarrassed about. Can see Shagua's heart now. Can feel concern for Shampoo. Even other things Shagua try and hide to… what is words… 'be gentlemanly'," she said, looking into his eyes. "Is very sweet."

Ryouga's blush deepened. Ranma felt an odd stirring of something dark and possessive in her, though she wasn't entirely sure who it was directed at yet.

"I… uhh… w-well, you're doing this for my family, so… so making sure you're safe is the least I can do… right?" Ryouga said nervously with an awkward laugh.

Shampoo's soft lips curled into a smile and her eyes narrowed into a familiar, seductively predatory expression. "Shampoo should give Shagua reward to show should not be so timid, yes?"

Ranma's eyes widened. She put her hand on Shampoo's shoulder, feeling a flash through the link that told her exactly what Shampoo was going to do, even if Ryouga hadn't caught on yet. "Shampoo, wait…!"

It was too late. Shampoo's slipped her arm around Ryouga's neck and pulled him closer. His eyes widened as she tugged him off balance but before he could correct and pull back she had leaned in to close the gap and pressed her lips to his in an enthusiastic kiss.

Ranma, Ukyou and Nabiki stared, too stunned to move or comment.

Ryouga naturally froze up like he had been turned to stone, his eyes wide and panicked for a moment, before going glassy as his higher functions immediately jettisoned all core operating files.

Not that this deterred Shampoo, who was more than accustomed to a similar reaction from Ranma. She held the kiss until she was satisfied then leaned back, smiling.

"There. See? Shagua not have anything to fear," she purred. "Might even enjoy if let self relax a little."

Ryouga slowly toppled over backwards, eyes staring sightlessly upwards.

Ukyou yelped and was the first to recover, moving to catch him before his head actually hit the floor.

"Shampoo!" Akane stepped out around the medical equipment, aghast. "Why would you do that?! Don't tease poor Ryouda like that!"

Shampoo arched an eyebrow. "Only tease if not serious."

"Shampoo!" Akane yelped. "He has a girlfriend!"

"Pokemon trainer girl not here," Shampoo said, her expression darkening slightly at the mention of Akari. "Her loss."

Ranma had finally started out of her stupor enough to move. Struggling to get her emotions under control, she took a deep breath, opened her eyes and was about to speak, but found that Nabiki was
in her way now, looming over the Amazon.

"Pintou? What…?" Shampoo said, but Nabiki simply extended her finger and flicked the bell on the collar around Shampoo's neck. Shampoo's eyes widened and the color drained from her face.

"Got your attention, kitten? Good," Nabiki said, her voice stern. "Let me be perfectly clear then; You do not ever do that without asking and receiving permission. Is that clear?"

Shampoo swallowed hard. "Y-yes Pintou… Shampoo did not mean harm, just…"

Nabiki put a finger to her lips to quiet her. "What you meant doesn't matter. What you did does. I know for a fact that was Ryoga's first kiss, and while that might not be such a significant thing for you, it is for him. He also has a very complicated romantic situation that you have just inserted yourself into without consulting the rest of the people in your own complicated romantic situation. Now. I need your word of honor that you won't make any moves on anyone with whom you are not officially and consensually involved."

Shampoo bowed her head. "Y-yes, Pintou. Shampoo swear."

"That means no hanky-panky with Ryoga unless both he and Ranma agree to it, clear? Beforehand. No seducing them and getting forgiveness after the fact."

"Shi de, Pintou," Shampoo murmured. Then she blinked and gave Nabiki a shyly quizzical look.

"Good girl," Nabiki winked and gently ran her fingers through Shampoo's hair, almost as if she were petting her.

Dr. Tofu, who had been watching the exchange, sighed and shook his head. "I was about to say that if any of you wished to move, change positions or make contact with each other you may do so now, as long as you keep contact with Shampoo, but apparently you're already doing that. Just… all of you stay put for the next thirty minutes or so."

Ranma took a few more breaths with her eyes closed to steady herself and wrestle down her angry response. It's cool, Ranma. Nabiki took care of it and Akari didn't see, so it's probably fine. It's fine. It's fine.

She opened eyes and her gaze fell on Ryoga. He was still catatonic, propped up by Ukyou. His first kiss, huh? Ranma thought, her mind flitting back to her own rather unpleasant first time, forced upon her by Mikado Sanzenin. She shuddered involuntarily. In the past she might have suggested that at least Ryoga's experience was better, but she could sense the overload through the Link when Shampoo kissed him, that conflicting mixture of confusion, surprise, arousal, and sheer terror. Something similar had happened to her when Shampoo had first kissed her. Now that she had that first kiss with Ukyou in the school halls to compare with, and even the later kiss with Shampoo afterwards, she knew the difference.

Mindful of keeping contact with Shampoo, she reached across her and touched his hand to strengthen her connection to him. She could sense the roiling, black feedback loop of guilt and fear. She glanced at Shampoo. "Can you feel that, Shampoo? All that black, spikey stuff coming from Ryouga?"

"Is… because of Shampoo?" Shampoo blinked, brow furrowing as she seemed to try and focus on Ryoga without really focusing her eyes. "Is… What emotion this?"

"Fear," Nabiki replied. "Guilt. Shame. The poor boy is a factory for the stuff. He's terrified of
"But… but Shampoo no reject!" Shampoo protested. "Do opposite!"

"You did it where others who might reject him could see. And… he's been toyed with like that before, leading to rejection." Nabiki shot Ranma a telling glance, that caused the redhead to blush a little with shame of her own.

"But how can…?" Shampoo glanced at her then blinked and looked down where his hand still was wrapped limply around hers, with Ranma's on top. She tightened her grip and reached up to bring Ryouga's head gently down so she could look into his eyes.

"Is okay. Shampoo not mean harm, Shagua," she said softly. As she spoke, Ranma felt a warm flow of emotion suffuse Shampoo's ki and flow through the connection. Shampoo had amazing control already, her long years of training allowing her superior mastery despite not having the kind of reserves she or Ryouga had. Ranma could feel the warmth as well, though she could tell it wasn't meant for her. That caused another odd little lurch of jealousy.

Shampoo's gaze flicked to her. She smiled again and put her other hand on top of Ranma's. "Airen no need to be upset. Understand owe apology to Airen too. Shampoo push too hard, try take too much again. Get greedy."

Shampoo's efforts were bearing fruit. Ryouga's spiky, chaotic emotional landscape was starting to settle, some of the blacks and purples draining, though there was still a pinkish tinge of embarrassment and humiliation.

"I'm… sorry…" Ryouga mumbled. His eyes cleared, but were still unfocused, as though he was just waking up.

"No need. No do anything wrong," Shampoo said, her words accompanied by more warm ki. She glanced to Nabiki. "Maybe… is good time to take Akane, go shopping? Too too much emotion all at once now, and Shampoo need to talk with Airen and Shagua."

Nabiki sighed. "All right. Just remember…"

"Shampoo behave," Shampoo said solemnly.

Nabiki smirked and gave her a wink. "No. Ask permission. 'Behaving' is situational and optional."

"I… uhh… sure," Ranma said, a little uncertain as she realized with some surprise that Nabiki really did trust her and was essentially putting her in charge. "I'll keep anything from getting to roof-removing levels."

Nabiki smiled, leaned in and kissed her lightly on the lips. "Good." Leaning a little closer, she murmured in the redhead's ear, low enough that only Ranma could hear. "Don't be afraid of acting on what you want, okay? No one is going to take anything away from you for doing that."

"You sure?" Ranma replied skeptically, mindful of exactly how untrue that statement had been for most of her life.

Nabiki pulled back and gave her one of her confident smirks. "Of course I am. Nobody takes anything from Nabiki Tendo. I've made sure of that. I'm just extending that to include things that belong to the people I care about now." She reached out and ruffled Ranma's hair. "Shampoo knows
Ranma was feeling kind of fuzzy and warm about Nabiki's absolute confidence, right up until that last statement. "...The what?"

"Pintou telling bad joke," Shampoo said quickly, glaring at Nabiki. "And going to have very cross kitten shredding favorite clothes if not leave before Shampoo get stuck with two broken boys instead of one!"

"Sorry!" Nabiki said, holding her hands out in a placating gesture. Her rapid 180 told Ranma that apparently Shampoo wasn't bluffing and Nabiki was fully aware of it. "I couldn't resist. You know how I get. Please let the designer jeans live."

"Will consider if let Shampoo borrow," Shampoo replied with a smirk.

"I could just buy you your own pair," Nabiki offered.

"No. Want in your pants," Shampoo retorted. Ranma could feel a bit of pride from her at having managed her own bit of clever double entendre. "Decide later if Nabiki need be in them or not."

Nabiki grinned back and raised an eyebrow. "I'll keep that in mind, kitten." She took a breath, stood and turned to Dr. Tofu. "Are we okay to leave just the three of them now? It's a bit exhausting sorting through all the noise with five people at once... and there's a sale on at the mall."

Dr. Tofu smiled, put a hand on Nabiki's shoulder and, with a deceptively casual air, sat her right back down. "I'm sure your sale can wait fifteen minutes, Nabiki. For the moment I need a chance to do an actual examination of all of you. I'm afraid I'll have to insist you put off any shopping trips, makeout sessions or massive explosions of ki until I'm done."

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Ryouga was fairly certain Dr. Tofu had deliberately made the entire physical more awkward than absolutely necessary. He'd also reinforced several times the gravity of being in the kind of uncharted medical territory they were entering, and the need to advise him of any changes - emotional, physical or otherwise. Ryouga suspected the good doctor was a little annoyed with how flippant the group had gotten about the Link.

Truth be told, it was worrying Ryouga as well. Every time he had made a new Link, it was accompanied by, or in Ranma's case, caused by, surges of emotion. For Nabiki it had been grief while Ukyou's had been anger... emotions that Ryouga was familiar with and comfortable with.

With Shampoo? It was... affection. And it scared the hell out of him.

He wasn't entirely sure affection was the right term. He was fairly certain it wasn't love and it wasn't just raw attraction, though he sheepishly had to admit there was a definite subset of that in there. It was... just a powerful desire to give and receive affection, unrestrained by modesty or shame. It was like she was an abandoned puppy desperate for love.

Or perhaps kitten would be more appropriate, he mused. But the thought that it might come from some kind of deprivation suddenly made it more comfortable, which disquieted him somewhat. Do I really only 'get' feelings if they're from something bad?

He lay on his back on the futon that had been placed on the floor of the restaurant and studied the ceiling. It was probably the safest place to look at the moment, given what had happened and that the perpetrator of it was right next to him. Her hand was clasped with his and, although she wasn't lying...
unusually close to him, she felt too close. And just beyond her he was aware of Ranma and her usual complex whirl of emotions.

He closed his eyes. *What am I even doing? How did things get this... this...* He sighed, lacking the mental framework to define his situation outside of 'like Ranma's'. *I should be on the farm with Akari, training pigs. I should have been HAPPY with that, dammit! I should have told her about all of this and insisted she be here. Instead I... I'm doing to her what I did to Anna. I keep running back to... to something I can't have.*

Akane's face swam to the forefront of his mind. *Am I just doing this to have a chance to have that kind of connection with Akane? Even after she broke my heart and I found out that she could NEVER love me like that? Am I that much of a glutton for misery?*

Nabiki's face replaced Akane's, with that half-lidded look on her face that had become the source of a secret, guilty thrill for him. *I didn't even notice Nabiki until she belonged to Ranma. Is that all I'm doing? Chasing after Ranma's girls because I want to deny Ranma?*

Nabiki's face faded and Ranma's took its place. The twisting feeling in his gut got worse. He realized there wasn't even the duality there anymore. *Am I chasing them... because I want HER?* He squeezed his eyes shut tighter in an irrational attempt to block the image from his mind. *Why did I chase Ranma to China? I should have been GLAD she... HE was gone! Why do I keep coming back to obsess over girls who don't know I exist just because they belong to Ranma?*

Ranma's face shifted, her expression becoming the one she had worn the day of the *Shi shi Hokodan*. Worry and fear - and somehow he knew without a doubt, and for the first time, that it had not been for herself - not *because* of him, but *for* him. The knowledge that he had value to someone, enough that she would risk her life for him, had been burned into his mind by all that ki.

*People caring about me scares me,* he thought to himself. *Then came an odd realization. Because I know I'll let them down. Akane was safe to love because she had Ranma... Ranma would always catch her. I could see that. Ranma catches Nabiki. Ranma catches Ukyou. Ranma catches Shampoo. Hell, Ranma caught Kodachi when she needed it, too. Ranma catches everyone when they need it. And... that's it. They need to be caught, so Ranma catches them. It never occurs to her NOT to. I guess that's what makes them fall in love with her so readily.*

He relaxed a little, feeling the self-loathing ease a bit. *Ranma caught me, too.*

He opened his eyes to focus on the ceiling of the restaurant again. It was getting dark - harder to make out the patterns - but he wasn't tired. *Maybe that's enough... Nabiki only needed an hour or so. Ranma should be able to make it work from here.* He turned his head to check on the girls, sure they would be sleeping.

He nearly bumped noses with Shampoo. "Guh...?!"

Shampoo grinned at him. "*Shagua lost in own world too-too long. Interesting to try and match what see in ki to what see on face.* She frowned a bit. "*Shagua use own thoughts to hurt self sometimes,* though.*"

"I... uhh... That is..." Ryouga stammered. He could feel the heat in his own cheeks and cursed himself for his lack of discipline. *Shampoo too, now? Hibiki, you're every bit as bad as you always accused Ranma of being!*

"There, you do again," Shampoo said, and tapped him on the nose with her finger. "*No.*"
Ryouga blinked. "I… what do you mean 'no'?

"Is mean what Shampoo said. Much much nicer shapes and colors just before Shagua started hurting self again." She cocked her head. "Is… guilt, yes? Why nice feelings make Shagua guilty?"

"Because those 'nice feelings' are things I shouldn't be feeling," Ryouga replied, looking back towards the ceiling.

Shampoo sighed heavily, reached over, grabbed his chin and, with surprising strength, turned him forcefully back to look at her. Her red eyes fairly flashed in the dim light as she fixed him with a stern glare. "Is no 'right' or 'wrong' to feelings. Is just feelings to feelings. Good or Bad come from what do with feelings. Be afraid of feelings, try and pretend not have feelings, hurt self because of feelings… only lead to getting all twisted up inside. Lead to doing bad things in end."

Ryouga blinked a bit in surprise. "I… But… What if…?"

Shampoo sighed again. "And you wonder why I call you Shagua?" she said, but she was smiling too. "Pintou right. 'Lost Boy' lost in more ways than one. Should stop worrying so much. Is with two pretty girls, should relax and enjoy!"

Ryouga rolled his eyes a bit. "It's not that simple…"

Shampoo raised an eyebrow and smirked a bit. "You sure?"

Ryouga felt a small surge of fear at that, and his pulse jumped as he noticed that same predatory look in her eyes that she had gotten just before she'd kissed him. That was a memory he had been trying very hard to suppress, given the situation. His eyes flicked down, unbidden to her soft lips, remembering how they had felt. He hiccuped and hastily pinched his nose shut. "Pleadth dobt."

"Pintou say ask permission first. Shampoo not do without permission," Shampoo said softly. "And only if Airen give permission as well. But… Will do. Not for pity. Not for scheme. Because was nice and want to do again. Shagua understand?"

"But… why?" Ryouga asked weakly. He glanced past Shampoo, nervous about Ranma's reaction to the conversation, but he could see the redhead was curled up against Shampoo's side, head pillowed on her shoulder and fast asleep. Ranma, this is the worst time for you to be sleeping! He briefly considered raising his voice to try and wake her, but he remembered how heavy a sleeper Ranma was.

"Why need reason past because feel nice?" Shampoo asked.

"Because… you've never shown any interest before?" Ryouga said quickly. "I-I mean, it's not like we never spent time together. There was that time when Cologne taught me the Bakusai Tenketsu…"

"Where Shagua tied up like game hen and face smash into boulder all day long?" Shampoo replied with some amusement in her voice. "Yes, very romantic."

Ryouga sighed. "Yes, well… that's the point! Nothing has been romantic until now. What changed your mind all of a sudden?"

"Not all of sudden!" Shampoo said indignantly, puffing out her cheeks in a way he had to admit was unnervingly cute. "Shagua just crazy rival for Airen for longest time. Then when finally calm down, start seeing have a lot in common with. Even when come to Airen."

Ryouga's gaze fell away. "L-look, about that…"
"Shagua love Ranma, yes?" Shampoo said softly. "No lie."

Ryouga was silent. Something about saying the words, especially in Ranma's presence, was simply too real for him. But after a few moments, he managed a timid nod.

Shampoo smiled. "Shampoo same way. Realize when we talk at Ucchan's how much. Start off hating Ranma, see Ranma as rival. Hunt, become obsession. Then see other side… have hope for a moment… then hope betrayed. Angry, hurt… but no can hate anymore. If had come back to Japan and found out Airen really was a girl? Not matter. Stopped mattering before even got back to China. Shampoo think it stop mattering to you, too."

"Ranma isn't into guys," Ryouga replied. "Hell, neither am I! How is this supposed to work?!"


Ryouga took a deep breath, attempting to find some flaw in her argument - refute it - find some good reason why this whole thing was stupid… and just let the breath out again as he came up with nothing. He felt her squeeze his hand and realized he had forgotten her hand was there. Timidly, he squeezed back.

"I don't… I don't get you. Any of you," He said softly. "I don't know why you all seem to be okay with this… even Akane! Not just me, but… with each other. With this… this whole arrangement. It shouldn't work. Everything about it tells me it shouldn't, but… it does. Why?"

"Is easy choice. Survival. We all in corner with no way out. Airen know this. If Shampoo fail to bring back husband, come back after second failure? Great grandmother's position protect Shampoo from first failure… give leniency… leniency was curse Shampoo live with entire life. But second failure? Death… exile… maybe worse. Even if not, live in disgrace. Be unperson. Ukyou? Ukyou live whole life shaped by Airen, by Panda-skin-rug-in-law's betrayal. Identity… sense of self… hang by thread now. Only hope to regain honor, regain identity. Airen give her hope for future. No Airen? She live… but not live, yes? Akane probably go bad way without Airen. Grow up hating all boys, thinking they all like idiots at school. Never deal with anger. Nabiki spend whole life with heart locked up in ice. All need Airen. Not have other choice. We fight, we struggle… but not hate. Not like idea of others lose so one can win. Always hold back… sometimes forget to fight, realize are friends. First real friends Shampoo have in whole life." Shampoo cocked her head. "Shagua and Airen like that too, maybe?"

"We were always rivals," Ryouga conceded. "Ever since middle school. I hated him. I… thought I hated him. I figured I was supposed to hate him. Honor and Martial Arts and all that. He never hated me back, though. And… sometimes I'd forget to hate him. He seemed so lost at times… so much confidence and pride, but… he didn't know anything. Even compared to me."

"Tell me about?" Shampoo asked. "But… can move arm? Is no comfortable like this."

"Uh… sure?" He released her hand and lifted his arm, not sure where she wanted him to put it. He realized a moment too late that it was a ploy as she squirmed in against his side and rested her head on his shoulder.

"There. Much much better," she said, relaxing against him.

Ryouga, for his part, had frozen solid, arm still in the air as he stared sightlessly off into the darkness.
His heart started to thud in panic.

"Calm," Shampoo reminded him. "Shagua not have much physical contact, yes?"

"N-not… not with…"


Ryouga forced himself to un-tense, but he was still left uncertain where to lay his arm.

Shampoo glanced up at him then smirked. "Where feelings say you want to put hand? Shampoo give permission, anywhere Shagua like.

"Urk."

She giggled. "Calm. Hentai is okay, but where want to put arm, really? Shampoo know Shagua want more than just grope, yes?"

Ryouga swallowed. He closed his eyes and quickly lowered his arm and put it around Shampoo and Ranma before he lost his nerve.

"Good," Shampoo fairly purred. "Grope later, maybe."

"That's not exactly helping me to relax!" Ryouga grated hoarsely.

"Then talk more," Shampoo countered. "Tell about Shagua and Airen."

Ryouga closed his eyes. "I used to tell myself it was an honor thing. That I wanted to fight Ranma at his best. I wanted to beat him, not hunger or being out living in the cold or social awkwardness. Sometimes… sometimes I'd just kind of lose the distinction. He was the only person around who sorta understood." He smiled wanly at the memories. Now that the veil of his anger at Ranma had lifted and the 'bread feud' and Jyusenkyou curse were no longer the driving justifications for his relentless pursuit, he could remember those times more clearly. He could remember that Ranma had never been bothered by his directional problems and just taken to quietly leading Ryouga home after school when it got bad. He could remember how he'd started feeding Ranma or providing him a place to crash when his father got mean. He could remember the hours they had spent sparring… getting into trouble at school… or sometimes just talking.

"He was my best friend. He is my best friend. She is…" Ryouga said after a moment. "I don't even know anymore. I guess it doesn't matter. But… It was fun. All the bickering and banter… it was just playing - teaching me to stand up for myself. Ranma would make fun of me, but he'd stand up for me to anyone else. And the simplest, stupidest things would make him happy… a hot meal, a hot bath, a soft bed… these were luxuries to him. He kinda made me appreciate them more. And… and I guess I always figured he'd… he'd just be there."

Shampoo listened quietly. He could feel her eyes on him, sense the gentle swirl of her emotions, and the warmth of her against his side. He could sense Ranma's sleeping emotions as well. His hand twitched, then impulsively he moved it to brush Ranma's hair.

"He had terrible hair back then. Guess she took all my griping to heart." He let his fingers trail through the soft red locks. "The Tendos probably taught her about conditioner."

Shampoo giggled softly. "Good hair important," she agreed. Ryouga had a momentary rebellious thought, wondering if her hair was so soft to the touch as well. "So… when Airen leave…"
"He told me about a week before," Ryouga said. "At first I told myself that I was okay with it, but… I wasn't. The only person who understood me… who I wasn't too ashamed of myself to be around… was leaving. Probably forever. I think… I think I was sad, but… I was sad about a lot of things growing up. I learned it was easier to be angry about them. People make fun of you when you're sad. They see it as weakness. But anger? People leave you alone when you're angry. So… so I got angry. I decided I was going to challenge Ranma. One last big fight. I was going to prove I was better than him. Prove that I… that I didn't need him around anymore. Except…"

"Got lost," Shampoo finished for him. Her tone was gentle and quiet now, more like she was talking about something from her own past. "Couldn't find. Couldn't settle things."

"Yeah…" Ryouga breathed. "I didn't even question how insane it was. When I was able to find my way home, I packed up my things and set out after him. I used to be so scared of not being able to find my way home again or of getting too far away - but this time I just… I didn't even think about it."

"Scary being away from home for first time," Shampoo murmured.

"Terrifying," Ryouga agreed, thinking back to his first few harrowing weeks, before he'd started to learn the skills that would keep him alive over the next three years. "I had no business being out in the wild. But… turning back never crossed my mind. Every time I learned something new, I'd think 'Just wait until Ranma sees this!'. Every time I wanted to stop, to rest, I thought 'Ranma is still ahead of me. Ranma isn't resting. If Ranma can do it, so can I!' I used to imagine he was just ahead, just in the next clearing, just over the next hill, and that if I just kept pushing, I'd catch up to him. I kept practising what I'd say when I did… Trying to be dramatic… stuff like…"

"'Ranma, you I kill!'" Shampoo said softly, then giggled and looked up at him. "Like that?"

Ryouga blinked at her. "Y-yeah…" he felt a small smile come unbidden to his lips. "Something like that, I guess… what with you hunting her after she visited your village…"

"Was bread at feast Airen and stupid Panda-skin-rug-in-law eat. Was also 'bread feud'," Shampoo replied. "Ryouga chase boy. Shampoo chase girl. Finally catch, and find opposite."

"I wonder what would have happened if I hadn't found out right away?" Ryouga murmured. "For a second… when I saw her… before it clicked…"

"Would have fallen for. Hard," Shampoo said. She tapped his nose. "Be honest."

Ryouga laughed softly. "Yeah… yeah I would have." It felt like less of a burden to admit that now. He realized that Shampoo understood. That was a good feeling… one he had missed. It was enough to make him feel a little braver. "Maybe I kinda did anyway," he admitted in a low voice.

"Not bad thing," Shampoo said. "In good company." She hugged Ranma's sleeping form a little closer and snuggled against his side, closing her eyes. "Could get used to this."

"I…" Ryouga trailed off. It wasn't the fear that held him back this time, though.

"Does Shagua love Pokemon Trainer girl?" Shampoo asked softly.

"She loves me," Ryouga replied.

"Not question Shampoo ask."

Ryouga was silent again. "I want to," he finally answered. "I love… the idea of loving her. She's…"
she's everything I ever wanted. But…"

"But?"

"But so was Anna," he finished. "And I walked away from them both. I could never bring myself to
give up on… something. I thought it was Akane… Now I'm not even sure what I want."

"Is common problem in Japan, yes?" Shampoo said with a smirk. Her eyes sparkled in the low light.
"Always say want one thing, terrified of getting it. Or finally get, and not happy. Too too confused
about what really want. Too worried about what should want."

"Well… what do you think I want, then?" Ryouga said, half expecting a pat reply.

Shampoo looked thoughtful. "Hmmm… Think… Shagua partly right. Want love, want place to
belong, want be accepted… all things other girls offer, yes? But is more, something Shagua doesn't
want to live without, so Shagua run."

"So… I'm greedy," Ryouga replied, a hint of bitterness in his tone.

"No. Shampoo think is important thing. Too, too important. Think Shagua chasing feeling from
Middle School. Not just want acceptance and love. Want understanding too. Want someone like self.
Probably why fall so hard for Akane, even though Akane not know secret, and not return love." She
paused, thinking, then added. "Shagua like to save, like Airen. But bad luck. Maybe afraid he can't?
So run sometimes for that, too. But also… think maybe Shagua want be saved too, sometimes."

Ryouga chuckled. "Yeah, that's me. A regular damsel in distress," he said sarcastically.

Shampoo scowled at him. "Not have to be damsel to be in distress! Too much you think you stronger
Holds Shagua back. If have others who can catch… fear less." She closed her eyes and smiled
slightly. "Shampoo learn this. Pintou teach." She cracked an eye open, smirk widening. "Shampoo
will teach Shagua, if he let her."

Ryouga swallowed nervously. "I… errr… This isn't about that 'permission' thing, is it?"

"Maybe?" Shampoo said playfully, then sighed and shook her head. "No. Will no lie. Is trust.
Shampoo want to earn Shagua's trust, so Shagua knows Shampoo will catch if he fall. Not need to
be more than friends for that, yes?"

Ryouga sighed in relief, though part of him was disappointed. He had never really looked too closely
at Shampoo before, but after talking with her… there was so much more to her than he had
anticipated. "Right, no… of course. Sorry!"

She smirked. "Sex better if Shagua trust Shampoo anyway."

"Urk." Ryouga hastily pinched his nose again. "Coulb you stob teathsing?!"

"Why is so sure Shampoo only teasing?" Shampoo arched an eyebrow. "Is think self so unlovable,
maybe? Is why get so desperate when girl say she like you even a little?"

"I… no… I…" Ryouga mumbled, then trailed off as she leaned closer, almost nose to nose with him.
His eyes widened, heat burned his cheeks and his voice died in his throat.

She studied him a moment, as if looking for something, then nodded, and gave him a gentle kiss on
the cheek. It was chaste but… too lingering to be sisterly. "Airen loves you. Maybe Pintou a little
now, too. Shampoo could love too. Maybe too easy, even. Has bond with Shagua now."

She settled back down as he gaped at her.

"Shampoo know Akane and Nabiki tell to confess to Ranma," Shampoo added. "Shampoo say it too: 'Tell Ranma how feel.' If Ranma accept… Shampoo accept. Shagua have love, understanding, acceptance and people to catch, and who will catch Shagua when he fall." She winked. "Not bad deal, yes?"

Ryouga stared at her in disbelief for a moment, but the Link was still there, strong as ever, and he knew she was being dead honest. He opened his mouth to speak then closed it. He pondered a moment before trying again.

"I… guess I just… don't understand why?" he said at last. "That's… that's a big offer. I know I don't deserve it."

"Not about 'deserve'," Shampoo said. "And no as one-sided as Shagua think. Shampoo thinking about since Nabiki say Airen have feelings for you. Take… second look? Maybe wonder if things might have been different if Shagua block strike for Akane and defeat Shampoo instead?"

Ryouga considered. "That'd… still have been a mess. I'd still have been all wrapped up in Akane and blind to everything else."

"Mhmm… But is different now… yes?"

He paused, and took a moment to consider, pushing past the anxiety and really looking. She was beautiful, of course, but that was hardly a good deciding factor. She had far more depth than his shallow first impressions of her had allowed for, though… and she was right - they had much more in common than he had expected. There was also something in her eyes. Hunger, but… the hunger borne of loneliness. But where Ryouga had wrapped himself in a cloak of cynicism to protect himself, he could sense through the Link that she had stripped hers away.

_I could probably learn a lot from her_, he thought, surprising himself. _She's braver than I am. A lot braver_. He swallowed again and felt a bit of a lump in his throat. _A whole year and I never actually SAW anyone, did I? What a waste…_

"I… uh… I think you're someone I'd like to get to know better. I mean… even just as friends," he said carefully. "I'm kinda mad at myself that I didn't do so sooner, even though I had the chance."

"Have chance now," Shampoo replied. "Friends now, yes? Maybe more in time?"

He shivered a bit. He couldn't deny the concept was appealing, as unreal as the idea seemed. "I… I mean there's a lot of 'ifs'…" His eyes flicked to Ranma, who was mercifully still sound asleep. His gaze returned to Shampoo's, and locked onto her reddish brown eyes. They were full of expectation and… hope?

"Y-yeah…" he said finally, blushing hard and looking away. He was starting to wonder how anyone ever managed to say 'no' to those eyes. "Maybe more in time."

"Good," she said softly. He felt her snuggle in a little closer. "Sleep now, yes? Talk more tomorrow."

"Ummm…" Ryouga felt a moment of dread as he remembered what happened with Ukyou. With what was whirling around in his mind right now. "Uhh… A-about the Link…"
"Shared dreams, yes?" Shampoo murmured sleepily. "Is okay. Will be nice dream now. Trust Shagua."

"I'm... not sure I trust myself..." Ryouga admitted, but there was no answer. He glanced back at her and found her eyes had closed and her breathing had slowed into the steady rhythm of sleep. He could already feel the change through the Link and could sense her ki mixing with Ranma's as she slipped into the redhead's dreamworld.

Tentatively he moved his hand a bit, and gently ran his fingers through her hair. Just once. It felt a bit like trespassing, so he stopped, but he noticed that she smiled when he did it.

Hibiki, what have you gotten yourself into?

000 (Chapter 29 End)

And that closes out Thursday in Nerima!

Thank you for sticking by me for this long, and I really do appreciate the feedback. Even if it doesn't seem like it's being used, I DO read all of it, and consider it. Sometimes I can't make use of it because it conflicts with things I've already written or plotted out, but I do appreciate it, and it all helps make me a better writer. And of course, if you just wanna say you love it or hate it, that's fine too.

This is all going somewhere, I promise! I have a plan! It may be a stupid plan, but I have one! After all, those who fail to plan... never know the joys of that plan going up in flames in the first engagement... or something.
To Be Manly or To Be Warm

Three years ago

It was raining. *Pouring*, really. That heavy, misty rain that washed out all the color from the world and made everything look the same. It had been raining for two straight days and everything was soaked and unrecognizable.

It was ironic that this was the day Ryouga finally found his way to the empty lot. It took him a minute to be sure it was the right one. The tent was gone, but he could see the spot where it had sat for so long, the grass dead and brown and garbage strewn about, abandoned by the former squatters.

He stumbled over to the spot, staring at it. He left.

He clutched the ragged, dog-eared folded paper in his hand, crumpling it. He willed for the familiar dark shock of messy black hair to pop into view from over the retaining wall, or for the other boy to give his usual infuriatingly casual greeting.

He left.

The full import of it hit him like a kick to the chest. Ranma was gone and he had no idea where he had gone, or when he might come back - if ever.

He LEFT!

He crushed the letter in his hand, clenched his fists and shook with fury. *How DARE* he!? *We made a PROMISE!*

*You made a promise for four days ago.*

*We were going to have one last fight! Settle things without any regrets! We swore we would be there! Both of us!*

*You swore to be here FOUR DAYS ago…*

Ryouga trembled with emotions that roiled between shame, despair and unfocused anger. The curse had never been this bad before. He had been lost for hours… maybe even an entire day, but never *this* long!

*I tried!* He struggled to shut out the feeling of loss - the feeling that he had missed out yet again and that he had lost something important. *I tried to be here! I tried my hardest! I didn't want him to go like this!* He squeezed his eyes shut and sank to his knees as the blackness of despair filled him.

Everyone left, after all. Everyone left and it was *his* fault now. Maybe it always was.

He opened his eyes and gazed up into the rain. The rain was good. The rain hid the tears. He stared sightlessly up into it, feeling the shame and self loathing eat away at him inside, his doubts bubbling up from the black ooze to remind him that *no one* liked him. That they all thought he was weird. That he was a homeless vagrant. Even Ranma.

He had been a fool to think Ranma would understand. Why would he? Ryouga had just been a burden, making Ranma lead him home day after day.
He probably only did it for the free food. A dark thought bubbled up from the morass. It was... comforting. Maybe it wasn't such a big deal to break his word, right? If Ranma was just a vagrant and the son of a thief anyway...

If he was really my friend, he would have waited. Another dark thought. Soothing and horrible at the same time. He knew somewhere deep down it was a betrayal, but it was the only way he knew to save himself - the only way to make it so it wasn't him that was so horrible. I bet he never even showed up! The coward!

His breathing grew faster. Anger was easier. Anger pushed the darkness back a bit, kept it from suffocating him.

"He should have waited..." he said softly.

It was a promise! A promise between men! A matter of honor! He should have been here no matter what!

"He should have waited!" he repeated, louder, more firmly. His voice was lost in the rain.

He was afraid! He knew his tricks weren't going to work this time! He RAN!

"He should have waited!" Ryouga shouted.

The heavens were unimpressed. The rain continued to fall.

I'm never going to see him again...

His breath caught in his throat and, for a moment, the anger flickered and died.

No.

"No..." he breathed, realizing it didn't matter. What was the point of making it Ranma's fault if there was no Ranma? Who would even care but Ranma, anyway?

His eyes fell as the darkness rose up again, the despair threatening to swallow him. What does it matter? What does any of it matter?

His eyes fell on a rain-soaked pamphlet. Its bright red color caught his attention a moment, a brief distraction from his own downwardly spiralling thoughts. After a few minutes of just staring at it, he mustered the herculean will needed to force his limbs to move, to reach over and pick it up.

The pamphlet was old and faded, worn at the edges and soaked nearly to disintegrating. He couldn't read most of the words, but he could make out that it was about some place in China. It looked like a travel brochure or some kind.

"China..." he breathed.

Suddenly, he lurched to his feet, still clutching the pamphlet. He was exhausted, he had been running literally all day, but it didn't matter. He was going to follow Ranma even if it meant going to China. He was going to make Ranma see that he was wrong. They were going to have their fight, and then...

And then...

He would figure out the rest from there. He turned, mumbling to himself. He didn't notice at first that there was anyone there until he heard his name.
"Ryouga…?

He looked up. There was a girl standing there. She was a few years older than him, though it was hard to tell because she was no taller than he was. She was wearing a dark silk shirt and black pants, and her red hair was plastered against her face by the rain. Two bright blue eyes peeked out at him, the only real color in the rainy world around him.

His eyes widened and the pamphlet fell from his nerveless fingers. "R… Ranma?"

Present Day

Ryouga woke with a start. He almost sat up, but something was pinning his side, and some instinct told him to stop before he pushed it off. He took a few quick breaths, trying to focus his eyes. He rubbed them as the unfamiliar ceiling resolved itself.

Right… the Nekohanten… He groaned and relaxed back onto his pillow as his heart rate gradually dropped back to normal.

He had been back in that empty lot. He could still feel the wet from the rain and the soggy texture of that travel pamphlet between his fingers. He had been right back in that moment, with all the emotions that came with it. It was already starting to fade, but he got the feeling this wasn't the first time.

"Ryouga?"

He moved his hand and for a moment he was worried it was still the dream. Those same blue eyes that he had seen in it were looking back at him, soft red hair framing a face full of concern.

"Ranma…” he breathed, then his memory caught up with him. He glanced to his right, and saw Shampoo against his side, her head pillowed on his shoulder. She was still asleep, apparently deeply enough that he barely heard anything from her through the Link. He felt a twinge of worry, like he was caught in someone else's bed (specifically Ranma's), but when he turned back to her, he still saw only worry on her face.

"Sorry…” he said quietly, not wanting to wake Shampoo. "Bad dream. I didn't mean to…” He trailed off…”That was you, wasn't it? In the dream. How much…?"

"Was that what happened?" she asked softly. He could sense a whirl of emotions from her. Regret… Pity? Sadness even. "What you were feeling? I…"

"I'm sorry," Ryouga said again, closing his eyes and looking away. He couldn't stand to see the pity there anymore, though the Link wouldn't let him close it off so easily. "You… never deserved any of that anger. I using you as an easy out from hating myself. I shouldn't have expected you to wait one day, much less four."

"I tried," Ranma replied. Ryouga blinked and looked back at her.

"I knew you were trying to get there. I knew about your problem, and I knew it was getting worse." She shook her head and laughed. "It… it was the first time I really stood up to the old man, you know? He was getting antsy after the first day, but I just refused to listen to him and stood in that spot." She sighed. "At the end of the third day, he just beat me until I gave in."

Ryouga looked away again, guiltily. "That doesn't exactly make me feel better, you know. You
shouldn't have waited that long for me. It wasn't worth it."

"After what I just saw… after that dream, you're trying to tell me that?!" Ranma raised her voice a little. "D'ya think I'm _that_ stupid, Ryouga?!!"

Ryouga's eyes widened and he shook his head. "Th-that's not…!"

She sat up and folded her arms, huffing and looking indignant. "It _did_ mean that much to you. And it meant that much t'me, too! I… _we_ gave our word, right? The first time I did that an' it really _mattered_." She took a breath and her expression softened as she seemed to study the far wall off to the right. "I… suppose you never found the letter, huh?"

"Letter?" Ryouga said, confused.

Ranma sighed, a bit of color rising in her cheeks as she rubbed the back of her head. "It was… I vaguely remember leaving you a note or something explaining everything. I think… I'm pretty sure I even apologized, so… If you want any indication of how bad I felt…" She glanced at him shyly. "I… don't remember _exactly_ what was in it… But I remember it was important. I stashed it behind that loose brick in the retaining wall, the one you used to smuggle the homework assignments to me when Pops was being a jerk and wouldn't let me go to school."

"I… didn't look," Ryouga admitted. He remembered he had more or less stumbled his way home eventually, packed up and left for China. "How do you not remember what it said if it was so important?"

Ranma scowled and hunched, her blush deepening. "I… I _don't_ remember, okay? It was probably some stuff about promising to challenge you again when we were men or something like that, I don't know! I forget a lot of stuff, okay? It's… forget it! We gotta get up anyway. It's still a school day and the Old Ghoul will probably want to open for the breakfast rush."

"How thoughtful of you, son-in-law. We'll make a dutiful husband of you yet," Cologne's voice wafted in from the kitchen, causing both teens to freeze. "If you're done with your charming little heart to heart, I could in fact use some help in the kitchen preparing for that breakfast rush. There are still dishes left over from last night."

"Damn it Ryouga, now look what you did!" Ranma huffed.

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"Now, don't complain. I did miss out on a fair bit of business traffic last night to accomodate you kids and I know you wouldn't want me to think that you're freeloaders, right?" She smirked. "Besides, the furo is small, and while I would be tempted to allow Son-in-law and Shampoo to share, it's a school day and, knowing my great-granddaughter, chances are you would be late. I wouldn't want to cause Ranma any new problems in his challenge with that Himura girl, now would I?"

"Y'know, Ranma and I could just go together and save some time," Ryouga said, his arms already up to the elbows in suds as he scrubbed at dried-on rice, egg and sauce. He watched Ranma out of the corner of his eye to gauge her reaction and saw her tense up immediately.

Cologne thwacked him on the back of his head. "You're doing dishes, sonny! You can have your turn when the girls are done."

"Ow! It was just a suggestion you old freak!" Ryouga's protest earned him another solid whack, this time against his forehead.
"WASH!" She said in a tone that told him he had best stop talking, lest the beatings get worse. Despite his resilience, Cologne knew how to make those staff blows HURT. She turned to Shampoo, who was still rubbing the sleep from her eyes. "Go show son-in-law where the linens are. "Go show son-in-law where the linens are. Let her go first. Your uniforms are folded and on your bed."

"Yes Great-grandmother," Shampoo said, smiling at Ranma and gesturing towards the stairs.

Cologne tapped her on the backside with her staff (Though far more gently than she had with Ryouta). "And no hanky-panky! I'm serious, child. I appreciate your enthusiasm for producing an heir, but there is a time and place for such things, and before school is not it."

Shampoo bowed, suitably chastised. "Shampoo know, Great-grandmother. Will be good. Save for weekend."

"Good girl," Cologne chuckled and watched as they headed up the stairs.

With a sigh, Ryouta returned to scrubbing. Ranma looked TERRIFIED when I suggested that. Almost like… like when her mother would come over and there was a danger that she might find out about the curse - back before Ranma defused all that. He considered. Well, maybe not QUITE the same. Not a 'fear for her life' kinda look, but… still… it's like…

"Someone is very deep in thought," Cologne commented, startling him. "And not the job he was given!"

"Uhhh, sorry!" Ryouta said quickly though, after a moment, he realized that the comment had not been punctuated by a smack from the staff.

"Sorry Elder," Cologne prompted. "I permit Ranma's casual disrespect because she's family and because she doesn't know any better - thanks to her rather wretched parents. But you have a perfectly good mother who I am certain taught you different. If you intend to be part of this family, I expect you to hold yourself to a higher standard. As an example to Ranma."

"Sorry Elder, I…" Ryouta replied automatically before his mental gearbox threw a cog. "Wha… wait, what?!

Cologne sighed and rolled her eyes. "Isn't that what your obvious little test was about, boy? You were seeing if Ranma was comfortable reverting to her natural form around you. I presume the answer you got was the one you were expecting? The look on her face was quite plain."

Ryouta sighed. "Yeah… It's like… it's almost like… She's forgotten that I know about her curse… that she thinks that I think she's a girl, and… and… something bad will happen if I see her as a guy?" He scratched the back of his head. "I've been trying to figure it out, but I still don't really get it, honestly."

Cologne clucked her tongue and hopped up into the counter in front of her, sat down and pulled out her pipe. "Honestly, you cannot be this dense, boy," she said as she took out a match and lit her pipe. "She knows you are aware of her true nature. She is simply trying very hard to avoid reminding you of it."

"But… why?" Ryouta replied, still confused. He put the dish he had been washing onto the rack, still wet.

"Dry the dishes before racking them!" Cologne snapped, thwacking him on the head. She waited until he had picked up the plate and started to dry it before taking a puff on her pipe. "It's because she wishes you to see her as a girl, and only as a girl."
"Why would she want that, though?" Ryouga grumbled, scrubbing at another plate with more than recommended force.

"Careful with the china, boy. That's imported from back home!" Cologne warned him, then took another puff. "And isn't the reason obvious? Why would a girl want a boy to see her as a girl and not just 'one of the guys', as you might put it?"

Ryouga paused in drying the plate he had just rinsed. "To steal a scroll for some secret martial arts technique?"

Cologne promptly bopped him on the head. "Don't get smart, boy!"

Ryouga muttered darkly and rubbed the sore spot on his head. He could tell he was going to have a few lumps there later. "Give me a break! That's why she did it last time!"

"And do you have any scrolls of secret techniques?" she asked. Then her leathery face stretched into an awful smirk. "Or perhaps you are just happy to see her?"

Ryouga dropped the plate into the sink, which was, thankfully, still full of water. He backed up, feeling his face burn. "H-hey!" He folded his arms tightly and looked away. "I-I would never…! Listen, you perverted old hag…!"

She hopped down and jabbed him in the gut with her pointy end of her staff, driving the wind from his lungs. He sank to his knees, clutching at his middle while he gulped for air and tried to coax his spasming diaphragm to work.

"Don't be stupid, boy. Your interest in her is painfully obvious. Something I see my Shampoo has picked up on… and accepted." She folded her hands behind her back and started pacing in front of him. "Which has come as something of a surprise. My dear Great-granddaughter is not overly fond of sharing… or at least she hasn't been up to now. It seems she has grown somewhat through this arrangement." She glanced at Ryouga. "Fair enough. As my heir, she's entitled to bend the marriage laws somewhat, and bringing two outsider males with the obvious qualities you and son-in-law possess… well, there will be some jealousy, certainly, but she's dealt with that all her life. Though don't think you won't have to pass more than a few tests to ensure your worthiness and commitment. Ranma did, after all."

"Thanks… that's great… really…" Ryouga wheezed, finally getting back enough breath to speak.

She turned and glared at him through narrowed eyes. "It is great, though your flippancy suggests that you don't understand just how great. For a Joketsuzoku warrior to accept an outsider male freely without requiring he defeat her in combat first is a rare honor. Her affection is a gift - one that I plan to spend the next few years making very sure you are worthy of." She gave him another brief, awful smirk. Then it faded. "As I said, though, none of that is overly concerning to me, now that son-in-law's affection and commitment to Shampoo has been cemented. What concerns me is the change I have seen in Ranma, which appears to be primarily centered around you. Given the nature of this Link that you and she share, and which you now share with my Great-Granddaughter, you can understand the basis for that concern, yes?"

"Look, I'm not trying to pull anything, and I'm not trying to screw up Ranma's relationship with Shampoo, or muscle my way into it, or any of that!" Ryouga said. "I'm just trying to cure my direction curse so I can find a way to cure my Mom's! I'm… I'll be out of Ranma's hair once this is all over with."

Cologne grunted, folded her arms and nodded. "I see."
"O-okay..." Ryouga blinked, relaxing a bit as he sat back on his haunches. "So... we're good then?"

Cologne responded with a solid thwack to the head, hard enough to make him see stars for a moment.

"Of course not, you stupid boy!" Cologne croaked. "Because that answer tells me you're clinging to denial as tenaciously as son-in-law! How you can be sharing your emotions all this time and be so blind to the truth still baffles me! If my generation were as blind as yours appears to be, we would have all died walking off of cliffs!" She thumped the end of her staff on the ground. "I am trying to help you, boy! Help you and my Granddaughter before all of this ends in heartbreak and dishonor!"

"What are you talking about?" Ryouga asked querulously, rubbing the top of his head.

"Son-in-law is expressing interest in you, as a female, and has even gone to some not inconsiderable lengths to be a female in your presence! Have you not noticed her change of hairstyle? Of mannerisms? Or her adoption of pet names for you?" She poked him in the chest with her staff to punctuate her point. "I have been watching, young Ryouga. She spends more time with you and has sought out a level of physical closeness and intimacy that is remarkable given her usual... 'skittishness' with regards to such things. And she is avoiding changing forms around you for fear of undoing all of the hard work she's done to draw you in!"

"I... you make it sound like Ranma is trying to seduce me!" Ryouga squawked.

"Isn't she?" Cologne chortled. "Oh not on a conscious level, mind you. That super-masculine mindset her idiot father imparted to her makes that nearly impossible for her, even now. But it's hardly a new thing, is it? Women spend excessive time with cosmetics, hair styling, exercise regimes and outfits, all to enhance their allure, and are often loathe to be seen by their beloveds without such accoutrements. For a shapeshifter, choosing the most appealing base form would be a natural part of that process."

Ryouga clenched his fists. "But... Ranma isn't a girl, is she?" he asked tightly. "This is wrong. Even if she does care about me, she shouldn't have to... to pick one form for my sake!"

"Why not?" Cologne bopped him on the head again, but more lightly. "Do you expect her to become enamoured of your piglet form all of a sudden? Or do you think that she should not be with my Great-Granddaughter because of her fear of cats, or that her revulsion towards them means she cares about my Shampoo any less?"

"I... well..." Ryouga stammered.

"Which is precisely why your pig-headed attitude is the problem!" Cologne added. "She wishes for you to see her as female, as something attractive and desirable, and she won't be comfortable in her male form around you until you accept her as such and you've built sufficient trust that she can be certain you won't reject her. I would think, given your struggles with Akane Tendo and your own curse, that you'd be somewhat more sympathetic to such feelings."

Ryouga stared at the floor a moment, as if the pattern on the linoleum held the secrets of the universe - or at least the secrets of his own personal little world. "So... Ranma Saotome... man amongst men... wants to be a woman... for me?" he asked, carefully piecing together the concepts. "Without any magic potions or spells or whatnot involved?"

"Well, I suspect your Link has had more than a small effect on things," Cologne said. "But from what Dr. Tofu has told me of it, the Link merely brings understanding and perspective. It does not
inject artificial emotion like various types of love magic. The emotions are genuine, even if they were given a little assistance in flickering to life. Also…” she trailed off and looked away. "Perhaps I am still mistaken, but all of this has reawakened an old suspicion in me."

"Old suspicion?” Ryouga said, leaning a bit closer to listen.

Cologne sighed. She folded her hands behind her back and turned away from him. "What I am going to tell you I tell you in the strictest confidence. You may discuss this with Nabiki Tendo if you wish, I trust her to use the knowledge appropriately, but none of the others until I've had a chance to discuss it with them, and not until after Son-in-law is ready to accept the implications." She took a deep breath. "When my Great-granddaughter told me about Ranma, there was still some doubt as to Ranma's true gender. The change - hot water male, cold water female - that she reported suggested a male true form, of course, but that the girl claimed to be female despite such a claim invoking a literal death penalty was odd. So when I first came to Nerima, I tested son-in-law. I forced him into a form that should have been unnatural for him, placed before him an impossible test and waited for him to crack."

"But he didn't," Ryouga replied.

"She didn't. Though all along she loudly proclaimed her male nature, she displayed a… comfort with her female form that is unusual for Jusenkyo sufferers. There are certain 'adjustments' the curse makes to allow the victim to function, certainly, but… high level martial arts? The only other I have heard attaining a modicum of such control is Mousse, and admittedly the boy is exceptional. And his ability to wield weapons as a duck does not compare to Ranma's mastery of her form." She chuckled. "Of course she won my impossible little contest, without submitting to my demands or surrendering her male identity, so I could simply chalk that up to exceptional determination and will. I had noticed that, despite her experience, her exceptional level of comfort with her female form has continued, and she shifts smoothly between them."

"What are you saying?” Ryouga asked, cocking his head.

"That Ranma appears… uniquely compatible with her Jusenkyo curse. So much so that it may be a mistake to consider her as one gender or the other. Something that is… not without precedent,” Cologned continued.

"Wait… so… someone getting… well, 'caught between'... this has happened before?” Ryouga asked.

"There have been many reactions to Jusenkyo curses. Most have been difficult to live with. It is a curse after all. You young people have adapted well, but there have been many cases of older victims being unable to adjust." Cologne resumed pacing. "There are also cases of those who have come to prefer their cursed forms. Men electing to live as women, women as men, individuals afflicted with curses that bring about personality changes finding their new personalities better suited to life… even a few cases of sufferers of animal curses becoming feral and abandoning their humanity." She clucked her tongue. "That Taro boy skirts dangerously close to that abyss, though thankfully none of you kids have shown any signs of it."

"So… the curse does change something in our heads?” Ryouga said nervously.

Cologne scoffed. "The curse changes physical form, grants some reflexes and instincts, and nothing more. The rest is all supplied by the human mind's inexhaustible capacity to warp itself. For example, a weak man of low importance and average intelligence might find himself transformed into a powerful beast, where his 'average' human intelligence is a tremendous advantage. Free from the restrictions of society and with the power to take what he wishes, he can slake his long-repressed
bloodlust without consequences. Despite our best attempts to keep intruders out of the Jusenkyo grounds, one arises every generation or so. The curse one receives from the pools is no act of random chance; there is an intelligence... a will to the place. The curses bear significance to the victim's life. Shampoo's was an obstacle to her pursuit of love, one she had to overcome. Mousse's represents his desire for freedom from the cultural restrictions placed upon him and his own physical limitations - a form that can go nearly anywhere. Yours is... well, yours is self-evident." She chuckled.

Ryouga ignored the barb. "And you think Ranma's was..."

"At first I thought it was an obvious counter to that super-masculine upbringing. But as her father's cursed form is an accurate reflection of his lazy, gluttonous and unimposing true nature, it is possible that Ranma's curse reflects something buried within her. Something she even now struggles to accept, but which the curse will not allow her to bury or deny." She hopped back up into the counter and took another puff of her pipe. "In fact, I am shocked it took as long as it did for it to creep into her psyche. Perhaps the hope of a cure staved it off for a time. No matter. For now... she is in a fragile state and, for whatever reason, she has tied this emerging identity to you. So... the question is what you will do with it?"

Ryouga crossed his legs, still sitting on the floor. He stared at his hands a few moments. "What should I do? How do I avoid... hurting her?"

"Could you accept her? As a woman? Even as she is a man to others? Can you accept that contradiction and resolve it within yourself?" Cologne asked.

Ryouga closed his eyes. That wasn't the problem! That was never the problem! He wrestled with it a moment. Accepting Ranma as a girl? That was far, far too easy. The idea that might be what she wanted? That just made it more enticing. But taking that step felt like a leap over a great, yawning chasm.

Ukyou's words came to the surface. I learned the hard way over this past year that you can't have both. I'm a lot of things with Ranchan... but a trusted outsider isn't one of them. That kind of trust doesn't survive the first kiss. Once there's that... investment in the other person, it changes things, for better or worse.

"I... feel like there's no going back once I do," he said softly. "If I do... If I tell her how I feel, then... things will change. One way or another."

"That's how love works, boy," Cologne said. "It's a gamble. But, whether you take it or not, you cannot stay here - in this moment. You can only move forward."

"People keep telling me that," Ryouga replied. "But... taking that step... It's terrifying."

Cologne chuckled. "That's how you know it's the real thing, boy." She hopped down from the counter, walked over and gave him a pat on the head. "And that's enough for me. It appears you have the support of the others, too. All that remains is to get the notion through Ranma's thick skull. I would also hope you have more than a passing affection for my Great-granddaughter as well?"

Ryouga blinked. It took him a second to switch gears. It was a strange idea for it to not only be allowable for him to like more than one girl, but for it to be expected of him. "I... well... I didn't spend much time with Shampoo before all of this started, but... After last night? I... well, I can see how things might have gone differently for me if I had gotten to know her sooner."

"It's a shame you didn't. The competition did wonders for Ranma and Akane's relationship," Cologne said. "But that's good. Despite what salacious rumors might claim, my Great-granddaughter
is very particular about the company she allows to share a bed with her."

Ryouga ducked his head, face burning.

"Now, come along, Son-in-law, you have dishes to finish before the girls come back down." She hopped back up onto the counter and thumped her staff against the countertop. "Hop to it!"

"Okay, okay, I’m…” Ryouga got to his feet, then froze. "…son-in-law?"

"Yes. As I understand it your marital status to Ranma is already secured, and for a male to share a Joketsuzoku warrior's bed without being wedded to her would mean death, so I will be charitable and take the forging of this Link with my Shampoo as a proposal. Congratulations, boy! Not many can count themselves so lucky as to be part of the harem of the heir to the legacy of the Joketsuzoku!" She chuckled as she refilled her pipe.

Ryouga rubbed his forehead. He hadn't been prone to headaches before all of this, had he?

It might not be that bad, a small, hopeful voice said from somewhere deep inside. He felt a goofy grin spread as he had a mental image of having his arms around a laughing, smiling Ranma and Shampoo. Maybe curled up on a couch in front of a roaring fire together? But what about Nabiki? He felt a small pang, then realized that she could be there too, and she suddenly joined the pleasant fantasy bringing in a tray of steaming mugs, and his grin widened. Why the hell not? He plunged his hands into the soapy water, content to enjoy the happy daydream as he worked.

"Watch out, the water's cooled quite a bit while we were talking," Cologne commented dryly, just as Ryouga vanished into a pile of clothes on the floor. A small black piglet wriggled free of the pile and whimpered plaintively.

Cologne clucked her tongue and shook her head, blowing a ring of smoke at him. "I can see we have a long way to go when it comes to mental discipline, son-in-law."

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The screams were hardly the worst part.

Himura had claimed the changes would be slight and so the process should not be overtly painful. She had been wrong. The figure on the other side of the glass had convulsed and writhed as bones cracked and muscle and sinew re-wove themselves, becoming sickening bulges and ripples under the skin.

The screams just made it harder to look away.

The worst of it was over before Mineko even arrived, apparently. Regardless, she had to fight the urge to not throw up, and it was only a stalwart determination to see it through that kept her breakfast down.

This is for the best. It's for the best! This will make her life better! Mineko repeated as a mantra to herself as the screams finally abated to a pathetic whimpering.

"I admit, the initial formulation is somewhat… rough," Himura said dryly. She had watched the entire scene so far with complete dispassion.

"Outsiders botched recipe," said the green-haired girl in chinese silk next to them. Mineko had always felt uneasy around the foreign girl. Despite being about the same age, she always felt small when the girl looked at her, as though she was in danger. The girl's movements spoke of power and
confidence, and she seemed to look out on the world like a tiger, assessing threats, rivals and prey. Mineko had no illusions about which category she fell into.

"You think the substitution caused this, Tan Pohn?" Himura asked, her tone businesslike, unaffected by the scene in front of her.


"Will it have the desired effect, then?" Himura asked.

"Yes. As said, Outsiders good at mechanical precision. Refinement merely make transition easier, more survivable." She stepped forward and tapped on the glass. "This one strong though. Good candidate. Will do well."

"Y-you mean… this might have killed her?" Mineko asked quietly. "You said it was safe!"

Tan Pohn smirked, sniffing disdainfully at Mineko. She walked over to her, and despite the chinese girl actually being shorter than her, Mineko got the feeling of being looked down upon. "No magic safe, girl, much less magic made from curse. Outsiders abandon long ago. Prefer safe science. If not have stomach for risk, should not play with."

"Th-this isn't a game!" Mineko retorted, marshalling her courage. "That's a person suffering in there!"

"Much work to refine potions. More people be in that room after this one," Tan Pohn said, a hint of menace in her voice. "If not have stomach for, maybe spare next person this? Take potion own self. Maybe try out animal curses next. Tan Pohn think girl make good mouse."

"Peace, Tan Pohn," Himura said sternly, cutting her off. "Mineko has a valid concern. The potion in this unrefined state is worthless on the open market, no matter how miraculous the eventual effects are." Himura stepped past the chinese girl and put a hand on Mineko's shoulder, giving her a reassuring smile. "Please believe me when I say that I never intended for things to be this bad. This was a miscalculation on my part. I will ensure that she makes a full recovery, and will not remember any of this."

Mineko still felt uncertain, but she knew she was powerless to do anything further. She sighed and looked away. "When… when will I be able to see her?"

"Tomorrow," Himura said. "She'll be awake and believing that she's recovering from a bout of illness - and she will be very happy to see you." Himura squeezed her shoulder, then let her hand fall away.

"Will… will she remember me?" Mineko asked, hope warring with guilt.

Himura nodded. "Of course! Her memories of you will be unchanged… save for one small detail, of course. Can I tell her you'll be here in the morning to see her? I'm sure that will be a tremendous help to her in completing the transition."

Mineko breathed a sigh of relief. Part of her had been worried Himura might not allow her access. "Yes. Yes, of course!"

"I'll send the limo around to your house first thing, then," Himura replied. "Now… off to school with you! Make sure we win a resounding victory in today's game! I'm trusting you to keep our players on
track in my absence."

Mineko closed her eyes and nodded. She wished that nagging uncertainty would go away, but she
didn't want Himura to see her still conflicted. Not now. I've gone too far to back out. I started this, I
have to see it through. "I'll make sure we trounce them, Himura."

Himura smiled. "Good. Good! Off with you then. I'll see you on Saturday."

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Himura waited for the limo taking Mineko away to pull out of sight before she let her usually
pleasant smile settle into the more comfortable self-satisfied smirk.

"[Why do you bother lying to her?]" Tan Pohn grumbled in Mandarin, crossing her arms. "[She's
weak. She should be doing what you tell her because you tell her to.]

"[Fear and intimidation don't breed much in the way of loyalty, my dear Tan Pohn,]" Himura said
softly, turning to walk back inside as the Chinese girl fell in step. "[My grandfather taught me that
you can only get so much by cracking the whip. They'll work until they no longer mind the sting and
then turn on you. But convince them that you're on their side, working towards a common goal?
Make them feel like they're part of your 'vision'? Oh they'll struggle, sacrifice, and die for you.]

"[Hmph. Joketsuzoku only follow the strong.]"

"[There are different kinds of strength. Strength of arms and Strength of Leadership are often very
different. Many great generals and conquerors of history were hardly imposing as individual
warriors,]" Himura replied.

Tan Pohn made a noncommittal grunt.

Himura changed the subject. "[Can you help my little Chemistry Club friends perfect the formula
before next week? Things are moving ahead quickly, and if all goes well we will need it by then.]

"[The Elder has already ordered us to work on the problem. Your application of the false curse
powder to the original formula was interesting to her. We'd never get approval from the Council to
do such a thing ourselves, but if your test is successful, it will have many applications,]" Tan Pohn
replied. "[Though that is only a fraction of what you promised us. You said you would deliver the
Godslayer to us, and many more besides. Lo Shan grows impatient.]

"[Yes, yes… I've already told her that this will take time, and I must complete this challenge my
Grandfather has set out first. All of this is simply laying the groundwork for what comes after, which
is where our true partnership begins. Ranma will be delivered by the end of it, the rest will be
scattered, and it will just be a matter of rounding them up.]

"[Yes, we are aware of the plan,]" Tan Pohn said testily. "[But Lo Shan is not convinced you
can deliver on your lofty promises, and neither am I.]

Himura turned and gave the girl a look of hurt and shock. "[Why… Tan, I'm appalled! How can you
think so little of me, after all the time we've spent bonding?]"

Tan Pohn scoffed. "[A couple of loud indoor celebrations with alcohol, drugs and male sex slaves is
not 'bonding'.]"

Himura crossed her arms. "[Please, my dear, those were the highest end clubs in Tokyo. And please
don't refer to the male escorts as 'sex slaves' to their faces again? It costs extra.]

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don't refer to the male escorts as 'sex slaves' to their faces again? It costs extra.]"
Tan Pohn grinned. "[Different name, same thing. Most of them are pathetically fragile, anyway. But… fun to play with.""] She seemed to consider. "[Send that tall, dark one… what did he call himself…? Ah yes, Lantis. Send him to my room tonight, and I'll see about putting a good word in with Lo Shan to get you some more time.""]

Himura smirked. It was always just a matter of finding what someone wanted, after all. "[He'll be waiting for you. I'll make sure he's at your disposal from now on.""]

"[I am still not sure how you plan to cow the Godslayer by next week,]" Tan Pohn said. "[It seems… ambitious. Elder Cologne has been here nearly two years with no luck. Rumour has it she has subjected him to all manner of horrors.""]

"[It's a matter of finding someone's breaking point, my dear,]" Himura said as they returned to the observation room. The figure on the bed was still now, though her chest could be seen rising and falling as she laid sprawled on the mattress. Faintly through the walls could be heard Himura's own voice, a special recording that was meant to play for the one inside once the worst had died down. " [Reserve your judgement until Sunday, when my plan goes into motion. Ranma should be relatively easy to secure. And even if not, she will no longer be any sort of obstacle.""]

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"Y'know, it's unusual to see schoolkids here, much less on a school day," The middle-aged security guard said, chatting amicably as he led the three teenagers though a series of disused offices full of file storage racks. "Ever since everything went digital, nobody much comes down here. In fact, the guards hardly ever patrol down here. Think it's haunted."

Daisuke ran a finger along the dust covering an old microfiche reader. The decor of the offices was dated at best, and none of the equipment looked new - as in 'older than he was'. "I think the ghosts would hang out somewhere more exciting."

The guard chuckled. "Well, I like it down here. It's quiet. Have my lunch down here sometimes and talk to the ghosts."

"They don't… talk back, do they?" Yuka asked nervously.

"Not yet, but I have had my sandwich go missing a couple of times when I wasn't looking," he replied nonchalantly.

"They steal your food?!" Yuka squeaked.

"Yeah!" The guard replied. "That or I set it down somewhere and forgot about it. I tend to wander a bit when I eat, and now and then I get distracted and forget where I put things. If you find something rancid in the stacks that's probably my fault. The janitorial staff don't come down here too much either, y'know."

"Can't imagine why," Hiroshi said dryly.

"I know, right? Well, I do my best to make up for it. Weekend guards always slack off, stick to ground level and above. Friggin' part-timers." The guard led them to a far corner of the room. "All right, here you are. Microfiche readers are there and the index cards are in those drawers over there. Holler up to the front desk if you need anything or have any questions. Closing time is at 5 PM sharp. Be sure to poke your heads out before then. They're bad about locking up without checking in here first."

"Yes, sir," Daisuke said dutifully.
The guard turned to leave and the three breathed a sigh of relief, before he stopped and turned back.

"Damned peculiar, three students bein' sent here to check the old archives. What was it for again? Normally there's all kinds of red tape to even get down here. This place is full of people's personal data after all." He scratched the back of his head.

"Correcting school records," Yuka said, thinking fast and not missing a beat. "Our Principal was caught altering student records and he did it in such a way that it messed up their online files, so we have to compare to the hard copies. The parents didn't trust the faculty with the job after all of that, so we were assigned to do it as internship work."

"Really?" he said, frowning. "That's pretty damn odd. Which school?"

"Furinkan High," Yuka replied.

"Oh god dammn!" the guard chuckled and shook his head. "Say no more, little miss, and my condolences for dealing with that nutjob. Ain't the first time that freak has sent work down here. There was the time he changed the names on all the faculty teaching licenses to Hawaiian-themed names." he shook his head and turned away again, with a wave. "You kids have fun and don't go crossed-eyed squinting at the labels!"

"We won't, sir," Hiroshi said. "Thank you!"

The three of them waited as they listened to his footsteps disappear down the hall, then the big fire doors close behind him. They all let out the breaths they had been holding.

"Okay, pro bluff Yuka, I am honestly impressed!" Hiroshi said.

"How did you know to throw the Principal under the bus like that? Not that he didn't deserve it," Daisuke added.

"Lucky guess. I remember that bit with the teaching licenses. Don't you remember he came on the PA and started announcing the teacher's new 'Big Island' names?" Yuka said.

"Oh yeah!" Hiroshi replied. "When Ms. Hinako learned the dress code for female teachers now included a coconut shell bra and grass skirt, she marched right up to his office and drained him so hard he was out of commission for a week."

"Yeah, well I remember them griping about all the issues with fixing their ID's. I figured the Principal had a history," Yuka said. "So… where do we start?"

"Well, I think we go to those index cards over there, look up 'Saotome', and it'll tell us where the files are with all the documents," Hiroshi said. He walked over to the card file and pulled it open. And stared.

"What's wrong?" Daisuke asked, coming up beside him. "Is it empty? Did Himura beat us to the punch?"

Yuka came up on Hiroshi's other side. She blinked as she realized what he was looking at; index cards. *Hundreds* of them.

"Apparently… there are a *lot* of people in Japan with the last name 'Saotome'..." Hiroshi said quietly.
Akane usually appreciated going to school. For all of the insanity, strife and stress that blossomed there, it had slipped into that balance where most of the time the craziness was manageable ever since Ranma had arrived to help her weather it. It could even be fun. One minute they’d be in some dramatic martial arts battle, the next they’d be sitting down and having ramen together. Then back to battling.

She was starting to realize the craziness acted as a distraction - it kept her from focusing too far into the future. Her life had become all about getting through the next day with nary a thought to what might come later, even as far as graduation. With the exception of the ever-present threat of parentally-enforced marriage.

Taking back control had felt good. She found a lot of her anger was calmed simply by the fact that she felt more in control of her life than she ever had before. Most of the conflicts had been smoothed over, the Hentai Horde had been shamed out of existence and the Principal had been put on one of his long hiatus’. It was true that the whole marriage mess was more snarled than ever, but now they had a path forward independent of whatever their parents decided.

But now? Now that getting through the immediate chaos was conceivable she was starting to wonder what shape her life might take after high school.

I guess I never really thought about it, she mused as the group walked towards school. She glanced over to where Nabiki was chatting with Shampoo and Ranma, and Ryouga walking a few steps behind, looking like a fifth wheel. I mean, I'd nod and agree when Sayuri and Yuka talked about having a career, meeting someone, getting married and having kids, but…

Truth was, even before admitting her own sexuality to herself, the idea of becoming an office lady, or a teacher, or taking up some other mundane career just didn't parse for her. I guess I figured I would inherit the dojo. Part of why I resented Ranma, I suppose. She looked up at the redhead's back, smiling a bit. She's a better teacher than me. She'd be good at it. But is that really what we're going to be doing? Her eyes shifted to Ukyou. Ukyou has Ucchan's, and I'm sure Nabiki has bigger business plans than just running a dojo. She glanced at Shampoo. Then there's the Amazon thing. She sighed. And it has to be something that has room for ALL of us right? All five. Her eyes shifted again to Ryouga. Maybe more?

She considered a moment. She wasn't really getting anywhere quelling her worries just rattling around in her own head. There had been one person she had always used as a confidante when things were bothering her… maybe he could help again? She sped up a little, coming up behind Ryouga and hooking his arm with her own.

"Hey, I… Akane?" Ryouga said with some confusion.

"Hey Ranma? I'm just going to borrow Ryouga for a few minutes, okay?" Akane said.

Ranma glanced back at her, and gave her a quizzical look. "You're not gonna break him or anything, are you? He hasn't done anything to deserve it!"

Akane scowled. "Do you have to assume I'm always in danger of becoming violent?"

The redhead scratched the back of her head, pondering. "…Yes?"

Akane huffed indignantly and started dragging Ryouga along with her. "Come on, Ryouga! I feel like walking the rest of the way with someone who respects me!"

"I… uh… sure?" Ryouga said, glancing about nervously. He shot Ranma an apologetic look and
then let Akane drag him off some ways down the road.

Akane sighed and slumped a little. She had slipped into an old, bad habit and had taken advantage of Ryouga again to get back at Ranma for a minor slight. She slowed down, then stopped. "I'm sorry, Ryouga."

"I… uhh… what for?" Ryouga asked, rubbing the back of his head nervously.

"What Ranma said made me mad and I went right back into my 'Why can't you be more like Ryouga?' thing… I know that caused a lot of friction between you two." She sighed and resumed walking, holding his arm a bit more loosely. "I'm just… a little apprehensive."

"Apprehensive…" Ryouga said. "You mean about the Link?"

"Partly," she replied. "Part of me is all twisted-up and jealous that I'm the last one to go, but part of me is…" she swallowed, "part of me is scared that everyone will see what an awful person I am and… a-and… stop loving me, you know?" Her voice trembled and broke a bit at the last. She clenched her fist and scrubbed at her eyes impatiently. "Damnit…"

"Hey…! Hey hey hey…" Ryouga immediately stopped, took hold of her shoulders with both hands and turned her to face him. "Akane, listen to me… it doesn't work that way, all right? It's the opposite, really. It'll… it'll help you understand what they're feeling, and help them understand your feelings."

"I-I know… I know. Nabiki told me some of it. She's convinced we need this to make it all work, but… but part of me…" She cringed. "I'm scared, Ryouga. I'm frantically trying to get a hold of all these terrible things about myself before they're all out there for everyone to see, and… and…"

Ryouga gave her a weak smile. "Akane… Trust me. You've always been wonderful. Take it from the guy who… who probably knows more about you than he has any right to."

"But that's part of it!" Akane continued. "I… I used you. I keep using you, even now! I'm…" She hugged herself and pulled away a little. "I'm so selfish… even now. I don't know how you do it."

"Me…?" Ryouga asked, blinking.

"Yes, you!" She turned back to him. "You're always so kind and so thoughtful! You always listen! You always encourage me and teach me when I need to learn, and… and…" She sagged. "And you were exactly the kind of boy I'd always say I wanted back when I was deluding myself into thinking I wanted a boy."

Ryouga looked off to the side then took a deep breath. "Akane… I'm… I'm not really any better than the other guys in your life… You know that, right?"

She looked up at him, seeing his eyes shadowed as he looked down. "Ryouga…"

He sighed. "I'm not groping you or being grabby or pushy… but not because I don't want the same things. I'm just shy and a coward. When the time came to say or do the right thing, or to keep lying so I could be close to you… I lied. I've had two girls fall in love with me and I didn't have the courage to tell them that… that I didn't… love them the same way. And… when I did fall in love… I…" He trailed off.

There was a moment of silence between them then Akane stepped forward and hugged him.

"You're nowhere near as bad as you think," Akane said softly, wrapping her arms around his waist.
in a tight hug. She relaxed it a bit and looked up at him. "And… you're right, I'm not as bad as I'm moping about being either, am I?" She smiled at him. "Maybe we should just keep reminding each other of that?"

His answering smile was a bit more genuine. "Yeah. I… yeah. That sounds good."

"I… actually wanted to talk about something else," Akane said sheepishly as she released the hug and took his arm again. "I was wondering if you've ever thought much about the future?"

"Huh? The future?" Ryouga pondered a moment. "Kind of? I mean… I sort of had this… vague notion about it. Marrying the girl I loved, having kids, domestic bliss..." He shook his head. "When I would really think about it, though, it was just me inserting myself into their lives."

"Nothing about what you would be doing?" she asked. "What career you might choose… where you would live… that sort of thing?"

He shook his head. "I think with Akari I had some vague idea of just being on her farm forever and training her pigs."

"You are a good teacher," Akane said. "When I was training for my fight against Natsumi and Kurumi, you were absolutely brilliant at it."

Ryouga's face fell again. "Akane…" He sighed, closing his eyes and shaking his head sadly. "I… I have a confession about that. I walked away at the end there because… because I was starting to hope that you'd lose the rematch. So you wouldn't be engaged to Ranma anymore."

"But you taught me anyway, and what you taught me helped me win," Akane said with a smile. "You focused on the needs of your student. Maybe you're the one who should be running a dojo, not Ranma or me."

"Maybe," he said thoughtfully. "I'd need to find a dojo that'd be willing to let me teach, first."

Akane sighed heavily as she realized the hints she had been dropping had all sailed over Ryouga's head. "Ryouga…"

"Maybe I could open my own… I'd need to work a while to save up for it… Maybe if I could find a longer-term construction job… those pay pretty well. Still, we'd be talking years…" Ryouga continued to muse out loud.

"Ryouga, I want you to teach at the Tendo dojo," Akane blurted out.

"Huh? What did you say, Akane?" Ryouga snapped out of his reverie, his eyes widening.

"I want you to teach at our dojo," Akane repeated. "At the Tendo Dojo."

"O-oh… You mean… when you all go back to China with Shampoo?" Ryouga asked.

Akane shook her head. "No. I mean… come teach now." She twiddled her fingers. "I… I've been thinking about… about how things might work, and… even if we are all going to end up going to China to make this work, we're not going anywhere until we're done with school, and that probably means waiting for Nabiki to finish her degree, so… I thought you could come stay with us, o-or even just teach classes…" She trailed off, then after an awkward pause added, "so we can figure how to make all this work."

"Make all of what work?" Ryouga asked.
Akane closed her eyes. "Before I answer that… When you were talking about the people you did fall in love with… Do you mean me, or Ranma, or… or both?"

She waited for the answer. The silence stretched to new levels of awkward.

"Ryouga…?" She cracked an eye open.

"Both, okay?" he finally blurted, blushing and looking away. "You were gonna find out anyway when you got added to the Link, so…"

"Still?" she added.

"Yeah, still," he mumbled, jamming his hands into his pockets.

She walked in front of him and stopped him. "Ryouga, look at me."

He reluctantly raised his head, looking her in the eye. She cringed inwardly when she saw the distress in his eyes. It was obvious this had been tearing at him.

"Ryouga… Would you believe that I love you too?" she asked. He blinked, then frowned, so she continued before he could ask. "I can't… I'm not attracted to you… and that's not your fault! But… I do love you. Does that make any sense?"

"What, like a brother?" He scratched at the back of his head. "I… I'm honored, I guess?"

Akane sighed. "It's… Not quite. You've always been my best friend, Ryouga. You've always been the person I could talk to about… so many things! You're the person I go to when I need to rely on someone. I know… that's been one-sided up until now, so… So I wanted you to know that I want to be someone you can rely on too." She nodded. "I know this is hard… I… kinda know a bit about unrequited crushes."

"Huh? Oh… wait, something about Doctor Tofu, right?" Ryouga sighed. "A crush, huh?"

"No, no, I didn't mean…! I'm not trying to belittle your feelings or anything!" she said quickly. "I know it's more serious than that. I just… Oh, I'm making a mess of this, aren't I?" She wiped her hand through her hair, took a breath and tried again. "What I'm trying to say is… I want you around, Ryouga. And I know that means that things will have to sort themselves out with you and Ranma, and Nabiki… and Shampoo…" She grunted. "Honestly, she just had to mix herself up in that too, didn't she?"

Ryouga smirked slightly. "Mad you haven't gotten your kiss from her yet?"

"Yes! I mean NO! I mean…" Akane glared at him. "Wipe that grin off your face, Hibiki!"

He laughed, and she was forced to giggle a bit too after a moment.

"God this is so stupid…" Akane said, shaking her head. "Yes, I wanted a kiss. I still want one. I need to pull her aside and… and work out where we stand before all the unspoken tension and everyone else getting it on makes me crazy." She took a deep breath, feeling much more centered. "There… it feels so much better to admit that. I'm not mad about that. But if you kiss Ukyou like that, I will feed you your own entrails."

He held up his hands placatingly. "No, no, no worries there! I don't have that kind of relationship with Ukyou even with the Link. It'd be like… you kissing Nabiki or something."
Akane swallowed. "Aheh… yeah… Anyway," She cleared her throat. "You are planning on telling Ranma how you feel, right?"

"Is everybody going to get on my case about that?" Ryouga grumbled. "Look… I'm just kinda coming to terms with the fact that I… That I have these feelings for her… and that maybe it'd be okay to tell her… Maybe even that I'm obligated to. I wouldn't say I've got anything like a plan about it."

"Well, then I could help with that!" Akane said brightly.

"No," Ryouga said flatly.

Akane was a bit taken aback and maybe even a bit hurt. "Wh-why not?!"

"Because Ukyou tried that with me to get me to tell you," Ryouga said. "And it backfired every single time. I'm... I dunno, I'm probably just going to blurt it out at the worst possible moment like I usually do because that's the only way I'll ever do it..."

"I... okay, point," Akane replied. "But... there has to be some way I can help?"

Ryouga said nothing for a moment, lost in thought, so they walked in a companionable silence until he spoke again.

"I guess you could answer a question for me. Answer it honestly - don't hold anything back," he said finally. He looked upwards at the clouds as they walked. "If you could have the best outcome for you, just for you... like having Ranma to yourself, or Ranma and Ukyou, or whatever... and there was no downside - the rest of us would be just fine... what would be your perfect outcome?"

Akane blinked. "Why do you ask?"

Ryouga sighed. "I guess I want to know what you're giving up for this. Marrying Ranma was something that's been set up for you your entire life. And... it's obvious you want to be with him. Or her..." He glanced at Akane. "How would things go if everything was perfect for you?"

Akane considered the question. She folded her hands behind her back, and started to walk a little closer to Ryouga. She didn't know why - possibly for support - like she could hide behind him from her answer. "I... Would it surprise you if I said it wouldn't be just me and Ranma?"

"So... Ukyou too," Ryouga said quietly.

Akane shook her head. "Not like that. I mean, not just because of that." She took a deep breath to gather her thoughts. "How do I explain this? I had Ranma to myself, Ryouga. After Jusendo, and nearly dying? All I had to do was say 'I love you', and we'd have been married, and that would be the end of it. But... but I couldn't... as much as I wanted to. Every time it's just me and Ranma, no matter how much we want it to be different, we both just... snap back into our old, stupid patterns. We both want to be together, I know that. But we also both need someone who can defuse us... nudge us onto better paths for dealing with our problems. For Ranma... that was Nabiki. For me... a ghost of a fond smile crossed her lips, "for me, it was Ukyou. But we couldn't make that work alone. Shampoo was the one who brought the ability to... to accept each other, and the courage to say 'Who cares if no one else has done this before?'. So... I guess I can't answer your question because I haven't been able to figure out any other way that all of this could work. Nabiki figured out early on that we all needed each other," She shrugged. "Maybe I could have made it work with just Ukyou and me, but... that would have eaten both me and Ukyou alive inside. And I know it's the same for the others, too. We're doing this because... well, not just because if one of us wins
everyone else loses, but... because we can't figure out any other way that even one of us can win. If that makes sense."

Ryouga nodded. "I guess I can understand that." He rubbed the back of his head.

"What about you, Ryouga?" Akane asked. "What's your perfect outcome?"

Ryouga blinked then blushed and looked away. "I don't know."

She elbowed him gently in the ribs. "Come on, that's not fair! I answered. You can't hold out on me like that!"

He grimaced. "I'm not holding out! I..." He sighed. "I think... Everything has been so tied up in not being lost anymore. I just wanted a home that... that I didn't need to leave. That may be why the idea of the Tendo Dojo or a farm appealed to me so much. I could work in the field or teach classes without having to go anywhere. I'm starting to think that I was so desperate for... for something... stability, I guess...? that any girl who could offer it..." he trailed off. "And then I would screw it all up anyway because I still had something to prove to Ranma."

"And Ranma? Why was it so important to prove yourself to her?" Akane asked. "Not the bread feud, was it?"

Ryouga shook his head. "No... that was just an excuse to be angry. The truth was, in middle school, Ranma made me feel needed. Even if he couldn't admit it. So it was okay for him to beat me to the bread every day. My ego wants to say I let him, but it'd be lying. And he'd have known if I had ever held back. But... that was okay, too. We both got better for it. Having him around... made life manageable. I wasn't a charity case because of my directional problems and I wasn't a burden. He needed me to get by just as I needed him to get by. That was all I wanted... to be needed... to be useful. And then..."

"He left," Akane finished for him.

"He didn't need me after all. He was headed off into the world and was gonna be just fine without me... and I was back to being doomed." He kicked at a pebble on the sidewalk, watching it skitter across the concrete. "I didn't deal with it well. The two years wandering and getting the second curse didn't help much. All I wanted was to face him down, beat him and prove that I didn't need him. That's all I saw when I looked at him."

"So that's why you helped him when he was vulnerable," Akane said. Gently she took hold of his arm again. "He needed you."

"I guess. I never wanted him dead. There were a thousand times I could have done that. It just sounded better in my head than 'I want him to be sorry he left me'." He grimaced again. "Damn... that sounds like some maudlin jilted ex-lover crap. It... wasn't actually like that."

"Except he turned into a girl," Akane said.

"When... she pulled me out of the Shi shi hokodan... She said she needed me... that she always had. And, because of the Link, I believed it. I couldn't not. It was the truth." He shrugged. "Then... I guess that changed things. I'd never allowed myself to really see Ranma as a girl before - probably because, deep down, I knew this would happen. So when Ranma was suddenly someone who needed me and a girl..." He chuckled dryly. "I guess that's all it took."

"To be fair, if I hadn't met Ranma as a girl first, I would never have fallen for her," Akane said, a small smile gracing her lips. "She was... she was so cute... another girl who liked martial arts the
same as me, but was even more of a tomboy. It didn't matter if she was better than me - she was someone I could relate to." She laughed. "Finding out she was actually a boy? It took a long while to forgive her for that. Not because she had done anything wrong, but because finding out that I related to a boy better than I related to most girls just made the insults they used to throw at me at school feel more real. The irony was that, because Ranma was there, a lot of the scrutiny came off of me."

"Yeah… Ranma is good at distracting people," Ryoga said. "He usually grabbed so much attention in middle school that the other kids didn't bother me much anymore, even though I was hanging out with him a lot."

"So… your 'perfect outcome' would have to have had Ranma in it somewhere, wouldn't it?" Akane asked. "After all, you made her your anchor for a reason, right? Even if your direction problems are cured, that reason will still remain."

Ryouga let out a long breath and nodded. "Yeah. You're probably right." He shrugged. "Long way from here to a perfect outcome, though."

Akane sighed and rolled her eyes. "Every time I think I get somewhere with you, you roll it back. You're a serious pain, you know that Hibiki?"

"What?! What did I do n-" Ryoga started to protest, but he caught movement out of the corner of his eye. Without thinking, he snatched Akane up in his arms and dodged forward out of its path, curled around her protectively and rolled until he figured they were clear.

He leapt to his feet and set a somewhat dazed Akane smoothly onto hers. He looked back to see a massive wet streak spread across the pavement and the adjacent concrete wall. "Water? But…"

"RYOGA HIBIKI, PREPARE TO DIE!"

"Aww, c'mon, what did I do this time?!" Ryoga looked up into the glare of the sun in time to see a silhouette descending towards him, carrying some sort of weapon poised for an overhead strike. He reached back for his umbrella to block the strike only to find empty air. He lurched back in a last minute attempt to dodge, barely getting clear while the weapon brushed his nose before it struck the concrete and fractured it.

Ryouga hopped back a couple more steps and dropped into a ready stance. His eyes widened as he recognized the blue groundskeeper's overcoat and white headband of his assailant.

"Shinnosuke?!
he yelped. "What the hell are you doing in Tokyo?!"

"That should be my question!" Shinnosuke straightened to give Ryoga an icy glare. "After you ran off, I followed Akari here. I expected to find you together, but I've been following you for the past few days, and now I see the truth!" He levelled his pushbroom at Ryoga like a rapier. "Akari wasn't enough for you! How many other girls have I seen you around with!? I've lost track!"

Ryouga blinked, paused and ticked off on his fingers. "Lessee… there's Nabiki… Ranma… Shampoo… Anna… Uhhh… six?" He rubbed the back of his head. "I mean, I know your memory is bad but I can't really blame you on this one. It's been nuts for the past couple of weeks…"

"Shut up!" Shinnosuke roared. "How can you be so shameless about cheating on Akari?! On your fiancee?!"

"She's not…" Ryoga started to say, then shook his head - that wasn't the issue at hand. "I never cheated on Akari!"
Shinnosuke's eyes narrowed. "Just because my memory is bad you think I'm stupid? I've burned every moment, every transgression into my memory, Hibiki. Including where you kissed that purple-haired girl!"

"I… oh," Ryouga trailed off. "I guess… Look, the situation was complicated, and I never… Hang on! Were you peeping on me during that?!"

"I… uhhh… no!" Shinnosuke looked nervous. "A-actually, there was this guy in glasses who stomped out the back door that was complaining about it. But you just confirmed it!" He levelled the broom again. "Prepare to die you… you… enemy of women!"

Ryouga had the oddest feeling of deja vu… enough that he forgot to dodge as Shinnosuke came in for another swing with the broom. Someone moved in front of him and the broom thwacked solidly against a familiar red bamboo umbrella.

"Shinnosuke, stop this!" Akane said, fending off the broom with Ryouga's umbrella. "There isn't any need for this… if you'd just stop and listen!"

Shinnosuke recoiled, his eyes widening. "A-akane?!" He stepped back a pace, looking as though he had seen a ghost. "It… it's… it is you, isn't it? I… I remember you!"

Akane smiled. "I remember you too, Shinnosuke." She lowered the umbrella. "You know I wouldn't lie to you, right?" She held out a hand. "Please believe me. Ryouga hasn't done anything wrong. I know the situation he's gotten into can look pretty bad, but he'd never…" She trailed off a bit, and shot a glance over her shoulder at Ryouga. "Well, almost never take advantage of a girl's trust like that…"

"Hey!" Ryouga squawked, realizing she was referring to P-chan again. "I thought we were past that!"

"Well it's not like I'm just going to let you forget it!" Akane scoffed, turning to face him. "You were sneaking into my bed at night!"

"You knew! And besides, half the time you had to drag me there!" Ryouga shot back.

"WHAT?!

Akane's eyes widened as she heard the cry of outrage from behind her. "Sooooo… I'm guessing this was probably a bad time to have this discussion, right?"

Ryouga was already backing up, his own eyes wide and fearful from the expression on Shinnosuke's face. "Yeah. Yeah, you might say that…"

Akane felt beads of cold sweat on her brow. She could almost feel the heat radiated by Shinnosuke's ki across her back now. "Ummm… too late to try and explain and smooth it over, do you think?"

Ryouga grabbed her wrist and pulled her away as Shinnosuke shattered the concrete with an angry cry, his ordinary-seeming wooden push broom smashing the surface like it was dried mud.

"What do you think!?!" Ryouga yelped. "Run!"

Ranma watched Akane drag Ryouga off down the road, scowled and returned her gaze to the sidewalk. She kicked at a pebble and jammed her hands into her pockets. "What's she gotta drag him
off to talk about anyway? She better not be trying to sweet talk him into something. She knows he's still soft on her!

"So you, Akane and Ryouga are together and one of you puts their foot in their mouth, so the other two storm off. Some things do change..." Nabiki started, sidling up to Ranma. She noticed that Ranma didn't react to her light jibe and put a hand on her shoulder. "Hey... you okay? You're not actually worried, are you?"

Ranma sighed heavily. "That they'll do something intentionally stupid? No, not really." She kicked at another pebble. "It's never intentionally stupid. I just..." She chewed on her lower lip, trying to think of the words. "You know how I have this habit of saying something to Akane... like, not even meaning anything bad by it... and it'd totally ruin her day? Well... that, I guess. 'Cept it's usually her doing it to Ryo. I still worry he's not outta the woods yet as far as... well, y'know. Kaboom."

Nabiki raised an eyebrow then smiled and slipped an arm around Ranma's shoulders. "Well, well! That's probably the most perceptive and empathetic thing I've heard you say yet, Ranma. I'm proud of you. You've come a long way in figuring people out!" She leaned over and kissed Ranma's cheek. "I think you're dead on the money. And your being so concerned about Ryouga being hurt is actually kind of sweet. Though... don't discount Akane's feelings either."

"Ryo'd never hurt Akane in a million years," Ranma scoffed. "I'm pretty sure if she told him to use his sword-belt trick to stab himself in the chest, he'd still do it."

"Yeah, but like you said, it's not always intentional," Nabiki replied. "I imagine there will be some fireworks when those two get Linked."

"This really isn't fair to him, you know," Ranma said, her shoulders sagging a little. "I... sorta got a peek at why Ryouga is the way he is. It's kinda my fault. I was his only friend when he felt like he was alone in the world, and I just... walked out when he most needed me to go that extra mile for him."

"Weren't you rivals, though? Was it rational for him to expect you to wait for days for a challenge?" Nabiki asked.

"It... wasn't like that," Ranma said. "I mean, yeah, it was a challenge, but... before that... we did pretty much everything together. We called each other names, we fought over lunch... but then I'd come get him at the end of the day and walk him home, and he'd give me dinner... And a lot of the time we'd even forget about the fighting, and just talk." She shook her head. "It's... it's weird. I didn't remember any of this stuff when he showed up again. It was like he was just some random guy that I scuffled with over lunch - and even dredging that up was a stretch. I... It's weird that I don't remember a lot of stuff like this, right?" She glanced at Nabiki for confirmation. "You know... for the longest time I didn't realize I had a mother. It's not that I thought she was dead or anything, just... the whole idea that I had one somewhere, living or dead... It just never occurred to me." She shook her head. "So much stuff is nothing but a big blur. Is that... is that normal?"

Nabiki cocked her head. "Not really, no. I mean, my memory is very good, so maybe I'm not the best to ask? But..." Nabiki considered. "Actually, now that you mention it... things do get a bit blurry around the time that Mom started to get sick. You'd think that knowing my Mom was ill would make me treasure those memories more, but... Sometimes they just slip away until something happens to remind me. Like when Kasumi found that old cookbook. I think... maybe it's simply easier to let the memories of the most painful things slip away."

"Huh..." Ranma slumped a bit. "But most of my childhood is like that."
"Your Dad tried to sell you to a Singaporean businessman to pay a debt," Nabiki pointed out. "Your childhood sucked. I'm guessing that having to skip out on Ryo, knowing he was depending on you, probably loaded up all those memories with guilt and... well, easier to just forget if you're never going to see him again, right?"

"Ryo didn't forget." Ranma mumbled.

"Yeah, he kind of did," Nabiki replied. "His memories all ended up twisted up into anger and resentment. Now that you've both sorted that stuff out, it's starting to come back."

"That just worries me about what else I might remember that I'd rather not," Ranma shuddered. Her scalp felt itchy, as though there was some crucial detail about it all that she was still forgetting.

"Worry about that when you do, not before," Nabiki advised. "For now, focus on the present. You were saying you were concerned about Akane and Ryouga being off alone together? Surely you're not just jealous?" Nabiki smirked and nudged her in the ribs.

"Ryo wouldn't try anything. Hell, even when he was inclined to he wouldn't," Ranma said dismissively.

"That's not exactly what I meant," Nabiki prodded. "Seems to me that you're the one who usually drags Ryo off for some 'alone time.'"

Ranma blinked in confusion at her. "What do you mean?"

"Ranma... you're very possessive of Ryo. Don't you realize that?" Nabiki said. "If I hadn't stepped in, I worry you might have hauled off and punched Shampoo for kissing him."

"I-it's not like that!" Ranma said, her cheeks burning as she crossed her arms defensively. "He didn't! Ryo's too shy to make a move like that! He's just a big pile of anxieties around girls, and Shampoo shoulda...!" Ranma began hotly, then trailed off. "I... look, I was mad because she was manipulating him! Ryo doesn't know how to say 'no' to a cute girl! I should know!"

"Because you're a cute girl he can't say 'no' to?" Nabiki asked with a smirk.

"Yes! No! M-maybe..." Ranma hunched down a bit more. "I... I don't wanna do that to him anymore. Not now that I know how much it twists him up inside... I just..." She felt uncharacteristically nervous... unsure. She groaned in frustration and slapped at her own cheeks. *What the hell is wrong with me lately?*

She had thought adding the girls to the Link would settle the weird emotional flashes she was getting whenever Ryouga became a topic of conversation, but it only seemed to have gotten worse.

Nabiki was quiet, just... waiting. Not interrupting or cutting in with observations, just... listening. Somehow that made it even more awkward. Ranma realized she wanted Nabiki to accuse her of things. It was easier to shout a denial of something when someone else brought it up first. "I... I... look, I know what you're thinking, but... it's not like that!"

Nabiki raised an eyebrow. "Not like what, Ranma?"
"Like… like…! Arrgh! Don't make me say it! It's weird!" Ranma huffed.

"I'm not making you say anything," Nabiki replied. "And I'm not going to try and tell you how you feel. I'm just saying you should probably sort out what you do feel…"

"I don't feel nothin'!" Ranma shot back hotly.

Nabiki glanced up slightly. "Oh! Ryouga, you're back!"

Ranma felt the bottom drop out of her stomach, a cold dread bubbling up from a yawning chasm that had opened inside her. She turned, half expecting to see Ryouga staring at her with a hurt, broken expression. She opened her mouth to say something, anything, to try and explain, without having the slightest idea what she was actually going to say…

There was no one there.

She felt Nabiki put a hand on her shoulder. "If you don't want him to think you don't care, then don't say it."

Ranma jerked her shoulder away from her grasp, whirling on her. "That was cold, Nabiki! That was Ice Queen."

Nabiki winced, an expression of pain crossing her face. Her brow furrowed and she scowled, momentarily angry. "Yes, all right, fine! It was cold! And… and I'm sorry." She deflated. "I don't know how else to get this through to you though, Ranma! You need to stop trying to figure out what you think you should feel, or what you should feel to protect everyone else's feelings, or what it's right or wrong to feel, and just feel it! Even if it's only in your own head!" She clenched her fists. "You're possessive and jealous about Ryouga because you're insecure about something - because you're afraid of losing something; Whatever that might be. And… you can't protect that… I can't help you protect it if you can't even say what that is. What do you want, Ranma?"

Shampoo and Ukyou had stopped, exchanging concerned glances as the conversation started to get heated.

"What do you want me to say!?" Ranma threw up her arms. "That I want Ryouga? That I love him? What?!!"

"Do you love him, Ranma?"

For a second, Ranma thought Nabiki had asked that. But then she realized the voice was wrong - too high pitched - too… sweet? She turned to see who had spoken, and that cold wave of dread washed right back over her, full force.

Akari was standing there, with Anna beside her.

Akari's expression was… the oddest mix of sorrow, hurt and resignation. Ranma felt like she had just stabbed a kitten.

Akari sniffed and forced a smile, though Ranma could see the tears forming. Anna was giving her a concerned look, touching her arm and saying something in English that Ranma didn't understand.

"It's okay, Ranma," Akari said softly. "I… I knew when Ryouga left the farm… when he always left… that there was something he was going to. If… if you feel the same way about him, then that's good. He… he deserves to have the person he wants want him back. He does!" She swiped at her eyes with the back of her hand. "J-just… Tell me? Tell me you mean it? That you
"I… I…" Ranma backed away a couple of steps.

*I just gotta say 'No', Ranma thought. I just gotta say it's a joke! Just say it! She'll believe me, and then I can patch things up between her and Ryouga, and… and… He'll go with her. A-and that's what's best for him! You're not a real girl anyway, he's got no business… no business…* Her eyes widened as dangerous notions about what all those warm red feelings from Ryouga actually meant started to seep around the edges of her carefully constructed wall of denial.

Anna tugged on Akari's sleeve and repeated her question. Akari glanced at her, cleared her throat, and in halting, broken English said a few words. Anna's eyes went wide, then a mask of rage slipped over her face and Ranma realized that she had blown her chance to defuse things.

Ranma didn't actually understand the words at the time, but afterwards she was told that what Anna said was "[Ranma Saotome, prepare to die!]

And then she picked up the car.

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Ryouga stumbled through the school gates, reeling.

Akane had gotten him back to the school where he had hoped Ranma would be able to help him subdue Shinnosuke with a minimum of property damage. Unfortunately for him, Ranma was nowhere to be seen and Shinnosuke wasn't giving him much breathing room.

Against most other quicker opponents, Ranma included, Ryouga's endurance generally allowed him to bull through. But Shinnosuke's fighting style was developed almost exclusively to deal with the oversized, magically enhanced animals of Ryugenzawa. He wasn't quite as fast or agile as Ranma, but all of his strikes were carefully focused to deal with opponents who had armored hides or dense fur, and the style was proving more effective against Ryouga than he liked.

A series of quick strikes of the broom to Ryouga's head staggered him. Ryouga dropped low and swept with his leg, but Shinnosuke backflipped away from it, then darted forward again before Ryouga could even take a breath. Ryouga was forced to dodge as the next strike from the broom shattered the asphalt.

*That broom feels like a steel bar!* Ryouga thought, raising his guard again. *He's doing something to it with his ki, like my iron cloth technique, but… it's magnifying the strike rather than making an edge.* He dodged a few more swings, but he knew that Shinnosuke's speed would get through his guard eventually.

He ducked another thrust and stabbed a finger into the pavement. *Bakusai Tenketsu!*

The asphalt exploded outwards from that point, but rather than dodge back or parry, as Ryouga expected, Shinnosuke dove into the cloud, twirling his broom handle to deflect the worst of the debris. Ryouga didn't have enough time to move before a savage whirling strike caught him under the jaw and sent him sprawling.

Ryouga hit the ground, bounced, rolled and lay sprawled on the pavement for a moment, groaning.

*This is stupid,* he thought, staring up at the sky. *I could probably just blast him with a Shi Shi Hokodan, but I don't know if he can take what he dishes out. It might really hurt him. I gotta find another way to end this.* He grunted and flipped himself back onto his feet to see Shinnosuke
stalking towards him, murder in his eyes.

"You feel any better yet?" Ryouga asked, wiping his mouth. The back of his hand came away streaked red with blood.

"I'll feel better when you're dead and Akari is finally free of you," Shinnosuke growled.

"Trust me, it's *never* that simple," Ryouga replied.

"*What could you possibly know!?*" Shinnosuke howled, darting forward and thrusting the broom head directly at Ryouga's face.

Ryouga had anticipated this, intentionally giving the other boy an easy opening, knowing that talking would probably provoke a face shot. He grabbed hold of the broom handle, with the head inches from his face and held on tight. "I've got some experience in avenging unrequited love," he shot back, smirking a little.

"Shinnosuke, stop this!" Akane called as she finally caught up to them and ran up to join the fray. "It's not what you think!"

Shinnosuke turned to look at her and his eyes were cold. "I thought you were better than this, Akane. You deserve better than *him.*"

With that Shinnosuke did *something* with his ki and the broom suddenly became incredibly slippery in Ryouga's grasp. The broom head smacked him in the face (though without the force of the previous blows) and it surprised him into letting go.

The next three blows were lightning fast and the broom had regained its unnatural density and hardness. A swipe across the face, followed by two jabs to the gut that drove Ryouga back and earned a grunt from the Lost Boy.

Ryouga grit his teeth and growled. "I'm starting to lose my patience with you, Shinnosuke..."

He noticed movement from the corner of his eye, a streak of red and blue. He looked up to see a familiar redhead figure soaring over the wall... or, more accurately, tumbling end over end.

Shinnosuke had seen it too and, for a moment, his stance slackened. "What the...?"

Ranma spotted Ryouga as she tumbled and their eyes met for a moment. "Ryouga, catch me!"

"Wha...?! Oof!" Ryouga barely managed to react in time and caught her awkwardly. Her hair was mussed and dirty, and her school uniform was battered, rumpled and even torn in places. "What the hell happened to you?!"

Ranma looked up, and her eyes widened. "Car!"

Ryouga blinked and turned his head to look, then dodged frantically as a mid-sized sedan sailed over the wall after Ranma, crashing and crumpling into the tarmac a few scant feet away. They all stared at the wreckage.

"What the hell was *that*?" Ryouga asked.

"A Celica, I think," Ranma replied. "She's been working up from the compacts to mid-sized on the way here."

"That's not what I... *Who* is... Ranma, *what did you do!*" Ryouga demanded.
"Another one, Hibiki!?" Shinnosuke snarled, levelling his broom at them. "Don't you have any shame!?!"

Ranma and Ryouga blinked and looked at each other, then realized that Ranma was still clinging to Ryouga, who was holding her in a bridal carry.

"No, no! This-" Ryouga started.

"-Isn't what it looks like! We're-" Ranma continued

"-Victims of circumstance!" Ryouga finished.

Shinnosuke gave them a skeptical look. "Uh huh."

Just then the cement wall exploded.

"[WHERE IS SHE!?]" a familiar voice roared in English. The rather unassuming form of a farmgirl stepped out of the cloud of dust over the rubble, eyes searching.

"Ack! Ryouga, hide me!" Ranma whimpered, huddling closer to him.

That caused a mild short in Ryouga's brain, long enough to delay the notion that Anna seeing him holding Ranma like that was probably not the best way to defuse the situation. The idea hit him right about the time her eyes locked onto him. Even though she was twenty feet away or more, he swore he could see her pupils dilate.

"[You HUSSY!]" she snarled. "[Joe, you get your hands off her!]"

"I don't know what she's saying, but she's mad and I think it's because she thinks I stole you from Akari," Ranma said. "Which would have been okay except she started throwing things. Big things. Things that were probably bolted down."

"Yeah, well jumping into my arms probably didn't help any…” Ryouga muttered, putting the redhead down as he started to back away nervously. Shinnosuke was advancing on them again as well.

"I didn't have much of a choice. She clipped me with a mailbox!" Ranma replied testily. "I'd probably be out cold if it hadn't been Tsubasa! You have to talk her down!"

"I can't!" Ryouga shot back. "I'm still working on talking Shinnosuke down!"

"Shinnosuke? What did you do to Shinnosuke?!” Ranma asked, glancing toward the Ryugenzawa guardian.

"Among other things he thinks I'm cheating on Akari with Akane. And now, probably, with you." Ryouga watched apprehensively as Shinnosuke started to twirl his broom.

"Didn't you explain to him that Akane isn't into guys?" Ranma demanded.

"It got kinda hard to find a conversational opening for it after Akane started talking about how I used to sleep in her bed!"

"Well, to be fair, you've slept in a lot of girls' beds and nothing has happened."

"That doesn't help, either!"
"Including mine."

"Still not helping!"

Akane looked from one to the other as they argued, then to the advancing American girl and Shinnosuke, who seemed like they were about to settle into an impromptu alliance to beat the hell out of Ranma and Ryouga. She glanced at the crowd of students gathering and realized they were far too close if cars were going to be tossed around. "I'll clear the courtyard. You two deal with this… somehow!" She turned and ran towards the crowd, yelling at them to back up.

"Deal with it how?!
" Ryouga called after her, then returned to eyeing Anna and Shinnosuke nervously.

"Okay, okay…” Ranma took a deep breath, glancing between Anna and Shinnosuke. "All right, partner switch."

"What!?" Ryouga yelped

"Swap dance partners! I'll take Shinnosuke. I've fought him before and I'm pretty sure I can shut him down. You talk to Anna since you speak English," Ranma replied, then gave him a quizzical look. "Why, what did you think I meant?"

"Nothing! Nevermind! It's been a bad day for it!" Ryouga muttered nervously. "Let's just do it now before they kill us both. You sure you can get Shinnosuke's attention off me?"

Ranma gave him a confident smirk. "Trust me, getting people pissed at me is a speciality of mine."

Ranma locked her gaze on Shinnosuke and settled into a ready stance. Shinnosuke looked momentarily confused, then his eyes narrowed in response.

"Yeah, I'm pretty well acquainted with that," Ryouga muttered.

"You love me and you know it," Ranma replied with a wink.

Ryouga suffered another brain seizure. The lock up must have been apparent on his face, because Ranma's eyes widened and the color drained from her face as she realized what she had just said.

"I-mean… as a rival! Friendly rivalry!" Ranma babbled. "Brotherly love! Or… sisterly? Damnit, just go talk to your ex girlfriend!" She blurred as she dashed towards Shinnosuke, earning a yelp from him as he barely blocked her overly enthusiastic kick with his broom.

"Okay, just calm Anna down, and… Ryouga stepped forward. "[Anna, listen, this is all a big misunderstand…]"

"[DIE, TWO-TIMER!]
" Anna hefted a large chunk of concrete from the wall she had shattered and threw it at him.

Normally Ryouga would have just used the breaking point to shatter the debris, but this close to Anna he was worried about hurting her with shrapnel. Without much other choice, he caught the chunk, grunting as he skidded back a bit. "[Anna, wait! I…]

"[RRRRAGH!]
" She picked up an even bigger chunk and hurled it at him. He didn't have time to drop the piece he was already holding, so he had little choice but to catch the second as well. He grunted, bowing a bit as he tried to hold up the weight of both pieces, each one bigger than he was. " [... Nnnnf... Anna, just listen, I…!]"
"[DIE!]" Anna hefted the final large chunk, bigger than either of the other two, and brought it slamming down on top.

The weight was too much. Ryouga buckled and collapsed as the concrete shattered into rubble and buried him.

Anna stood looming over the pile, panting and glaring at it. Gradually, her breathing slowed and the red haze over her vision cleared. Her eyes widened as she spotted Ryouga's arm poking up out of the pile of smashed cement.

"[Oh no! What did I do!? Joe!]

She darted forward and grabbed his arm, pulling him free of the pile of rubble.

Ryouga groaned woozily. There was a limit to what he could take in a day.

She threw him over her shoulder. "[Don't worry Joe, I'll get you some help, I'll... I'll...]

She looked around, but Ranma and the other boy were nowhere to be seen, having vanished during her tantrum. She looked around the unfamiliar surroundings.

"[AKARRRRIIIIIIIIIII!]

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Ranma threw a frantic flurry of blows at Shinnosuke. She had to admit, she was impressed that he was keeping up with her. Though she wasn't really trying to take him down, just to lure him away.

"Why are you fighting me?" Shinnosuke yelled in frustration as a spinning swipe whiffed harmlessly past her. The skills that had been effective against Ryouga's stony defenses were coming up short against Ranma's speed. "My fight is with Hibiki!"

"Yeah, about that. Why are you beefing on Ryo?" Ranma asked, perching on a chain link fence post. "I mean, it's Akari you like, right? If Ryouga's with another girl, doesn't that free her up for you?"

"You don't get it. He walked out on her!" Shinnosuke growled. "He needs to pay for that alone! The fact he's dragged Akane into this just makes me more certain of it!"

Ranma blinked. "So you remember Akane then? Cool, that'll make this easy." She dodged another few swipes, trying to make it look casual, though he was starting to get close with a few of them. "Remember when we were all in Ryugenzawa fighting the Orochi to get the cure for you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about!" Shinnosuke took a step back, scowling. "I've never met you before in my life!"

Ranma blinked, then grit her teeth. "Of all the... you remember Ryouga and Akane, but not me!? I nearly got eaten saving your rotten hide!"

"The Orochi is a myth," Shinnosuke said, glaring at her. "A story my Grandpa tells to scare away the tourists. Just like the Water of Life or... or the giant animals!"

"Your forest is full of giant...!" Ranma stopped, clenched her fists and grunted. This isn't working! His memory is swiss cheese... gotta work with what he DOES remember! "Didn't you used to lament about how you never told Akane how you really felt?" Even though you DID and just forgot?
"How did you…? So what?!” Shinnosuke twirled his broom, pacing her warily.

"Well? Are you going to repeat that same stupid mistake with Akari?!” Ranma scoffed. "Here you are, wasting your time on revenge when you could…"

Shinnosuke darted forward faster than she expected, sweeping her feet out from under her and sending her toppling off the fence post to land ungracefully on her backside on the grass. Before she could get up, the end of the broom was at her throat.

"I already told her," Shinnosuke said coldly.

"Uhhh… Oh,” Ranma said. She swallowed nervously, glancing down at the end of the broom poised to crush her windpipe. "Then… why…?"

"Because she deserves better than him!” Shinnosuke snarled. After a moment he flipped the broom handle away and seemed to deflate a little. "Even if it isn't me…"

Ranma sat up slowly, self consciously rubbing at her throat. "I… look man, I'm sorry…"

"Save it," Shinnosuke cut her off. He turned and started to walk away. "Just… Make sure the next time he says he loves someone, that he means it."

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Ryouga groaned as light filtered through his eyelids. His head was pounding, and there was a general ache in his muscles, like he was bruised all over.

*Where am I…?* It didn't feel like he was lying on a pile of broken concrete. He was lying flat, like on the ground or on a bench, and his head was propped up on something soft. Cautiously he cracked an eye open.

Anna was smiling down at him. "[Hey. Finally awake?]" she asked.

Ryouga groaned and closed his eyes again. *I'm on a bench, my head is in her lap, and I'm officially a dead man.* "[Anna, look, I shouldn't be here…]" He started to sit up.

She pushed him back down with surprising strength. "[Hush and be still a minute, will ya?]" she said. Her tone was playful, but there was an undercurrent of… something sad beneath it. "[Ah haven't had a minute alone with ya for over a year, and Ah've got some stuff to say. Just… get comfortable, okay?]"

He sighed but didn't resist. He had learned that panicking generally only made things worse. It didn't help the guilt, though. *I don't deserve to be comfortable…*

"[Ah'm sorry about the bump on your head,]" she said sheepishly. "[Ah kinda got carried away. And Ah owe an apology to Red, too… What's her name? Ranma? And probably a few property owners along the way…]"

She started unconsciously touseling his hair, which actually felt pretty good, and made the guilt worse. "[Look, Anna…]"

"[Ah said hush!]" she chided him. "[Now… Now before you start gettin' ideas…]" She took a deep breath. "[... You broke up with me. You made that clear when you left. Your heart was someplace else. Ah knew that comin' out here. For alla my carryin' on… You're not mine. So… don't go thinkin' I'm all deluded about that.]"
"[Anna…]" Ryouga felt the stabbing ache in his heart get worse. *I am literally the worst person on earth…*

"[Ah came here because… well, part of it was to check on you. But… part was… well… this is the world you came from.]" She looked up and around. "[There's so much world out here… outside of my sleepy little corner of Omaha. You've seen so much more of it than me, and… and Ah realized Ah wanted to see it too. Ah wanted to be more like you. And… Ah wanted to make sure you were okay.]"

"[I'm sorry,]" Ryouga said. He tried to sit up again. "[I'm sorry for… for walking out! I'm sorry for never trying to get in touch with you, I'm…]" He winced as a wave of dizziness passed over him.

She stopped him, then helped him sit up. "[Don't be. You were honest, even if it was something Ah didn't want to hear. Ah'd rather you be free than to see you starin' off at the horizon day after day, knowin' you were pining for something or someone else.]"

He slumped forward, his forearms across his knees as he studied the pavement. "[I haven't always been honest. I've been lying for a long time, about a lot of things… even to myself.]" He shook his head. "[I'm not 'Joe', Anna. I'm no hero.]

She smiled at him. "[You'll always be my Joe, Ryouga. But… you're something to other people, too. Ah… don't understand all of what's goin' on, but… Ah think Ah understand why you had to leave when you did. You're bein' pulled all over the place, aren'tcha? Akari, and Red, and… there were a few others, too?]

Ryouga sighed. "[It's… complicated.]

"[But Red's at the heart of things, isn't she?]" Anna asked.

Ryouga nodded slowly.

"[Is she the one you left for?]

Ryouga chuckled bitterly. "[I would have denied it violently back then. But… I don't know. Maybe. Our relationship has always been… complex. But I'm… seeing a lot of stuff about myself that I didn't realize before.]" He studied his hands. "[I think… I need to see where this goes.]

"[Well… Make it simple then.]" Anna punched him gently on the shoulder. "[Tell her how you feel, get her to tell you how she feels, and then follow your heart!]" Her eyes flicked up and the smile faded. "[but… before that… Ah think there's someone else you gotta talk to first.]

Her glanced at her quizzically, then followed her gaze. Standing nearby, partially hidden by a tree trunk, was a girl with a very familiar streak of pink in her hair. On the ground next to her, a massive pig was sleeping.

Ryouga felt his insides twist up into knots again.

"[You gotta tell her,]" Anna said. "[You gotta be honest. Like you were with me.]

"[Does it make it easier?]" Ryouga asked.

"[Not really,]" Anna admitted. "[But… at least you can start t'move past it.]

Ryouga clasped his hands, staring at the ground, lost in thought for a moment. Finally he looked up, locked his eyes on Akari and stood.
"[When you do finally find Joe… the real Joe… You tell him he's a lucky bastard. And… and he better work damn hard to deserve you, or he'll hear from me,]" Ryouga said, not looking back at her.

"[Ah will,]" Anna replied. He hadn't looked back at her because he knew he'd see the tears and then he'd break. "[Good luck, J-Ryouga.]

He took a deep breath and stepped forward. What am I doing!? part of him wailed in horror as his feet continued to carry him forward.

**Go back! Apologize! You can't just break a girl's heart like that, you monster!**

_I'm not going to lie to her, _Ryouga decided, firming his resolve. _She deserves someone who'll be her hero._ He focused on the form of the girl ahead of him. _So does Akari._

_You'll be alone! Where else are you going to find a girl who can accept you!?_

His stride faltered a moment. _I'd rather be alone than keep lying, _he decided. _I'm tired of all my secrets and fears crushing me. Pretending I'm someone I'm not… that I feel something I don't… won't save me from being alone. I'll just drag someone else down with me._ He drew another deep breath and resumed walking.

Akari was leaning against the tree. She had her arms wrapped around herself and her eyes were closed. For a moment he wondered if she had somehow fallen asleep like that until she spoke.

"I wish I understood what you and Anna said. She's been helping me with my English, but…" Akari opened her eyes, but she still wasn't looking at him. "I think… I caught the gist of what you were talking about, though."

**Why do I have to do this twice in one day?!** that small voice wailed in Ryouga's head.

"I'm sorry," Ryouga clapped his arms to his sides and bowed formally and stiffly. "I've been behaving like an idiot and… and… I've done things that hurt you. And that's unforgivable."

Akari blinked in surprise at him, then her expression melted into a smile. "Don't be ridiculous, Ryouga." She tapped him on the top of his head with her finger and motioned for him to straighten up. "I could forgive you anything. You know that."

His jaw tensed. "That's exactly why you shouldn't…"

She shook her head. "Ryouga… I love you." She locked eyes with him and he wasn't able to look away. "Maybe… I think at first it was silly and childish and naive, but… I do love you. But… That doesn't mean you're obligated to love me the same way. I don't want it to." She turned to him, stepped closer and raised a hand to his cheek. "When I met you… I was so afraid of being alone forever that… I didn't question it. You had to be the one for me. How could there be anyone else?"

"Akari…" he said hoarsely. _This hurts. I don't want to do this._

"But… Then I got to see your world, and… I realized that mine had been so small. You already had so many others who cared for you and wanted a place in your heart and your life, and you struggled with it. And that's good. That's a good problem to have. After I met Shinnosuke, and he met all of my grandfather's qualifications the same as you, I asked myself why I didn't love him as well. I realized I was being a hypocrite… I was using it as an excuse to justify how I felt about you, and that you should feel the same for me." Her hand slipped away. "I… I'm not ready for this yet, Ryouga."

**Wait… is she…?** Ryouga's eyes widened.
"At first I hoped Ranma could give me the answer… She seemed to know so much more than me, about how this works… I thought I could just take notes..." she scoffed. "She… she knows you. More than I ever did. And she knows... why she feels the way she does about someone. I need to learn how to do that. How to tell the difference between what I feel, and what someone tells me to feel." Her shoulders sagged a bit. "I'm not ready for someone like you, Ryouga. I'm... I'm going to make sure I am ready... someday. But I can't make you wait for me."

Ryouga swallowed. "Are... you breaking up with me?"

Akari bit her lower lip. "I don't want to say it like that!" she said, clenching her fists. She folded her arms again and looked away. He could see that her eyes were wet and she seemed to be struggling. "I hate this. It hurts."

"I know," Ryouga said.

Akari glanced back at him. She smiled weakly. "Your... your mother was telling me and Anna stories about your father. How he was such a Casanova, with girls chasing him all over. But... I don't think that's right. Not the way she talks about him, how he was afterwards. I don't think he'd choose to break all those hearts. I know that's not who you are, either. He had to make a lot of mistakes to find the right person. And... I know you feel guilty about making the same kinds of mistakes." She smiled. "But I think... I think I need to make some mistakes too. When Anna goes back to America... I'm going to go with her. I'm going to see the world that you've wandered for so long. Maybe... maybe decide what I want."

"I..." Ryouga just stared at her a minute, not entirely sure how to respond. "Umm... That's a big trip..."

"I'll have Anna and Katsunishiki with me. Anna made the trip all on her own. I'll be fine." She smiled a little brighter. "Now it'll be my turn to send you postcards!"

"Yeah... I..." He laughed weakly, but stopped because it didn't feel right. "Yeah." He squeezed his eyes shut, feeling the old dread grip at him, that fear of losing something, like a door slowly and ominously closing. I'm not afraid of being alone. I'm not afraid of being alone. I'm NOT...

"Take care of yourself," he said finally, forcing a smile. "I'll... uhh... I'll see you around?"

She giggled softly. "Ryouga... somebody has to guide you back to school, don't they?"

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By the time Ranma got back to the school, Ryouga was missing. Akane said that Anna had run off with him and she had lost track of the girl. They had searched for a bit, but classes had started and Ranma couldn't afford a black mark for missing out, forcing her to leave the search with others.

He's fine, she thought, staring out the window and tapping her foot on the floor. He's fine. He's been lost before, he'll find his way back.

Unless his direction problems have gotten worse.

She squeezed her eyes shut. No! He's FINE! He's still got his Anchor... he's got a whole MESS of Anchors!

Unless that MADE it worse?

He'll be back! Any minute! She started tapping her pencil as well.
Anna could have him halfway to America by now.

NOPE! Ranma grit her teeth. He. Will. Be. Here.

"Ms. Saotome!" Ms. Hinako said, rapping her ruler on the desk and nearly causing Ranma to jump up into the rafters. "Is there something you need to share with the class?"

"Uh, no, Ms. Hinako! It's nothing, Ms. Hinako!" Ranma said, sitting up stock straight.

"You seem more on edge than usual. What sort of delinquency are you up to this week, hmmm?" The diminutive teacher started flipping a 5 yen coin with her thumb as though she was a gangster.

"I'm not! Up to anything I mean! Really!" Ranma eyed the coin nervously. She glanced around the room, but Akane and Ukyou were out looking for Ryouga, Sayuri and Rin were too far across the room for her to subtly signal for help, and Yuka, Hiroshi and Daisuke were all missing. Crap crap crap! What do I say?!

"Well?" Ms. Hinako caught the coin between two fingers. "I'm waiting Ms. Saotome!"

Ranma whimpered softly, then sighed and slumped. "I don't got a good reason. Ryouga's gone and gotten lost again and I'm worried that his ex girlfriend has hauled him back off to America or something." She closed her eyes in acceptance of her fate. "So… just drain me and get it over with."

She waited for the awful cold, dragging pull to drain away her strength, but nothing came. Cautiously, she cracked open an eyelid to peek.

Ms. Hinako was leaning in close, eyes wide and watery, her lower lip trembling. "Y-your boyfriend has run off to another country with another woman? That's so sad!"

"I… wait… He's not…" Ranma said, blinking in surprise. She glanced around and realized the entire class was looking at her.

"How heartless! And after Ranma has been so brave choosing to become a woman for him!"

"I always knew Hibiki was wishy-washy! Using that curse to fool everyone into thinking he was a cute little pet piglet!"

"I dunno. Maybe it's like all those times Akane was kidnapped by some kook who wanted to marry her and/or Ranma?"

"And/or?"

"Well, there was that Chardin dude."

"Yeah! Remember that crazy circus lady who attacked the school last week?"

"Oh this is so tragic! Ranma, we just want you to know that we're all behind you!"

"Yeah!"

"Yeah!"

"And if you need a guy to replace your deadbeat boyfriend…"

"Dude. Let the corpse get cold first! Come on!"
"No! Look, it's not... he's not...!" Ranma said. "I'm not... I..." She watched in horror as their conversation continued without her and realized she had now officially lost all claim to manhood at school. She slumped and dropped her forehead to her desk. "I give up..."

Out of the corner of her eye she saw movement. She sat up and looked out the window, scanning the courtyard. Someone in a school uniform was walking through the gates, flanked by two girls. She squinted, then caught the hint of a yellow bandanna around his head.

"Ryouga!" She popped open the window and, without a second thought, leapt smoothly through the opening, dropped the three stories or so to the ground and landed lightly on her feet. *I am going to kick his ass! For... REASONS!*

She ignored the faint cheering she heard from the open window behind her and stalked towards Ryouga. However as she got closer, the expression on his face caused her clenched fists to slacken, and her deliberate pace to quicken.

"Ryouga!" She jogged forwards towards him.

"Yo." He held up a hand and smiled. It was fake, forced and weak, and just reaffirmed what she already knew.

Ranma glanced from him to Akari and Anna flanking him. Their expressions were downcast, almost guilty. Not ashamed, but... not willing to meet her eyes either.

"What happened?" Ranma asked, stopping a few paces away from him.

"It's all good now. I... uhh... I sorted things out with Anna. And with Akari, so... no more flying cars," Ryouga said. He chuckled weakly.

Ranma regarded him skeptically. "No... something happened. Ryouga, what did you do?"

"Ryouga, we should go," Akari said softly, touching his arm.

"Oh... uhh... right..." Ryouga said and turned a bit awkwardly. He didn't seem to know what to do with his hands and finally settled on picking at his jacket sleeves. "Will... I see you later?"

"Probably not," Akari replied. "I need to go home and talk with Grandpa before anything else, and there's a lot to do to get ready. Anna needs to head back home sooner rather than later, so if I want to go with her, I have a lot of preparation to do." She sniffed lightly. "I-I'll call you before we leave... and I'll write you letters. Every day if I can!"

"Yeah..." he nodded. "I'd like that." He swallowed hard. "Take care, okay?"

Akari nodded, then gave him a fierce hug, which he timidly returned. Then she released him, wiped her eyes and gestured for Anna to follow. Anna gave Ryouga her own bone-creaking hug then followed Akari as they headed back through the gates.

Ranma simply blinked, watching. *That was a goodbye. Why was that a goodbye? "Ryouga, what the hell is going on?"

"Nothing," Ryouga replied heavily, turning and starting to walk towards the school.


"Akari and I broke up," Ryouga said reluctantly.
Ranma's eyes widened. "What!? Why would you do a-a rock stupid thing like that?"

"It was Akari's decision," Ryouga said, holding up a hand.

"She broke up with you!?" Ranma boggled. "Damnit, how did you screw this up?! You wait right there! Akari!" Ranma tried to step past Ryouga and call after the pig loving girl, but Ryouga clapped a hand on her shoulder and stopped her dead.

Ranma tried to slip out of his grip, but his hand was clamped like an iron vice. "Ryouga… Ryouga let me go! I can fix this! This is… this is a misunderstanding!"

"Ranma, it's not a misunderstanding," Ryouga replied. He sounded… tired. Defeated.

"She probably found out about that kiss Shampoo gave you, o-or the Link or…" She wriggled, but couldn't get free. "Let me go so I can get her back for you!"

"I don't want you to get her back!" Ryouga barked. "This doesn't have anything to do with you or Shampoo or the Link or any of it."

Ranma stopped her struggles and looked up at him, startled by his tone.

The hard expression on his face faded. He released her shoulder. "It… We weren't ready for each other," he said finally. "Akari needs the chance to make more mistakes… and I have to learn how to stop making them."

"B-but… No. That's not fair," Ranma said.

"We were both terrified of being alone, so we jumped at the first chance to escape it. That's… not a great foundation on which to build a life together," Ryouga said quietly. "She's gonna travel for a while and see the world. This… this will be really good for her. It's something she can't do tied down to me." He managed a weak smile. "I… guess I should get back inside and take my detention, huh?" He turned and started to walk towards the school again.

"I… no!" Ranma ran in front of him again, spreading her arms and blocking his path. "You dove off a cliff to save a picture of her! How can you just let her walk away like this!?"

"Because she asked!" Ryouga shot back, clenching his fists, his eyes flashing with a little of the old fire - which quickly guttered out. "Because it isn't about what I want this time, Ranma. She's right - everything she said, and everything she's doing to try and fix it. If I really love her I gotta let her go, and if I don't… I've got no right to stop her either way…" His hands relaxed.

"And… that's it?!" Ranma said. "You just wander off to be alone again, after we've done all of this to fix your life?! How'm I supposed to be okay fixing my life when yours is in the trash!?" She grit her teeth, not sure if she wanted to punch him in the gut for being an idiot or… something else. She wanted to fight something over this but… the only target available didn't deserve it.

"My happiness isn't your responsibility, Ranma," Ryouga said.

"Don't say that!"

Ryouga stopped short, staring at her in surprise.

Ranma clenched her fists, trembling and glaring at him. Her vision was blurry for some reason. "Don't you ever say that!" she snarled at him. "How dare you think I would be okay with… with coming this far and just leaving you like this!"
"I…” Ryouga simply gaped at her. She didn't know what had him so flabbergasted, and for the moment she didn't care.

"You always do this! You always get close to what you want and then you throw it away for some stupid noble bullshit, and then you try and pass it off and be all stoic and cool! Like… like nothing hurts you! Well you can't pull that crap with me anymore!" She walked up to him and thumped him on the chest with her balled up fist. "I'm going to make you happy, goddamnit!"

Ryouga's gape widened, then his mouth snapped shut with a click of his teeth as he looked around, noticing that there were more than a few students hanging out of open windows following the exchange. "Uhhh… Ranma…?"

Why is this so important to me? Ranma wondered. She was still angry… furious, almost. He was supposed to be okay! It was okay for me to move on with my life because he was going to be okay! He had someone else, so it was okay… Her vision clouded further.

"Hey. Hey." Ryouga noticed Ranma starting to tear up and put his hands on her shoulders. "Ranma? Why are you…?" Without thinking he lifted her chin and wiped the tear from her cheek.

For a moment Ranma's eyes locked with his, and she felt another lurch in her chest of the type that was becoming disturbingly common around him, but it was much stronger this time. Just for a moment… she got the feeling that… something was going to happen.

But it was wrong. She wasn't a real girl and he didn't belong to her, and suddenly she felt like a thief stealing someone else's moment. For some reason, that just brought more tears, despite her frustrated attempts to push them back down. She finally just dropped her head and wrapped her arms around him in a hug, finding it less humiliating than letting him see her blubber about… about nothing.

"H-hey… Ranma…” Ryouga said, glancing around and unsure where to put his hands.

"Shut up," she mumbled. "Don't tell anyone."

"I'm… I'm pretty sure the whole school is watching us, Ranma," Ryouga replied sheepishly.

"Still shut up," she replied, muffled by his shirt. "And still don't tell anyone!"

"I… Okay, Ranma." He sighed, a small, but genuine smile crossing his lips as he allowed his arms to fall loosely around her. "I won't tell anyone."

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Nodoka sighed happily as she pressed the seal into the wax on the envelope. It would have been more traditional to use a scroll, but those were hard to come by in the stationary stores. She imagined this would do. She examined the Saotome family seal in the red wax with satisfaction.

"Just one envelope?" Genma asked, peering over her shoulder. "Not five?"

"Well, I'd hate to get the other girls' hopes up," Nodoka said. "Besides, they'd likely be upset, or come by to pester Ranma to try and change my mind. Better we give them some time to themselves before we start sending out the wedding invitations. More chance of nature taking its course." She smiled. "Ranma will be so happy to have this over and done with, I'm sure."

"I'm… not entirely sure this would have been his choice…” Genma said, then quickly held up his hands placatingly. "Not that I'm questioning your decision, dear!"
"He'll accept this is for the best in time," Nodoka sighed. "It's a shame Soun had to wheedle him away from us, but I suppose allowing him one last bit of freedom can't have hurt. He has quite a bit of work to do, after all." She handed the envelope to Genma. "Dear, could you deliver this for me? I'm sure our future daughter-in-law is eagerly awaiting this."

Genma took the letter and tucked it into his grungy gi. Nodoka frowned, promising herself that the garment would have an 'accident' the next time she did the wash. It might have been Genma's favorite, but it had not aged well on the road.

"We'll need to round up the boy afterwards," Genma said. "If we leave word with the Tendos'..."

"I'll call Kasumi and tell her I'd like my son to come home for Sunday dinner," Nodoka replied. "They don't need to know more than that yet. We'll give them some time to cool down before inviting them to the wedding." She noticed Genma's crestfallen look and clucked her tongue, touching her arm. "Now don't be like that, dear! I know you had your heart set on joining the schools with Ranma and Akane, but there's plenty of life left in you and Soun, and once one of the girls has a son or daughter we'll make the arrangements with one of our grandchildren. We'll make sure they grow up together so that we don't have the same… 'compatibility issues' this time."

"I still think I could have gotten it to work between Ranma and Akane, with just a little more time," Genma huffed.

Nodoka's eyes narrowed. "You know we don't have any more time. He's starting to ask questions. *Maybe* if you had fulfilled your oath *properly*..."

"I did the best I could!" Genma snapped back. "If you'd have been able to have more children then maybe..."

Nodoka's eyes widened and she stared at him. Her hand trembled slightly as her breath caught in her throat.

He trailed off, his look of shock mirroring her own as he realized what he had said. He quickly dropped his eyes. "N-No-chan, I..."

She slapped him across the face, hard. Her hand stung from the act, though he barely flinched.

"How dare you," she hissed in a voice barely above a whisper, then louder. "How *dare* you!"

"I-I'm sorry, I forgot myself," Genma said, falling to his knees and prostrating himself before her.

Her lip twitched. She wanted to step on him, to grind him down further, but she relented. "This has been hard on both of us, and Ranma's ingratitude for the sacrifices we've both made only makes it harder," she said softly. She took a few breaths to steady herself. "We can't turn on each other now - not when we're so close." She knelt and extended her hand to him, forcing a smile. "Always remember, Gen-chan... it's the Kami who robbed us. We did everything right. *Everything*. We are *owed* this. All of this strife and struggle is just to remedy *their* mistake. Through Ranma we will finally have the life and family we deserve."

He pushed himself up onto his knees and accepted her hand. "You're right. I will try harder to teach the boy respect."

"For now, let him be childish, for the last few days of childhood he has left," Nodoka said. "Go to his bride and make sure she is ready. I know I have made the right choice in her. Just a bit further, and we may both rest." She pulled him in and gave him a gentle kiss on the lips.
Things were a bit awkward for the rest of the class until lunch. Ranma wasn't entirely sure what was going on, but it felt like the entire school was watching her.

As they gathered at the tree, Nabiki intercepted Ranma and Ryouga steered them over to one side and sat them down together.

"Ummm… are we being sectioned off for something dumb we did?" Ranma asked.

"Not quite. I wouldn't exactly call it dumb, just… well, implicative. Ryouga, scoot over to your left… no, no, your other left. No, your… towards Ranma! That's better."

Ranma blinked, feeling a bit nervous as Ryouga was directed to sit practically touching her. The rest of the group was chatting and seemed unconcerned about the whole thing.

"There, perfect!" Nabiki put her hands on her hips and nodded in satisfaction, then reached over and scooped up a bento box. "Here, and feel free to indulge any urges you might have to sit in Ryouga's lap, Ranma."

"What," Ranma said flatly, then snatched the bento out of Nabiki's hands. "Nabiki, what are you up to? And why do we only get one bento!?"

"You can have another once you finish that one. Together," Nabiki said. She held up a finger, going into lecture mode. "You two managed to cause one of the biggest rounds of romance speculation Furinkan has ever seen with that little display today. And that is a feat, believe you me! Now the school is unsure whether that was a heartwarming reconciliation between lovers after Ryouga was tempted by a pair of seductresses and their pet pig, or Ryouga is playing poor innocent, sweet lil' Ranko for a fool and every male in the school is obligated to descend upon him like a pack of vengeful wolves. Much as I could probably make a killing on the betting pool for the Justice Horde vs Ryouga, I'm guessing you two would rather not go through that every morning. So, while the whole school is watching, you two need to be as lovey-dovey as possible, and your first assignment is to feed each other lunch."

Ranma and Ryouga glanced at each other, then back at her.

"You can't be serious," they said in perfect unison.

"You two are adorable," Nabiki said with a smirk. "And I'm dead serious." She squatted down in front of them. "Look… Teasing aside, I know you two are uncomfortable about this. I'm sorry, but Furinkan is just like that. Without Hiroshi and Daisuke to run counterintelligence for me, I'm stuck dealing with whatever the current rumor mill churns up. They're convinced Ranma has gone full-time girl, or at least close enough for their hormone-addled brains, and if they get the notion she's single, or at least not in what qualifies as a 'real' relationship in their bigoted little minds, then they'll be all over her just like they were with Akane."

Ranma sighed and looked away. "Great. You realize if Mom or Dad get wind of this I'm dead, right? As in seppuku contract dead?"

"That's not happening!" Ranma was a bit surprised when this time it was Nabiki and Ryouga who were in sync.

Ryouga and Nabiki glanced at each other. Ryouga blushed a little and looked away, while Nabiki's smile widened a bit.
"Don't worry, Ranma. We're not going to let it come to that. You just be you," Nabiki said, patting Ranma's shoulder.

Ranma glanced past her to where Akane was chatting animatedly with Shampoo and Ukyou. "And... nobody else has any objections to this?"

"We had a pow-wow when we got back and it become obvious Furinkan was a hotbed of speculation," Nabiki replied. "Akane did have one condition, of course, but otherwise she's on board."

"Oh yeah? What's the condition?" Ranma asked, as she removed the cloth wrapping from the bento box.

"She made the bento," Nabiki replied with a wink. "She wants every bite gone."

Ranma's eyes went wide. She glanced at Ryouga, and then put on the sweetest smile she ever had in her life. "Oh, Ryouga, honey..."

Ryouga winced. Out of the corner of her eye Ranma could see Akane turn and clasp her hands with that very familiar expression of eternal hope she wore whenever she brought out one of her creations. Which was often immediately followed by rage, the appearance of a mallet from somewhere and then a blank spot in Ranma's memory.

Well... maybe it's something okay, Ranma thought. She can make decent okonomiyaki now, right? Maybe it's that! Or Spanakopita... she did okay with that... somehow... even without having the right ingredients... She cracked open the lid and peeked.

There were some dark shapes in the tin, covered in white stuff, with a few red bits amongst them. Ranma lost her nerve and closed it again without risking inhaling. It wasn't anything she recognized. Oh crap...

Ryouga noticed her expression and swallowed nervously.

"Well?" Akane said. "Go on, try some! It was my first time trying to make it."

Ranma stomach lurched at those words. She remembered vividly some of Akane's other 'firsts'. She glanced down at the bento and swallowed, then picked up her chopsticks. Okay... I'll... I'll just wolf it down quick. No point in both me and Ryo going down for this. And we don't want Akane being mad at him just before we do the Link. She popped open the lid.

She felt a nudge against her arm. She glanced at Ryouga to see him open his mouth and close his eyes.

"Ryouga, what are you doing!?" Ranma hissed.

"'Ust ooo eet quick!" Ryouga hissed back.

"But...!"

"OOOO EEET!"

She stabbed her chopsticks into the box, snagged a lump of... something. It resisted a bit before coming free - whatever the white stuff was a bit stretchy - but she was able to get it clear and pop it into Ryouga's mouth.
"I'm sorry!" she whispered as he closed his mouth and chewed a couple of times with grim determination.

He was tense a moment, braced as if waiting to be struck down. Then… another chew… and another. His eyes opened. "Mmmm?"

"Mmmm!?!" Ranma demanded. She fully removed the cover and looked down at the odd concoction, poking it with her chopsticks experimentally. Was the white stuff… some sort of cheese sauce and not some horrible permutation of egg? Then the black stuff was… She risked a sniff.

She blinked. "That… that actually smells pretty good!"

Ryouga nodded and swallowed. "I have no idea what it is, but that is good!"

"Try it Ranma!" Akane said, eyes shining.

"Akane asked, her grin a mile wide. "It's Moussaka! Ya Ya helped me make it!"

"Ya Ya?" Ranma and Ryouga said in unison.

"Remember how Ukyou and I needed to distract Akane while you and Ryouga linked Shampoo?" Nabiki said. "Well, Shampoo suggested this little Mom & Pop place to go for dinner after the movie. Little Greek family restaurant."

"She practically adopted Akane," Ukyou added. "Remember the Spanakopita she made? Well… apparently it wasn't a fluke.

"Greek cuisine just makes so much more sense to me!" Akane said. "The recipes are so easy to follow!"

"The recipes are in Greek!" Ukyou huffed, apparently a little put out that her progress with okonomiyaki had been overshadowed by some foreigner's dish. "And some of the measurements are things like 'A pinch' or 'Some' or 'Give it a good sprinkle'!"

"And those make so much more sense!" Akane gushed.

"Shampoo go with Akane next week to visit. See if Ya Ya can teach more," Shampoo said. "Should all go! Would make them too too happy!"

"Who is 'Ya Ya'?" Ryouga repeated, confused.

"Shampoo has secret Greek Grandparents. I met them when we went on our date," Ranma replied. Mindful of Nabiki's instructions, she scooped up more of the Moussaka and popped a morsel into Ryouga's mouth, earning a small noise of surprise from him. "Which begs the question of how we're going to explain things to them if we all go."
Shampoo shrugged. "Not have to tell whole story. Ya Ya and Pappou understand making families of choice. Just… leave out bits that should not be discussed with Grandparents anyway."

"Yeah, but…" Ranma was cut off as Ryouga took the opportunity to pop a morsel of the Moussaka into her mouth. She shot him an annoyed glare as she chewed. He had an amused smirk on his face. *Oooh, shutting me up with food, hmm? This isn't a challenge you wanna lay at my feet, bucko!* She finished chewing, and then as she spoke casually crammed the rest of the bento into Ryouga's mouth with *amaguriken* speed, using her *Parlay du Fois Gras* technique. "How do we explain the curse to them?" She gestured at herself with her free hand.

Shampoo, Akane and Ukyou exchanged glances, considering.

"Well, for occasional visits? Probably safer to just be Ranma's 'sister' like you are with the Kunos," Nabiki said.

"Geez… it's starting to feel like I'm living a second life here," Ranma said, slumping a little. "I mean… I guess there was always a little bit of that with Kuno, but I never actually claimed to be someone else before I got stuck attending school as a girl. Now Ryouga's Mom thinks I'm a girl, the Kunos think I'm two people, and now Shampoo's adopted grandparents?" She sighed heavily.

Ranma felt a hand on her shoulder and turned to see Ryouga looking at her, concern in his eyes.

"Nflo maddur whad, ur Ranma," he said solemnly around the mouthful of food he was still struggling to get down.

Ranma stared at him, then burst out laughing. "Oh my god, you are such a dork!" She giggled as she reached for a napkin. "Finish chewing that mouthful before you try and say something profound!" She reached up and cleaned up some of the dribble around his mouth as he chewed mightily and struggled to get an entire bento's worth down.

"Gah! Well, maybe if you'd be a bit gentler with your feeding technique!?" Ryouga said. "I thought my jaw was going to dislocate!"

"*That* was nothing. I managed to get a whole roast turkey into Chardin's face. Though he was a freaking rubber-face mutant." She shuddered. "He kept trying to kiss me by shoving my whole *head* into his mouth."

"Yeeech." Ryouga made a face. "That's weird, even for weird martial arts. I don't even understand why he'd do that. Even if my mouth *could* stretch like that I wouldn't wanna kiss you like that."

Ranma blinked. It was an odd way to say it… like maybe Ryouga *would* want to kiss her the normal way? She could see his eyes widen as realization of what he said hit him too. They looked away from each other quickly. Ranma could feel the warmth in her cheeks though she didn't risk a glance to see if Ryouga was blushing as well. She cleared her throat softly and turned her attention to the girls, ready to move to a different subject.

All four girls were staring back at them in dead silence.

"I-I mean, not that you'd want to kiss me *at all*, right Ryo?" Ranma asked with a nervous laugh.

"Y-yeah!" Ryouga agreed, laughing along with her. "I mean… that would be *weird*, right!"

"Yeah, I know! Totally not what you meant!"
"Exactly!"

"I never should have brought it up!"

"Right! I mean, it's not like I'd want to kiss you!"

*That* pricked Ranma's pride. She glanced at Ryouga and narrowed her eyes. "Well, it's not like you'd know. You haven't exactly got a lot of experience."

Ryouga blinked. "What the hell does that mean?"

Ranma smirked and stretched nonchalantly. "Well, I'm just saying that a guy like you'd be pretty hard pressed to land a kiss from a girl like me."

"Hey! I've had plenty of… of *opportunities* to kiss a girl! I do fine!" Ryouga protested.

Ranma smirked and poked him in the chest. "Oh please, you wouldn't know what to do with a hot little number like me! You froze up when *Shampoo* kissed you."

"Hey!" Shampoo protested, feeling vaguely insulted by the inference Ranma was making.

"Because she *isn't my fiancee*, and I was in a room with people I was sure were going to kill me for it!" Ryouga shot back. "You didn't do a whole lot better when she kissed *you* if I recall!"

"I've had a lot of practise since then!" Ranma replied haughtily.

"What, kissing Kuno?"

"*It doesn't count if you use tape!*"

"Too bad. If you had just kissed him normally I'm pretty sure the dead fish lips would have cured him of his pigtailed goddess obsession," Ryouga replied with a smirk.

"*What!?*" Ranma leaned forward, nearly nose to nose with him, glaring daggers. "I do *not* have dead fish lips! Trust me, Mister, if I kissed you, it'd *ruin* you for any other girl!" She folded her arms and rocked back, smirking. "If you had the balls to do it."

"You're confusing lack of resolve with a lack of *desire*, Saotome," Ryouga shot back. "I only lock up when I get kissed by *pretty* girls."

She leaned back in and growled, poking him in the chest again. "Don't kid yourself! If I planted one on you, you'd be in a coma for a week!"

"Yeah. With *food poisoning*. Dead fish will do that to you," Ryouga said back with that same insufferably smug expression. "Otherwise I'd barely *flinch*."

"Oh yeah, smart guy?" Ranma said. "Prove it. Show you're a big man. I bet you don't have the guts to actually do it."

"There isn't any tape to save you this time, Ranma," Ryouga growled, leaning in so their noses were actually touching.

Ranma scoffed. "Not like I'm worried or anything."

"You'll move," Ryouga said. "You'll dodge out of the way at the last second."
"I'm not going anywhere," Ranma replied. She closed her eyes and pursed her lips. "You're gonna crack first."

"Not a chance," Ryouga replied. "Just giving you the option to back out gracefully."

"Not happening, buddy."

"Not happening here, either, so you'd better pucker up!"

"C'mon, plant a big fat one right..." She cracked an eye open. "...Ryouga what the hell are we doing!?"

"I don't know!" Ryouga whispered hoarsely. "How do we stop this?"

"How would I know! Usually someone interrupts with a camera or waving wedding decorations or screaming death threats or SOMETHING!" Ranma hissed back.

Slowly, they both turned to see Shampoo, Ukyou, Akane and Nabiki still watching them, enraptured.

"Well?" Nabiki said. "Get on with it!"

"Yes, is just getting to good part!" Shampoo added.

"If you stop after that much buildup, we're going to be cross," Ukyou said, narrowing her eyes and crossing her arms.

"They won't do it," Akane scoffed.

"Crap!" Ranma muttered under her breath and looked back at Ryouga. "Think of something!"

"What do you want ME to do!?" Ryouga hissed. "YOU started this!"

"I did not! You were the one who said you wanted to kiss me!"

"I didn't! All I said was I wouldn't do it the way that Picolet guy did it!"

"Which implied you WOULD do it!"

"Don't let's start THAT all over again! How do we get OUT of this!?"

They glanced back toward the girls who were looking considerably more impatient now, glaring and tapping their fingers or feet.

"Why do they want us to kiss, anyway!?" Ryouga whimpered.

"I think it's revenge for all the times they went through this," Ranma replied.

"So what do we do!?"

Ranma swallowed. "I don't know! I know that look, they're expecting something and are gonna be mad if they don't get it! We... we're gonna hafta..."

Ryouga swallowed. "I... was serious when I said I didn't have any tape. Sorry..." Ryouga said. He was definitely blushing now.

"I mean... you're not Kuno..." Ranma said. Oh God, I'm not actually doing this, am I?! "I'm...
Ryoga frowned. "Didn't you tell me that was YOUR decision which you were?"

"I..." Ranma's lips felt dry.

"So... which are you right now?" Ryoga asked.

"I... I..." Ranma noticed his face was a lot closer. Had he leaned in? No, she had... they both had? Everything was in slow motion. She had that same terrified, anxious feeling she'd had when it had been her and Akane in the dojo doing this. J-just tell him you don't want to right now! Just tell him you're a guy! Just LIE! Do SOMETHING! Everything is gonna change if you don't...

"Hey guys, how is the Ranma Family Buffet today?" Riko's familiar voice called out.

Ranma and Ryoga both bolted back a couple of feet, looking across the field as the volleyball team (Minus Yuka) came striding towards them.

*OH, THANK GOD!* Ranma thought. Her heart was thundering in her chest and she was struggling not to hyperventilate. I almost... almost...

Ryoga glanced at her then looked away guiltily. He looked almost... disappointed?

*Did he... did he WANT to?* Ranma gawked at him. *He... he COULDN'T, could he?*

"Hey, what's with the dirty looks?" Riko asked as she settled down on the grass nearby. She was receiving somewhat modulated death glares from Ukyou, Akane, Shampoo and even from Nabiki.

"You know when the phone rings right when the drama you're watching gets to the best part?" Ukyou asked dryly.

"Oooh I hate that!" Rin said, sitting down next to Riko. "But what has that got to do with... oooh, is that Moussaka?"

"Well, aren't we getting fancy with our lunches?" Sayuri sat down next to Rin. She glanced around the rest of the group and frowned. "Seriously, did we... interrupt something?"

"No!" Ranma said quickly.

"Not at all!" Ryoga added, laughing weakly.

"You interrupted a 13-to-1 longshot," Nabiki muttered, with a sigh. "I only had one ticket on that one. The pool would have been sweet."

"I can't believe you're running betting pools on your own relationship dodecahedron," Sayuri said. "Isn't that a conflict of interest?"

"Probably? The Tokyo Gaming commission doesn't exactly do much regulation at the high school gambling level," Nabiki winked. "Besides, if I don't do it Hana will and I don't particularly like the categories she chooses. Public opinion at Furinkan tends to sway depending on what odds the local bookie puts on something."

Sayuri raised an eyebrow. "That sounds way over my head. I should probably be a little worried about how complex your schemes get, but..." She sniffed. "I smell baklava."

Ranma's tummy growled, and she realized that she had hardly had any of the Moussaka she had fed
to Ryouga. She reached for the second bento box, but Nabiki scooped it up before she could get it and handed it to Ryouga.

"But... why?" Ranma asked plaintively, actually tearing up a bit.

"Remember the plan, Ranma," Nabiki said. "You can have this but Ryouga has to feed it to you. You gave all of the other one to him."

"We still gotta do that?" Ranma whimpered.

"What's this?" Sayuri asked, raising an eyebrow.

"More PR. Basically the school either expects lovey-dovey, or a big fight with these two now. Most of the students think Ranma has gone full time girl. Probably Himura pulling PR to humiliate her now that I think about it... and if the Hentai Horde thought Ranma was single and available we'd be right back to daily challenges. Ryouga's been nice enough to play boyfriend to keep them off her but the student body needs a certain level of PDA to keep buying the act."

"Is that what this morning was all about?" Riko asked. "I mean... from our vantage it looked like Ryouga had broken up with his own girlfriend to be with Ranma or something, and she totally broke down."

"Yeah... that'd be crazy huh?" Ryouga said weakly.

Ranma shot him a suspicious glance. *That wasn't... No, he didn't break up with Akari over ME... right?*

"Awww... it wasn't real?" Rin mumbled around a mouthful of *baklava*. "It was so sweet, though!"

"You two should try out for the drama club if you can pull off stuff like that," Riko added. "That kiss scene Ranma and Akane did last year was intense. I bet you two could top it easy after that little courtyard performance!"

"Yeah," Nabiki said dryly. "I imagine I could run a pretty good pool on that too. It'd be like a... oh, I don't know... a 13-1 longshot at least!"

Ranma groaned and slumped. *Everyone in my life has gone insane. Including me. It's probably malnutrition.* She looked longingly at the bento in Ryouga's hands, then finally decided that hunger outweighed whatever shred of dignity she might still be clinging to. She slumped against his side and gave him her best big-eyed pleading look. "Ryo, I'm hungry. Can I have some?"

"I... what... but?" Ryouga replied intelligently, looking slightly panicked at her change in demeanor.

"Pleeeeease?" Ranma said, and started drawing little circles on his shoulder with her finger.

She could almost watch as the gears in his head seized up.

She smirked and gave him a wink to break the illusion. *I probably shouldn't enjoy messing with him as much as I do,* some small part of her thought.

Realization dawned on his face, followed by a flicker of anger that melted into bemused acceptance as he realized she had intentionally let him in on it. It all passed in a fraction of a second and she was rather proud of herself that she didn't need the Link to see it.

*Or the Link has just become so normal for me I don't really notice that's how I know this*
stuff… Ranma thought as she realized it had been there all along, as sort of a low level background. She was so caught up in her musings that she was a bit surprised when a pair of chopsticks appeared in front of her face. She glanced up at Ryouga.

"I mean… you did ask nicely," he said, smiling a little.

She snickered a bit, but accepted the morsel. She scooted a bit closer to him, purely to facilitate the process as he began digging for more.

Sayuri frowned as she watched the scene. She sighed heavily. "Nabiki, how much would it cost to suddenly find myself in a situation where a cute boy is required to feed me lunch?"

"35000 yen and you have to supply the boy," Nabiki replied without missing a beat.

Sayuri slumped. "Damnit."

Young Mi winced as she dabbed the salve on the cut on her arm. Her trip through the concrete wall had opened a nasty gash. Thankfully, first aid was one of the many things she had been taught almost since she could walk. Circus work was dangerous after all.

She was leaning against her liger on the floor of an old warehouse. She had dragged some old sacks and boxes to create a makeshift nest for them, but it was hardly what she would call 'comfortable'. Still, she had endured worse.

Samson grumbled behind her, the sound resonating through his massive frame.

"Yes, yes… I will find you some food…" She tried to sit up and winced when her ribs protested. "Nnnnh… in a little while. Can't let Darling see me in this condition, now can we?"

"Perhaps we might help with that?"

Young Mi started and scrambled to grab her whip, making an abortive attempt to bolt to her feet and getting halfway before the pain staggered her. Luckily Samson was already up, shielding her with his bulk and growling at the intruders.

"Oooh, kitty!" another voice said. Young Mi made her way around Samson to see and spotted two girls; One was tall and statuesque, with long blonde hair - the other was shorter and more classically 'cute', her hair tied off to the side in a ponytail.

"This 'kitty' bites," Young Mi said, a warning note in her voice as she tried to straighten and hide her injuries. "Leave us in peace."

"But I wanna feed the kitty! I'll get the meat!" the shorter girl said. She disappeared behind the taller girl, towards the blinding light of the open door.

"Furinkan High? Oh, that school…" Young Mi sighed. "If you're here for money for damages…"

"Not at all," Sanae said. "Quite to the contrary, Himura and the council has been rather moved by your plight. She is quite the romantic. She's hoping to help."

"Help? Help how?" Young Mi asked suspiciously.
Just then Omi came back in, pushing a large cart. Young Mi could see it was piled high with raw meat. Samson could smell it and, with a rumble, started to pad forward.

"Samson, geuman!" Young Mi snapped. She gathered herself and walked over to the cart, eyeing the meat suspiciously. It looked like much higher grade than the usual animal feed. "If this is poisoned…"

"Ooooh… was it supposed to be, Sanae?" Omi said. "I thought we were playing nice. I didn't even look up what kind of poison to use on a cat…"

"Omi, please. We are not here to poison anyone," Sanae said with a sigh. "That would be counterproductive. You are looking for the martial artist known as 'Mousse', yes?"

Young Mi decided the meat looked safe enough and clicked her tongue to Samson, giving him the all clear to eat. He practically pounced on the cart, earning an excited shriek from Omi. "No. I am looking for the purple-haired maechunbu who has lured him away from me. Once I've dealt with her, I will find Darling and… resolve the matter of his infidelity."

Sanae produced a photograph of a girl with purple hair, wearing a Furinkan school uniform. "Shampoo, correct? Of the Joketsuzoku Amazons?"

Young Mi stepped forward and accepted the photo cautiously. "Yes, that matches his description of her. So she is a student at your school?"

"She is," Sanae agreed. "I've been instructed to tell you where to find her. But… you might be more interested in this girl." She handed over another picture, of a mousey-looking girl in a set of gym bloomers and T-shirt. Young Mi recognized her as the girl who had convinced the redhead to release her.

"I know her," Young Mi took the picture. "She seemed to know who I was and who I was after, though I've never met her before in my life."

Sanae smirked. "That would be because of this." She produced another picture.

Young Mi took it and squinted. She realized it was a picture taken at some distance, though it was quite clearly Mousse with the girl in his arms as he landed on the roof of the school. She looked up at Sanae, a demanding glint in her eyes. "Is this true? Is she the one who has bewitched my Darling?!"

"Her name is Rin Ito," Sanae said. "It seems after Ms. Shampoo rejected your 'Darling' one time too many, he began to take up with her. He's been seen in her company quite a few times."

"She knew…" Young Mi said, her voice soft, disbelieving. "the whole time. She knew who I was and why I was there and she didn't even flinch." She crumpled the picture in a shaking fist. "Geu changnyeo!"

"I'm quite happy to give you her address," Sanae said with a smile. "But… Himura would like to make a more… comprehensive arrangement."

"'Comprehensive' how?" Young Mi asked.

"What you do with Shampoo is… mostly irrelevant, though we have interested parties among us that would be happy to see her removed from circulation. Rin Ito we would very much like to have taken care of. We are happy to facilitate both. But in exchange for some coordination on the timing of your action, we are willing to provide more support. Food, housing…" she paused and looked Young Mi over, "and Medical attention. For you and your pet. All we ask in exchange is you wait for our
signal to strike."

Young Mi glanced over at Omi as the girl threw gobbets of meat to Samson for him to eat, seemingly unconcerned about how close the snapping jaws got. She was giggling and laughing, clapping her hands like a child with a new toy.

"I'm… intrigued," she said at last. "What are your terms?"

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Nabiki frowned at her phone as the recording played for the third time that day. "…not in service. Please hang up and try your call again. This is a message from…"

"Trying to make a phone call?" Rin asked, glancing at her phone.

"Just trying to check in on Hiroshi and Daisuke. I guess they must be somewhere they're not getting cell service," Nabiki replied, tucking her phone away. "I wasn't really expecting them to have anything for me yet anyway."

"Oh. Is Yuka with them? I haven't seen her all day," Rin said. She fidgeted a little. "I… I've been wanting to apologize to her since yesterday."

Nabiki lost the battle to resist ruffling the younger girl's hair once more, and did just that. "From what Sayuri told me, you were just standing up for yourself. I'm sure it'll be fine. People snap and say unkind and unfair things when they're stressed, and you're both under a lot of it."

"Mm," Rin replied noncommittally.

"So… how's your Dad doing with his new job?" Nabiki asked.

"Oh!" Rin brightened at the topic change. "He's doing really great! I haven't seen him this happy in a long time! And he says the team is doing terrific!"

"That's good," Nabiki fished out a couple of tickets from her bag. "I took the liberty of snagging a couple of good seats for their game next week. I figured it'd be a good distraction from our own problem. Did you want to be my plus one?"

"M-me?" Rin blinked. "W-well… sure, of course! But… wouldn't you rather go with… well…" she gestured at the rest of the group, "anyone else instead? Shampoo or Ukyou or Ranma?"

Nabiki shrugged. "It's hard to get them to sit still long enough for these things. Plus I'd like to meet your Dad in person, and I figured since we took in this side project together, it makes sense for you to see the results. Aside from that, I'm trying to socialize a little and have a life outside the harem."

Rin blushed a little and looked away. "I… ummm… I know it's a… complicated situation but… d-do you guys really call yourselves a… a… harem?"

Nabiki chuckled. "Sometimes. Really there isn't a word for it that isn't either ridiculous or a euphemism for something ridiculous. Maybe we'll figure out a new one. I suppose we'll need one when it comes time to explain this to our kids' teachers someday off in the future."

"Y-you're planning on having kids already!?" Rin squeaked.

"God no!" Nabiki chuckled. "I mean… it's almost guaranteed with this group, sooner or later, but I'd rather we put a few of these crises behind us and have at least one or two of us with stable jobs
before we really think about kids." She glanced over at Shampoo and sighed. "I more than half suspect a few of the girls aren't going to be so patient, though. It doesn't help that Ranma seems to have already chosen a name for her first. Personally, I'm content to wait until I'm successful enough that the business suits don't need to be quite as tight and the skirts don't have to be quite so short, if you get my meaning."

"I... yes, right. That makes sense." Rin said, having quite obviously missed Nabiki's implication entirely. "I guess... I'm kind of astonished. You all make it look so easy."

Nabiki raised an eyebrow at her. "I'm... now slightly terrified of what your definition of 'difficult' would be, Rin."

Rin huffed. "No, that's not..." She took a breath. "I mean... you all managed to find each other, figure out you all liked each other and... work things out. And now you're already thinking about the future. I can't even make up my mind about one guy."


"What do you think of him?" Rin asked. "And... please don't try and spare my feelings or anything. Please be completely honest."

"Well... honestly?" Nabiki considered. "He's... well, he had a rough childhood. Even if you didn't know his history you could guess that. Inferiority complex the size of China, black and white worldview, tends to objectify people... or one person in particular at least," she gestured towards Shampoo. "He's not that unusual given how obsessive-compulsive the entirety of Nerima is on average, but he focuses on that one obsession to the exclusion of almost all else and... that's kind of dangerous."

"You don't think he'd... he'd do anything, do you?" Rin asked.

Nabiki shook her head. "Despite what he says, Mousse isn't a killer or liable to take advantage of someone sexually, though I wouldn't put potions or other magical stupidity past him. The problem with being so focused, though, is that once that goal is taken away, there isn't a whole lot to fall back on."

"I think... he was afraid if he allowed himself to think he might fail, he might falter again," Rin said quietly. "I think he was probably a lot different when he was with Young Mi and the circus."

Nabiki nodded. "That's probably a good read. Ugh... tossing away all the complexity and depth to your life because you think it's weakness. That's Genma Saotome-level stupidity," she grumbled.

"Why is it stupid?" Rin asked. "I-I mean... I don't think I'd ever want to live that way, but I can understand people pushing everything aside but the goal. Dad said he knew a lot of athletes like that."

"When you make defeat unthinkable; when you only allow yourself the option of victory, with no way out and no backdoor; no idea what to do when you fail? That's it. You're done." Nabiki folded her arms. "Wisdom in business or anything else is built on failure. If you take risks without any allowance to fail, you're not taking risks - you're just in denial. It's at least as important how you recover from your failures as it is to succeed in the first place, maybe even moreso. That's why you need to spread yourself out, have diverse interests and try different things - to give you something to draw upon and build from when your first idea goes in the can."

"S-so... you think Mu Tsu's problem is that he isn't diverse enough?" Rin asked.
"Exactly. He has no friends, no interests outside of Shampoo or Martial Arts, no real career path and no school… He's like a tree that put all of its effort into growing one big root, instead of a whole bunch of smaller ones. Any one of the other local crazy martial artists has at least got something. Shampoo cooks, is honestly focused on the Nekohanten, and she's been besties with Ukyou for… well, almost since they met, even though they were rivals. Not to mention her intention to succeed Cologne and be the best in her village. Ukyou has Ucchan's, her drive to be the best Okonomiyaki Chef in Japan, she was going to school and has her own gaggle of odd hangers-on. Akane has a whole life outside of martial arts and Ranma has school friends, and now volleyball… heck, even Kuno had the Kendo Club! If you're asking how to help Mousse out? Maybe start with a hobby for him or something."

"A hobby…?" Rin cocked her head. "Hmmm… Well… he likes to find vantage points…"

"A hobby that doesn't do double duty to facilitate sniping," Nabiki corrected herself.

"Then I suppose airsoft is out?" Rin giggled a bit. "Writing, too, I suppose."

"Writing? Why writing?" Nabiki gave her a puzzled look. "Has he taken to tossing mechanical pencils in lieu of throwing knives now?"

"Oh! Oh no, no…" Rin paused and considered. "Well, actually I can't be sure, I think he said something about using a porcelain training potty once, so I suppose anything is fair game for him. But I meant that he's… not very good at it."

"Ah. No luck with the letter then?" Nabiki asked sympathetically. She had first hand experience that writing skills and wandering martial artists did not often go together.

"He's trying," Rin said sheepishly. "But… no, his attempts at a letter so far have been… pretty terrible."

"Well, him being good at something isn't a requirement for it to be his hobby. Just that he enjoy it and find some fulfillment in it." Nabiki shrugged. "I was terrible at photography when I started. Kasumi was almost as bad as Akane at cooking when she first started trying to learn Mom's recipes. Everyone starts out bad. But… it doesn't sound like writing is his thing."

"I'll think of something," Rin finally said. "But… that gives me some ideas on how to help. Thank you." She twiddled her thumbs. "U-um… i-is everything good w-with you? I know I-I-I'm not exactly the sort of person who can be of m-much help to someone like you or Senpai, b-but…"

Nabiki raised an eyebrow and smiled. "Rin, you're kidding, right? You're instrumental to all of this!"

Rin blushed and ducked her head. "I-I mean, I know! The volleyball thing, b-but…"

"No, not just 'the volleyball thing'" Nabiki gave into the urge to ruffle her hair again. "Trust me on that. Having you around has a way of… getting all of us out of our own problems. That and Ranma tries that much harder to improve because she knows you look up to her."

"I-I do!" Rin said enthusiastically. "Senpai is the person I most want to be like when I get older!"

"Well… just don't book any trips to Jusenkyo," Nabiki replied, somewhat bemused. "The springs are all flooded out anyway and, from what I hear, it'll be a century or more before things will settle down enough to even see if the cursed pools will still work."

"Why would I need to go to Jusenkyo?" Rin cocked her head.
"Well… You know, Ranma's curse?" Nabiki said. "I was mostly joking."

"Oh! But why would I need a curse? I'm already a girl," Rin replied. She glanced down at her chest and sighed. "Maybe not as… obviously as Senpai… But I don't need to learn how to be a boy from senpai, just how to be a better girl."

"But…" Nabiki scowled as if to protest, then paused. "No, you're right. That's kind of brilliant in a way, isn't it? Ranma would have a unique perspective, being able to see both sides of the fence, as it were."

"Mmhmm!" Rin nodded.

"What are you two talking about back there?" Akane called back. With so many in the group, it was difficult for everyone to walk together.

Nabiki quickened her pace. "Rin and I were just discussing how Ranma might just be the perfect female role model."

"What," Akane said flatly, giving Rin an incredulous look.

"What?" Ranma repeated, blinking owlishly.

As the rest of the group's attention locked onto her, Nabiki smirked. "It's simple; Ranma is both, so Ranma understands the male brain, expectations, what guys think and how to deal with them, but at the same time she's going to deal with all the usual girl nonsense like grabby perverts. Plus she's proud of herself and her looks without needing to be validated by ogling, drooling boys."

"And she's got no feminine modesty, runs around without a bra half the time if she isn't completely topless, and she's totally shameless manipulating boys into giving her free ice cream or other goodies," Akane huffed, crossing her arms.

"To be perfectly fair, you would call her a pervert when she did wear a bra," Nabiki replied dryly.

"I… well… hmph!" Akane hunched her shoulders, red-faced.

"Y'know, I can see it," Sayuri replied thoughtfully. "I mean… as much as a lot of it is cheesecake pandering to boys, Ranma's a pretty good example of a girl who doesn't put up with being treated as anything less than an equal. Y'know, when she's not taking the boys for a ride."

"Now that I think about it, that'd actually be a pretty good social experiment," Riko added. "Have Ranma go somewhere as a girl, and then as a guy, and then write down the differences in how she was treated."

"That sounds a lot like homework," Ranma said sourly.

"It is homework," Nabiki replied. "But you might wanna hold onto that idea. Third year classes sometimes give extra credit for stuff like that."

"That sounds like voluntary homework, which is worse," Ranma made a face like she had just tasted something disgusting. "Besides, I'm way too manly to be a good female role model. Right Ryo?"

Ranma batted her eyelashes at Ryouga in an exaggerated manner.

Ryouga blinked. "I… uhh… I'm getting some mixed signals. Can we just skip to the part where you punch me?"
Ranma scowled and put her hands on her hips. "I'm serious! I mean, obviously not when I'm trying to be girly, but otherwise it's pretty obvious, right?"


"H-he's right, Senpai," Rin said.

Ranma whirled on Rin, looking almost hurt. "Awww… c'mon, really?"

"I-it's not like you're super girly or anything. It's just… when you pay attention, you blend in," Rin said nervously. "Th-that's not a bad thing. It just means as a boy or a girl you seem… well, normal."

"Probably a martial arts thing," Sayuri said. "The only time I remember Ranma being awkward is when she's trying too hard."

"Happens when she's a guy, too," Riko added, chuckling.

"What!?" Ranma yelped.

"Well, I mean, you get a little silly when you're trying to be macho…" Riko said nervously, realizing she had stepped on a landmine.

"But being macho is manly!" Ranma protested.

Nabiki sighed. "No it isn't, Ranma. It really isn't." She patted her on the shoulder. "You are way manlier when you're not trying to be."

Ranma blinked. "But… but Pops said…"

"What have we established about your father, Ranma?" Nabiki asked.

"That he's an idiot?" Ranma replied, confused.

"Yes, and that his area of expertise extends and is limited to martial arts," Nabiki continued.

"And your mom's definition is pretty cracked, too," Akane added defiantly.

"Yeah, but…" Ranma protested weakly. "Well, what is manly then?"

"Ummm… Well, strength obviously…" Riko started.

"But not, like, those over-muscled oiled up guys who work out at the beach just to show off," Sayuri added. "That's just trying too hard. That's macho."

"I suppose it's… being kind and thoughtful?" Akane said.

"Well, that's really more of a general good thing, boy or girl," Nabiki said. "I always felt confidence was manly."

"Confidence can be womanly too, sugar," Ukyou replied.

"Yeah, that's how Ranma pulls off vamping guys so well. She even told me so," Akane added.

"Well, then… confidence is sexy at least," Nabiki shrugged.

"Yeah, but we're not looking at what's sexy," Sayuri admonished her.

"I thought you always looked out for money?" Riko said.

"Money is very sexy."

"Shampoo think manly man is one who keep home well, raise strong children, keep wife happy."

"Y'know, I like Shampoo's version."

Ranma sighed. "Nevermind…"

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"Guys? I just realized we might have a problem…" Akane said as they approached the front door.

Sayuri, Riko and Rin had parted ways some distance back, off to their respective homes, leaving just Shampoo, Ukyou, Nabiki, Ranma and Ryouga with Akane. They stopped short and waited for Akane to explain.

"Doctor Tofu is coming over to monitor all this, right?" Akane said.

"Yeah… the plan is the same for how we did it at the Nekohanten," Ukyou said. "Except this time we're doing another sleepover in the dojo, right?"

"Except this isn't the Nekohanten," Akane said slowly. "This is where Kasumi is."

Everyone's eyes widened in horror as they all realized the danger.

"Shampoo too young to have limbs switched around," Shampoo said nervously.

"Why didn't we think of this!?" Ranma wailed. "Aww man… it's too late to pick somewhere else!"

"We have to get Kasumi out of the house," Nabiki said. "At least long enough for Doctor Tofu to get the equipment set up, dose Akane and make sure the Link forms properly. A few hours should do…"

"Probably not a bad idea to get Dad out of the house while we're at it?" Akane added. "We still haven't really explained to him what's going on, just that we're having a sleepover."

"What, were you planning on just bulling through and hoping he folded?" Ukyou asked skeptically.

"Pretty much, yeah," Akane replied sheepishly.

"Okay okay okay, give me a minute," Nabiki said, leaning against the frame of the gate. She brightened and reached into her schoolbag, fishing around until she pulled out a small card.

"What's that?" Akane asked, peering at it.

"One of Jiro's business cards," Nabiki said proudly. "You know how he always makes the first cup of tea free, so he can guess your preference?" She smirked. "There's no way Daddy would turn down a free cup of gourmet tea. And Kasumi's been needing a reason to get out of the house."

"You sure that'll work?" Ryouga asked. "It's a little late for tea."

"I'll tell him the coupon expires today. Daddy is a sucker for free food. Sort of a bad habit he picked
up from Mr. Saotome," Nabiki said. "It'll work! Trust me!"

"Daddy's gone out?"

Nabiki blinked, looking almost crushed as her scheme fell apart before it had even begun.

"Yes, apparently the repairs to their house are complete and Mr. Saotome wanted to spend some time with Father," Kasumi said. "He said that Mr. Saotome had something important to talk with him about and not to wait up for him."

"Of all the…" Nabiki groaned.

Well, there goes our excuse to get Kasumi out of the house, Akane thought. How are we going to convince her to not be here while Dr. Tofu is working?" "I heard Dr. Tofu is coming over?" Kasumi asked brightly. She walked over to the pegs and lifted off her light fall jacket. "Could you be a dear and tell him I left a covered plate of cookies for him on the counter? After his work is done, of course."

"I… Wait, you're going out?" Nabiki asked, looking shocked.

Kasumi gave Nabiki a wan smile. "Well… you are relying on Dr. Tofu for his medical expertise tonight, yes? I imagine my presence would make that difficult. It is terribly flattering how flustered he gets around me, but it wouldn't be appropriate right now."

"Wait, you know?" Akane said.

Kasumi shifted her smile to Akane. "Of course I did, Akane. But… I felt pointing it out would merely humiliate him. So… I played along. He's a sweet man and deserves to keep his dignity." She slipped the jacket on.

"Hold up… how many other things that we thought you were oblivious to have you just been 'playing along with'?" Nabiki asked, folding her arms and giving her older sister a skeptical look.

Kasumi grinned, closed one eye and held up a finger. "Ah, now that is a secret."

"Don't you start going all mysterious on me, sis! My worldview can't handle it," Nabiki said. She held out the card from Jiro's tea shop. "Have fun. Uhh, I was gonna suggest you and Daddy check this tea shop out. You might as well go on your own. The owner is… a bit quirky."

Kasumi considered. "I suppose I could drop by. Will you all be okay for dinner?"

"We'll be fine, sis," Akane said. "I'll make sure of that."

Akane scowled a bit when she saw the momentary look of panic cross Nabiki's face. She huffed. "I'll get Shampoo and Ukyou to help and we'll make sure to clean up after. No experimenting," she clarified, a little annoyance creeping into her voice.

"Thank you Akane," Kasumi smiled. "I am so very proud of how much progress you've made cooking, but I'd really rather be there when you try something as ambitious as dinner for so many people. I'll make it up to you tomorrow. We can work through some more of those recipes that nice woman from the Greek cafe gave you."

Akane brightened, feeling a bit better. "Okay!"
They both watched Kasumi leave. Nabiki waited until the door had closed to speak.

"Ever get the sense we've completely misjudged her all these years?" Nabiki asked.

"I feel bad that we just assumed that she… well…" Akane said.

"Was oblivious to obvious stuff?" Nabiki finished for her with a raised eyebrow. "I get the feeling she cultivated that notion."

"I guess it helped her get by and stay neutral while everyone around her was losing their minds," Akane said a little glumly. "Especially me."

Nabiki reached over and ruffled Akane's hair. "Don't worry too much about it, Baby Sis."

Akane ducked away and scowled. "You're hanging out with Rin too much!"

Nabiki giggled as they walked back to the living room. "It's hard to resist the urge around her, isn't it?"

"It's a bad habit is what it is…" Akane grumbled, trying to un-muss her hair. She spotted Ukyou and Shampoo at the table and gave them a thumbs up.

"Mission accomplished?" Ukyou started to get to her feet. "Okay, Shampoo and I can whip up some snacks. This whole process takes a lot out of you and I kinda wish I'd had some snacks my time around." She motioned to the Amazon to join her as they slipped into the kitchen.

"Airen and Shagua laying out futons and blankets in dojo," Shampoo added as she walked past. "Seemed to be talking. Shagua seem nervous."

"After your session I don't blame him," Nabiki replied, poking the Amazon's shoulder as she passed.

"I hope he's not hoping I'll kiss him," Akane made a face. "I also knew he tended to get his hopes up."

"That or that Ranma will," Nabiki said, leaning against the wall.

Akane sighed and sat at the table, pouring herself a cup of tea. "I really thought they were actually going to do it today." She took a sip of her tea and made a face. "Bleh… Jiro has spoiled me."

"You almost sound disappointed," Nabiki said, slightly bemused. "I know why I like the idea… and by extension Shampoo, but boys aren't your thing, so…"

Akane glowered at her. "Must you make everything lewd, Nabiki? It's not about that!" She sighed. "I was hoping it'd happen so we could finally just… get it out in the open, you know? I… kind of know what it's like to not deal with feelings like that." She took another sip of her tea.

"Fair enough," Nabiki shrugged. "It's a bit more complex for those two, though. Especially Ranma."

"Yeah. Hard to define what's 'straight' and 'gay' if your gender changes if it rains," Akane mused. "Do you suppose that's why Ranma stays a girl when Ryouga is around? To try and… keep the problem simple?"

"Maybe. Not quite what I meant, though," Nabiki said. "Notice the seppuku contract has popped up more than a few times? Ranma is still worried about that."

"Must be nice to know what Ranma is actually feeling," Akane said, propping her chin in her fist.
"I'm so bad at it normally."

"It's not magic, sis," Nabiki walked over and sat next to her. "It's... well, it's a confusing jumble most of the time. Shampoo and Ukyou seem to be better at sorting it out than me. It's not like what you're sensing is labelled or anything, so a lot of it ends up being subjective based on how you react to what you're sensing, like 'black with spikes is bad' and 'red and warm is good'."

"I thought you said they weren't actually colors and shapes?" Akane said.

"They're not, those're just... well, kind of what I've labelled them because that's what they feel like to me. Ranma and Ryouga did the same, the only problem is there's no way to be sure if their 'red' is the same as my 'red'. I've tried to compare notes but they get really squirrely about feelings in general." Nabiki poured herself a cup of tea. "We should probably sit down with Shampoo and Ukyou and see if we can clarify some of that."

"Still... It'll give me an idea." She glanced out the doors to the backyard. "So... You've 'sensed' them both, and when they're both together. Ryouga's admitted it, but do you really think Ranma...?"

"Ranma is good at denial," Nabiki said. "Look how long she held out about you. You, at least, had an excuse for not admitting first. Several, I guess."

Akane sighed. "I think Dad is still holding out hope that Ranma will 'straighten me out'."

Nabiki rolled her eyes. "Well, think of it this way: If we can get Ranma unblocked about her attraction to Ryouga, then you giving Daddy grandkids to carry on the school is still entirely possible... as long as Instant Nannichuan exists."

Akane blushed red and ducked her head. "Nabiki! I'd never...!"

Nabiki smirked. "Aww c'mon. It was just a thought." She waited until Akane warily took a sip of her tea before adding. "Besides, I'm pretty sure Ukyou has dibs on going first with that plan."

Akane snorted a good mouthful of tea into her nasal passages. She was left coughing and spluttering, flailing for a napkin for a few moments. She glared at her sister. "That was mean, Nabiki!"

"And true!" Ukyou's voice called from the kitchen.

Akane's eyes widened as she realized Ukyou was eavesdropping on her. She crushed the napkin in a clenched fist. "Don't you start, Ukyou!"

"Seriously though, sis. Don't worry too much about Daddy. I'd say focus on Ranma for now," Nabiki said. "This might be a good opportunity for you to help Ranma with this. I mean... you've struggled with your sexuality as much as she has."

Akane sighed and slumped back down. "How are you so... so comfortable with it, Nabiki?" She glanced at her sister.

Nabiki folded her hands behind her head and lay back on the floor, staring up at the ceiling. "Well... I mean, even before Ranma came I kinda had a sense. Not really that I was into girls but... that I sorta didn't care. It was a background thing and didn't really matter. I figured I'd just go with whomever I went with when it came up. Then this redhead shows up, this fiance that Daddy promised, and he's cute and I was honestly seriously into the shota thing. Then... turns out it was a she. And there I am, poking her breasts, and still considering it."

"So you were feeling her up!" Akane said. "I knew it! Busted!"
Nabiki stuck her tongue out. "It wasn't intentional, okay? It's just... I hadn't seriously considered it before, and suddenly... well, my brain just kinda shorted out for a second because I hadn't processed that her being a girl kinda invalidated the 'fiancé' thing. I admit that I wasn't really ready to deal with it so I tossed him to you. I've had a lot of time since then to come to terms with it."

"How long before you regretted handing her off to me?" Akane asked, smirking.

"I didn't. Not right away, anyway," Nabiki replied. "Oh, I came to terms with the fact I was attracted to her in a week or so, but Ranma was so rough. If he hadn't been such a macho jackass for the first few months, maybe I'd have felt different." She sighed and closed her eyes. "I broke my own rule about judging people at face value. By the time I realized that I had missed something, you had already started to warm to him, so..."

"So you wouldn't have taken him even if he was a boy when he arrived?" Akane said.

"I probably would have, but I'd have regretted it when I found out about the curse and our personalities started to clash," Nabiki sighed. "I wasn't any more ready than you were. Daddy really bungled the whole thing."

Akane lay down next to her. "So... what should I say to Ranma? 'So, we think you might be gay for Ryouga and we just wanted you to know it's okay?'

Nabiki snorted and shook her head. "If you wanna say that, you get to clean up the property damage. Besides... I don't think it works like that for Ranma."

"What do you mean?" Akane asked.

"I mean... there's nothing like Ranma, is there?" Nabiki said thoughtfully, opening her eyes again. "What is sexual orientation to someone who's actual gender is changeable from one minute to the next? I think... it's more like Ranma is girl for Ryouga. She's gay for you."

"Huh?" Akane knit her brow, confused.

Nabiki paused, searching for the right words. "It's like this: Ranma is male for me. I'm more than happy to make out with her as a girl, but... even then, she's not entirely comfortable with it. She enjoys it, but I can sense a sort of weird conflict when we do. Ukyou has told me Ranma goes back and forth with her, so it's not just me, either. With you, though? She's pretty comfortable with girl-girl stuff. She... kinda shifts based on who she's with."

Akane frowned. "But... That just means she's going along with what the person she's with wants, doesn't it?"

"I don't know. Ranma never struck me as a 'people pleaser'. But then, he slips way too easily into the 'male fantasy' role sometimes. Given the Neko ken and God alone knows what else his parents have put him through... then throw in the curse... I think Ranma's self identity is built on shifting sands. That's why Ranma needs all of us... including Ryouga. All of us bring out some part of Ranma, and the only way to find the 'real' Ranma will be with all of us together." Nabiki sighed. "Which... is probably not the best task to leave to the pile of issues each of us is, but... we're what Ranma has."

"Well... you said I could probably talk to Ranma about struggling with her sexuality, since I know what it's like... perhaps we're actually the best suited for it, since all of us have our own troubles that let us relate?" Akane suggested.

Nabiki snorted. "I don't think we're that lucky, sis. Empathy is something none of us have a great track record with, after all." She took a deep breath. "I don't know. Maybe it will help, but I don't..."
want to create any illusions that this is not going to be hard as hell."

"And we're trying to talk Ryouga into joining, and trying to get Ranma to accept it," Akane added.

"Or at least talk about it and make a decision about it that isn't 'Something something MANLY,'" Nabiki muttered. She turned her head to glance at Akane. "Speaking of which… you sure you're okay with this? You do know you're basically going to be sharing a bed with Ryouga again tonight, right?"

"Cold water is a thing," Akane replied with a smirk.

"Don't be a jerk Akane. We've only just got the poor boy over that," Nabiki chided her. "Besides, it probably wouldn't work with P-chan."

"I know," Akane sighed. "I'm still trying to… well, reconcile in my head what my relationship with Ryouga is. And I feel like a complete heel now that I know he walked away from a girl who actually wanted a romance with him for me."

"I don't think Ryouga seriously thought he had a shot with you," Nabiki said. "I think he just didn't feel right pursuing something with another girl while he was still hung up on you. And the whole obsession with Ranma being unappreciative. I'm serious, though… I mean, you're not going to have sex with him or anything, but cuddling may be a thing."

"I've cuddled with him before. Maybe not in human form, but it was still Ryouga. He's about the only guy I trusted enough to let that close. Even Ranma… though that was for different reasons." Akane stretched. "What about you? You've been weird around Ryouga ever since you got Linked to him."

"Mmmmaaaaybe slight before," Nabiki admitted sheepishly. "I think I started doing it just to mess with them because they kept sneaking off to have their secret chats. But now…?"

"See? Between you and Shampoo I'm sure he'll be taken care of," Akane said. "Just… not in my bed, okay?"

Nabiki smirked. "No promises."

"Nabiki! At least not while I'm there, okay?" Akane replied, aghast.

Nabiki's smirk widened. "Again, y'know… heat of the moment and all…"

"Don't you DARE!"

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Yuka peered around the corner. She could see the guard walking along the hall, flicking off lights, whistling some tuneless song as he made his way up the staircase and closed the heavy fire door behind him.

"Okay, he's gone," she hissed to the darkened room behind her.

"Okay, good," Hiroshi said, exhaling the breath he had been holding as he flicked the light switch back on. About half of the bank of fluorescent lights flickered to life.

"Can't we turn on more than that?" Daisuke whined, squinting at the card files. "I'm gonna get eye strain without more light."
"Here," Yuka fished a penlight out of her bag and handed it to him. "You two really should prepare better if you're going to be hotshot detectives."

"Yeah, well I figured we'd be done by now!" Daisuke grumbled. "There's so much pointless junk in these files."

"We probably should have thought ahead and seen if Ranma could swipe his Dad's ID - something to narrow down the search," Hiroshi replied, scrolling through microfiche images on the archaic reader. There was a grumble from his stomach and he slumped back in his chair. "I think we should take a break."

"You guys did bring food, right?" Yuka asked nervously, realizing she hadn't thought that far ahead either.

"Are you kidding? I always have food," Daisuke winked, opening up his pack and removing several bento boxes.

"Wow," Yuka said, picking up a bento. It certainly felt hefty and well-filled. "That… explains why you've been putting on a few pounds."

"Wha…? Hey!" Daisuke huffed and snatched the bento back. "If you're gonna be judgemental then you can just provide your own! I worked hard on these!"

"I…" Yuka started, then her stomach growled as well. She grit her teeth and stared at the floor. "S-sorry."

Daisuke seemed to ponder a moment, then handed the box back. "If you want to know why I made so many… it's because I'm surrounded by freeloading bottomless pits for friends."

Yuka snatched the box. She lifted the top off the tin and sniffed cautiously. "You made this?"

"Yeah? So what?" Daisuke said, handing another box to Hiroshi as he fished chopsticks out of his bag. "It's the 21st century. A guy is allowed to cook without it being weird."

"Is that why you tell everyone your sister made these?" Hiroshi asked as he opened his. He was apparently familiar with the Daisuke lunch specials.

Daisuke scowled. "Look, you give 'em any excuse to give you flak about stuff in that school, they'll jump on it. Hell, even Ranma would probably give me grief for it not being 'manly'," he grumbled, sitting at the table. "But they never have enough food at lunch, even with both school stores open now. I kinda always felt bad for poor Gos always getting his lunch clipped… and there's always someone who's hungry at lunch, even if Gos is good."

Yuka scowled, looking for some sign of dissembling from him, but as far as she could tell, he was serious. She plucked a little hot dog on a toothpick, cut to resemble an octopus, and popped it into her mouth. She blinked. "Hey… that's not bad, actually. I was expecting it to just be microwaved."

"Yeah… well… Mom taught me how to make those…" Daisuke muttered.

"Cooking is one thing," Yuka said with a grin, pointing the toothpick at him. "But I never figured you for the sort to make a cute bento, Daisuke-kun."

"Kay, that's it, if you're going to make fun, give it back." Daisuke made a grab for the box but Yuka pulled it back and held it protectively.
"Who's making fun? It's a compliment!" Yuka said, then glanced back down at the box. "I'm sure you'll make someone a wonderful wife someday!" She yelped as a cherry tomato bounced off her head.

"He's sensitive about the octopi," Hiroshi commented dryly.

Yuka glared at Daisuke, who had been the source of the vegetarian projectile. She briefly considered returning fire but another rumble from her midsection made her think better of it. "Don't waste food," she muttered as she dug into the bento.

"So… how far into the catalogue are we?" Hiroshi asked. "I just got done with… what, I think it was the twenty eighth file? No sign of a Genma, Nodoka or Ranma in that Saotome family."

"Oh, good, we're nearly there then," Daisuke muttered. "Only one-hundred and thirty-seven to go."

"Don't even joke like that, Dai," Hiroshi said.

"I'm not."

Hiroshi's chopsticks dropped from his fingers.

Yuka sighed. "I hope you guys packed a few more of these bentos. We're gonna be here all weekend…"

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Once Doctor Tofu arrived, it took a little herding to get him to the dojo. Apparently simply being in the same house that Kasumi lived in was enough to be a trigger for him. Nabiki even had to talk him down from trying to give the post for the laundry line a tetanus shot. Once he had gotten himself under control, they set up in the dojo.

"I'll be setting the machines to record automatically. For… obvious reasons, I think it best if I don't stay here and monitor directly," Doctor Tofu said. He cleaned off his glasses for the fourth time in the last few minutes.

"Are… you okay to do this, Doc?" Ranma asked nervously with a glance at Akane.

Doctor Tofu took a deep breath. "I… took precautions. All of the dosages were measured out well in advance and clearly labelled and I have here a list of emergency contact numbers that aren't me if there should be any side effects, including a couple of colleagues who are familiar with this herbal medicine and its side effects."

"You know… if you ever want any help with this…" Akane said.

Doctor Tofu smiled. "I'll be sure to ask. But… for the time being I imagine your problems are a far more immediate concern. For now, we should finish the experiment so that we'll be ready tomorrow to go see Dr Hirano. I… expect he will have some choice words about all of this and it's best we avoid antagonizing him further by at least doing it correctly."

They all made their way to the futon pile, where Akane settled down in the middle. Everyone was already in pajamas (With the exception of Ranma and Ryouga, who were in boxers and undershirts) and they all arranged themselves around Akane.

Akane swallowed nervously. "Does… Does it hurt?" she asked. She gulped down the pills before she could have second thoughts.
"No, but it can be a bit tough to stay awake, and you feel cold," Ukyou replied, moving in beside her.

"It's important until the initial link is formed that each of you be in contact only with Akane," Doctor Tofu advised as they arranged themselves.

"It's like some kind of bizarre game of Twister," Nabiki muttered, taking up position at one of Akane's feet. "Do we have to sleep like this?"

"No, once the Link is established, all that's required is that Akane keep contact with enough of you to maintain a continual flow of ki. Since we surmise Ryouga is the key to formation of the Link, it'd be best if he remain in contact. How much contact… I leave to your discretion and would prefer to not know too much about unless medically necessary." He cleared his throat.

"Speaking of…" Shampoo grinned and leaned in and started whispering in Akane's ear.

Akane suddenly turned beet red. "Sh-Shampoo!"

Shampoo smirked. "Not get to try out for own self yet, but Pintou say is very interesting with Link," She winked. "Maybe we try out together?"

"Yes. That. That would be exactly what I was referring to," Doctor Tofu said dryly. "I'd request you reserve your… experimentation for another day?" He busied himself with getting the monitoring machines ready.

Ukyou ended up pillowing Akane's head in her lap, while Shampoo lay to her right and Ryouga to her left, holding her hands. Nabiki and Ranma were down by her feet. They all fidgeted nervously as they waited.

"So… Anyone for a game of cards?" Akane joked.

"Strip Poker?" Shampoo said suggestively.

"No," Ryouga, Tofu and Ukyou all said in unison. Ranma squirmed nervously. She had elected to take a more neutral position in an effort to stay out of any awkwardness this time.

"Come on, Shampoo, don't tease," Akane huffed. "I'm already annoyed about how shameless you were yesterday at the Nekohanten."

"Did Akane want kiss instead?" Shampoo asked, smirking.

"Yes…! I mean no! I mean…” Akane squirmed, growing redder by the second. "It's… it's hard to focus right now, okay?" She yawned widely. "This stuff hits… pretty hard…” She mumbled the last words.

"Stay awake or no work," Shampoo said.

"I'm cold." Akane shivered.

"Yes. Feel warmth outside, yes? Warmth all around? Just let warmth in, and feel better." Shampoo said.

"Kay…” Akane mumbled.

Ranma shivered as she felt the resistance break, and awareness of Ryouga and the four other girls flood into her as Akane became a conduit for their ki. Akane lurched and gasped in shock, her eyes
going wide when she felt the energies surging through her, and she found herself suddenly quite wide awake.

"Oh!... Oh!" She started looking around at each of them in turn, eyes wide with wonder as though she were seeing each of them for the first time. "I... you! And she... And you too! And then...!"

Her babbling was cut off when Shampoo leaned over and gave her a passionate kiss on the lips. The Amazon rolled over on top of her, lavender hair falling over their faces as she very quickly tangled herself up with the youngest Tendo.

"Aaaaand that's my cue to leave I'm sure you have my number if you have any problems remember to use protection and please tell your parents I know nothing about this situation goodnight!" Doctor Tofu beat a hasty retreat, earning a bemused glance from Nabiki.

"Wanted some distance from the inevitable, Ranma?" Nabiki asked, elbowing Ranma gently. She noticed that Akane had very much not frozen up as Ryouga had and, in fact, had wrapped her free arm around Shampoo and pulled her in and that Ukyou was looking increasingly nervous as it seemed the two of them were more than happy to make out in her lap.

"Uh huh," Ranma said, watching a bit slack jawed.

"Is it helping any?" Nabiki prodded.

"Nope." Ranma swallowed. She had been on the receiving end of kisses from each of them, but somehow the sight of them together stirred some odd, twisty feelings in her gut that she wasn't sure she currently sported the right equipment to process. She was definitely regretting the light fabric of her tank top, however.

"I guess it's my job to be the wet blanket." Nabiki sighed and crawled over beside the two, tapping Shampoo on the shoulder. "Okay, okay, there's two years of built up sexual tension between the two of you - we get it - but not right here and not right now, okay?"

Shampoo and Akane finally broke the kiss, panting softly. They parted, but only slightly.

"Shampoo been wanting to do that for very long time," Shampoo said breathily, stretching a bit as she looped her arms around Akane's neck, but making it clear that she had no intention of moving from her spot for some time.

"Why didn't you?" Akane asked, sounding a little dazed, but in a good way.

"Not sure. Akane very good kisser. Have been missing out," Shampoo replied. "Worry about why later. Make up for lost time now, yes?"

"No, be good Shampoo!" Nabiki tapped her on the back of her head. "The two of you are carbonating everyone's hormones plenty as it is and the point of this isn't to start an orgy. Stick to cuddling. Exploration and funtime come later, okay?"

"Yes, Pintou," Shampoo and Akane said in unison.

Nabiki shuddered. "Please, Akane, don't call me that until you find out what it actually means, okay? Especially not in front of anyone who speaks Mandarin. That's a lot of explaining I don't want to have to do."

"So, what are you doing Saturday night, then?" Akane asked.
"You," Shampoo replied, earning a giggle from the youngest Tendo.

"I'm leaving, I can't handle this much cheesiness." Nabiki said, getting to her feet. "I'll go grab some snacks from the kitchen and then we can start the movie marathon until your hormones calm down."

Ukyou gave Nabiki a pleading look, still pinned by the two girls who seemed perfectly content to use her as a pillow. "Halp?"

"Later," Nabiki said, handing her the remote. "Here's a distraction. I have a sneaking suspicion someone else is in worse shape.

Ranma released Akane's ankle, deciding Ukyou and Shampoo were probably generating enough ki between them to keep things going. She crawled over to where Ryouga was as Nabiki walked around to him.

He had pulled off several bandannas and was holding an entire fistful of them to his face. The red was already starting to seep through. He had rolled away from the two girls, but his hand was still firmly clasped with Akane's.

"You okay, big guy?" Nabiki asked, squatting next to him.

"Nuh." Ryouga shook his head, his voice muffled by the fabric.

Ranma patted his leg in sympathy. She could still feel the waves of... well, raw lust coming off the two of them, as two years worth of accumulated tension was uncorked all at once, and rebounded through the Link. She could imagine that it must be even worse for Ryouga. "Look, I'm right there with ya, pal."

"You c'n left go," Ryouga muttered darkly.

"I'll get you some proper tissues," Nabiki said, straightening. "Maybe some towels. Ranma, could you come help? I'm afraid the only thing I really know how to work in the kitchen is the coffee maker."

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The bell above the door rang as Kasumi pushed it open. At first she wondered if the small shop was even open as her eyes adjusted to the dimmer lighting and she could not see anyone at any of the tables or the long bar. "Hello?"

"Oh, hello my dear!" A funny-looking man wearing a woman's formal kimono, and quite a bit of makeup came into view. Though she was certain he must have been there a moment ago, she hadn't noticed him. He was tall and thin, with a hawkish nose and bright eyes. He came around the bar and smiled. "Welcome to Clara's Leaf! I don't believe I've had the pleasure." He extended his hand.

"Kasumi. Kasumi Tendo," Kasumi replied, though she wondered why she had felt the need to give her full name.

"Oh! You must be Akane and Nabiki's sister! I was wondering if you'd drop by. Come, come!" He gestured her towards a table. "Have they told you much about my little shop?"

"Only that they come here quite often. Nabiki said you sold exotic teas?" Kasumi sat down at the table. She frowned a bit as she glanced about. She had the distinct feeling that she was missing something.
"Well, that's partly true. I serve your tea. Whatever blend, brand or type that might be," Jiro replied with an airy gesture. "Sometimes that can be exotic, sometimes it can be mundane, but that hardly matters so long as it's the right one."

"Oh?" Kasumi canted her head. "I don't believe that I have a strong preference for any particular brand…"

Jiro clucked his tongue and patted her lightly on the shoulder. "That's simply because you haven't had the right kind yet, my dear. Now, tastes may change, but at any given moment of someone's life they have a 'right' variety. I like to play a little game with my customers. The first cup is free, but you have to let me guess your blend. If I'm wrong, you get to choose whatever type you might like, also for free."

"And if you're right?" Kasumi asked.

Jiro's smile grew. "Clever girl. Quite right. Then I get a loyal customer, aaand… a fairly significant boost to my already astounding ego." He winked. "So… are you game?"

Kasumi grinned. "Sounds adventurous!"

Jiro raised an eyebrow. "Oho? Crave a little adventure, do we? Well, then, let's see." He produced a saucer and teacup from apparently nowhere, and a teapot in the other hand that hadn't been there before. "This is a complex little blend from the Azim Steppe, created by the nomadic tribes there." He poured out a thick, creamy mixture of tea and milk, swirling it a little and sprinkling something into it as he poured. "You have to blend in just a touch of salt when pouring to bring out the flavor. Adding it at any other time ruins it."

Kasumi cautiously picked up the cup. It seemed much more robust and hearty than she was accustomed to, with the slight scent of spice and chestnuts, as well as a light sweetness. She took a tentative sip.

"Mmm!" She looked down at the cup in her hands in surprise, then back up at him. "I never would have thought to try something like this! It's very rich, but…"

"Invigorating, yes?" Jiro grinned. "It's said the warriors of the Steppe used this to maintain alertness and vigor in the cold climes at higher altitudes." He stood. "I'll leave you to enjoy it then. Do call me if you need anything."

As he turned, Kasumi nodded. "Oh, please do. I see you have other customers to attend to!"

Jiro stopped dead in his tracks.

"Pardon?" he asked, turning slightly. "I hadn't heard anyone else come in after you." He glanced over his shoulder at her.

"Oh, no… I think they were here before me?" Kasumi said. She cocked her head. "Curious I didn't notice them before, but… this little shop is quite busy, isn't it?"

Jiro spun on his heel, pulled the other chair out from the table and sat down in one smooth motion. He rested his elbows on the table, folded his hands and perched his chin atop, regarding her. "Tell me, my dear… describe them to me?"

"Pardon?" Kasumi frowned.

"I know it's an odd request…" He gestured with his hand. "But humor me? Most folks who come in
here are so preoccupied with their problems they don't even notice any of the other patrons, much like the others don't notice you. Pick one."

Kasumi nodded. She looked around… had there been other patrons? She swore she'd seen others out of the corner of her eye… She squinted and wondered why it was so hard to pick one out. "It's… Well, there's…" The certainty started to fade. "I was sure…"

Jiro smiled. "Of course you were, my dear. The shadows in here play tricks. It's nothing to worry about." He scooted the chair back to stand up once more.

Kasumi blinked. "At the bar."

"Hmmm?" Jiro paused.

"Off-white jacket. Reddish hair. Hunched over a bit," she said softly. She wasn't sure exactly if she was seeing what she was talking about, but she found that if she unfocused her eyes and let her mouth simply say what it would, it allowed her to talk around whatever difficulty she was having with her perceptions. "Odd garb. Worn. He looks tired… no… he looks beaten."

Jiro blinked. "Interesting…" He got up smoothly and moved over beside her, taking a knee beside her, careful not to break her line of sight. "What can you tell me about him?"


"Yes… very interesting," Jiro said. "Do you by any chance have any idea what sort of tea he might like?"

She frowned. "He wants something bitter. Harsh. Punishing. But… it's not what he needs. But… you couldn't just give him what he needs because he'd reject it…" She licked her lips. "Something… complex then? I'm afraid I don't know."

"No, no, one could hardly expect you to have the experience for that." Jiro smiled at her. "But… promising." He cocked his head at her. "Try again."

She looked around once more, narrowing her eyes. Then they widened. "Ranma? How? No… no that's not Ranma. Not at all. But the resemblance is uncanny… hmm…" She chewed her lower lip. "She's… complicated, isn't she? Innocence and wonder mixed with… a kind of cynicism? Or maybe it's detachment? Like… Alice in Wonderland. She's very intelligent, quick… Sees the world differently."

"She does," Jiro agreed. "And what would she drink? What sort of tea would compliment her?"

"Flavorful. Deep, but… not heavy. Not a fan of bitterness." Kasumi cocked her head. "Her tea is going to change though, isn't it? Quite soon…"

"Those two are a couple of my more recent clients, and interesting ones," Jiro said. "They're some of the few I've gotten wrong precisely because of what you are seeing about them. You've even managed to pick out a few details I missed the first time around." He folded his hands. "What about her companions?"

Kasumi frowned again. There were a couple of other women with the girl, a redhead with a shock of shorter, wild scarlet hair that seemed to go up and out more like flames than obey gravity, and another girl with long, dark straight hair. Both were dressed in outfits that were barely more than
swimsuits. Older… mid twenties? She couldn't really tell - something made their ages difficult to determine, but there was a worldliness there. But beyond that. "O-oh my… It's hard to say… It's like… the air around them is rattling…"

"Yes, precisely!" Jiro clapped his hands. "They don't come in often… deeply pondering decisions is not really their modus operandi… And with good reason. I doubt any detailed plans they make would last long enough for the ink to dry on the paper they're written down on. Those two are chaos-touched for certain. But… they seem comfortable enough with that. Their direct supervisor however… he has been one of my clients for years. Poor man."

"But why show me this?" Kasumi asked, frowning.

"Oh, I didn't," Jiro replied with a smile, his teeth white, straight and perfect. "You perceived this all on your own."

"O-oh. I'm sorry. Have I ruined the trick?" Kasumi asked, taking a sip of her tea. "I do hope you're not angry, are you?"

"Far from it!" Jiro laughed. "What you are doing normally requires a tremendous amount of skill, but I sense there's a… serenity about you. Most people make so much noise and clamor going through their lives that they're not receptive to the noise and calamity of the lives of others. You're different, though."

"But… why now?" Kasumi asked. "I've never been known to be particularly perceptive before."

Jiro snorted. "My dear, please. Don't try and pass off your carefully constructed mantle of obliviousness as the real thing to me. You already know why, don't you?"

Kasumi blinked, considering a moment. "This place. It's… quiet."

Jiro smiled. "Exactly."

"But…" She frowned. "Why?"

Jiro shrugged. "Why not? My dear, when you've lived as long as I have, things can get… well, dull. You start to think that you know everything; that you've seen everything. And then some child, who knows nothing, picks up a stone that you know is nothing special, a worthless lump that you could describe in the most minute detail… and laughs. And he treasures it. He sees something in it that you don't see. And just to be present for such a thing can make you look at that stone anew." He sat back in his chair. "Most people don't realize that happens every moment of every day, for countless people. They don't see it. They don't hear it. They're too noisy. I made this place… a quiet, safe place… just so I could be here for it. People started to come here as a refuge, a place to wrestle with their problems, and I realized that it was the purest form I had found. Someone takes some thing… a problem or a choice… and makes it into something new. They take it in a direction that is wholly theirs. Those moments, and the privilege of being able to witness them, are what I live for."

"Even if they make poor decisions?" Kasumi asked.

Jiro nodded slowly, his face falling a bit. "That… is the price. The shape they choose might not always be beautiful or innovative. You will see old mistakes made, over and over and over again. But if you get too involved, you ruin the moment. People have to come to their own decisions."

"Too involved," Kasumi noted with a smile. "So you do meddle then?"
Jiro chuckled and tilted his head, acknowledging her point. "I nudge from time to time. Most of the time, just listening is enough. I believe you've done much the same, haven't you? Your entire family seems to hold you in quite high regard for exactly that."

Kasumi blushed. "Well… I don't know if that's credit I deserve. For the longest time I've just listened without doing anything."

"Listening is often enough. Sometimes that's really all they need." He sighed. "But these days I can't often give my customers the time to just sit. Even now I'm robbing Peter to pay Paul a bit for this chat. Which leads me to the point." He leaned forward. "Tell me, Ms. Tendo… would you, by chance, be interested in a part-time job?"

The movies lacked Riko's flair for finding gems to get people talking, but they worked as a distraction. Much to Ukyou's dismay, Akane and Shampoo continued to insist on using her as a pillow and/or backrest and made out whenever Nabiki wasn't looking, so things never did quite settle. When they were just content to cuddle, Shampoo had drifted into her habit of purring, which had caused Ranma to retreat to Ryouga's side opposite them.

Thankfully, the initial surge of energy that came with the rush of ki from the Link soon wore off and Akane was left nodding sleepily. Akane was nestled in the middle of the futon pile and she, Ukyou and Shampoo eventually ended up in a tangle together. Nabiki wound up on the right side with Ranma, while Ryouga settled to the left, slightly separated, with his hand peeking out of the covers to clasp Akane's.

It was still uncomfortably close. He felt like an intruder. The girls had made every effort to include him during the movie, but he had remained withdrawn.

*Tomorrow this is all over, after all*, he thought. The dojo door was open and he could see the moon and the starlit sky. Not as many as he was used to seeing out in the country, of course, but it was still pretty. *Tomorrow we try for a cure, and if it goes well then…* He glanced to his right. *I guess I haven't got much reason to stick around, do I?*

He didn't like that thought. He closed his eyes, trying to keep the dark thoughts from causing a spike in his heavy ki that might wake up the girls. He felt a bit of a protective surge at that. *Maybe I could just… stay? Just... make sure they're okay? I could just find a spot out of the way, and…*

That train of thought died off as he looked at his hand, wrapped around Akane's own delicate one. Holding her hand had been a simple wish of his for so very long, but now? Even as he got his wish, he was on the outside - on the edge - intruding where someone else belonged.

*No… I tried that*, he thought glumly, looking out at the stars again. *I couldn't get out of Ranma and Akane's way… ended up making a jackass of myself. I'd just end up doing it again over Nabiki or Shampoo or… or Ranma.* He sighed.

*… Still.*

He smiled a bit as he thought back over the last few weeks. *I don't think that I'd change anything. Even if some of it has been messed up. Things haven't been this… NORMAL for me since… since… well, since Middle School. It's been nice having friends again.* He glanced to his right as Ukyou mumbled something and shifted. He could sense their ki had settled into a pattern together, and wondered what they were dreaming about. Part of him just wanted to drift off and join them.
I'll stay a while. He decided at last, compromising with himself. Make sure they're okay. As long as they actually NEED me. I'm sure, once Ranma's life settles down, things'll get awkward, so I'll leave before that. Then... He swallowed. I guess... That would be a good time to tell, her how I feel? Or... should I just keep it to myself?

"Ryouga?"

Ryouga blinked, noticing someone sitting up on the far side of the group from him. In the dim light he could make out unbound red hair. Ranma stretched and rubbed sleepily at her eyes.

"Uh... yeah?" Ryouga kept his voice low, not wanting to wake the others.

"Can't sleep either?" Ranma asked. She started crawling around the group to the foot of the futon pile, kneeling and looking out the open door.

"Mnnn," Ryouga replied noncommittally. "Just... kinda thinking about stuff."

"Me too," Ranma said softly. She turned to look at him, then crawled closer, next to his futon. She knelt again, and started fidgeting with her unbound hair. "Ryo... am I manly?"

Ryouga blinked. She was framed in the moonlight, just barely enough for him to make out the color of her hair, and the glimmer reflected in her blue eyes. The dim light gave her an aura, an almost glow that reminded him of a painting of a sad girl - one of those images so full of emotion that you wished you could step into the painting and comfort the girl.

"You know," he croaked, "it'd really be a lot easier if you'd just skip to hitting me if you're gonna ask things like that..."

Ranma sighed in frustration, her eyes glinting a bit as she shot him a glare. That bright flash of emotion framed by the moonlight was another snapshot.

"That's not... Look, I know I'm not a man at the moment." She took a breath. "But... but that's not what being 'manly' is about, is it? I mean... I mean..." She wrung her hair more. "There's... there's more to it, isn't there? Like... like being honorable and... heroic and stuff."

Ryouga levered himself up, releasing Akane's hand. There had been plenty of time for the Link to form and he didn't want to risk disturbing the girls. He sat cross-legged and considered.

"It's... not really the word I'd use," he decided finally. "Not anymore. Doesn't really apply to me, anyway."

"What are you talking about?" Ranma asked, confused. "You're manly! Way more than Mousse or Kuno!"

"No, I'm not," Ryouga replied, chuckling. "At least not how your Dad defines it. I'm a crybaby, I'm too wishy-washy to tell the girl I l-lo-care about how I feel, I was too afraid to own up to the humiliating truth of my curse with Akane..." He shook his head.

Ranma scooted closer. "Y-yeah, but... you're strong, and... and you care about honor, even if you struggle with it sometimes, and... and you do things because they're the right things to do, even when it goes against getting you what you want."

Ryouga glanced at her. "That sounds more like just being a good person."

Ranma looked away nervously. "W-well... yeah. Isn't that what being 'manly' means?"
Ryouga studied her face a moment, then shrugged. "Not to me. Not really. Don't have to be a man at all to be any of those things. I mean… Haven't they taught you that?" He gestured at the girls sleeping next to them.

"I… kinda figured girls had their own version?" Ranma muttered.

"Then why not ask if you're that?" Ryouga asked. "Or why not get some hot water? A hell of a lot easier being 'manly' if you're a man, right?"

Ranma scowled at him. "I don't… I mean… I-I don't wanna go to the trouble! 'Sides, I'm… not wearing the right underwear for that." She blushed and looked away. "This ain't about asking if I'm macho or anything. I just… I guess I'd use the girl word if I knew it… but 'womanly' doesn't sound right, and besides, I ain't exactly a real girl."

Ryouga drew his knees up and folded his arms across them, looking out at the moon. "If you wanna know if you're a good person?… Yeah. Yeah, you are. It used to drive me nuts that I couldn't deny that, actually. Why do you think I jumped on even the smallest of things you did? I had to work sometimes to find reasons to hate your guts. And whether you're a real girl or not is up to you."

Ranma stared at him. He glanced at her, and could see a blush spreading on her cheeks. It wasn't the usual flush of outrage, but more it seemed something he had said hit home.

"I… what do you mean?" she asked softly.

Ryouga shrugged. "What, about you being a good person?"

"N-no…"

He raised an eyebrow, turning and giving her his attention. She was fidgeting, wringing her hands in her lap and unable to meet his eyes. He felt a surge of anxiety as he realized this was one of those moments. I could just tell her. Tell her now and be done with with…

He shrugged the idea off. Don't be selfish! She doesn't need that now! "I mean… who says you're not a real girl? There isn't anything physical to say you aren't. Nothing to say you can't be a guy while you're in a girl's body too, I guess. But that's just it… the only thing that gets to determine what you are, up here, is you." He reached over and poked her forehead. "Nobody gets to tell you what's there but you. The rest is just… hot and cold water to adjust."

Ranma swallowed. "B-but… I know what I feel like, but… If it's that easy…" She shuddered. "I guess I'm just afraid of… of becoming something I don't recognize."

"I recognize you," Ryouga said. "Even after everything that's changed. You aren't gonna suddenly go off doing tea ceremonies and flower arranging just because you decide you're a girl one day. And nothing to say you can't decide to be a guy the next."

Ranma shivered again. She hugged herself against the chill of the night air.

Ryouga pulled the down comforter up and wrapped it around her shoulders, earning a look of surprise from her.

"It's getting cold out," he said.

"Aren't you gonna be cold now, dumbass?" Ranma frowned at him.

"Heh… I'm used to a little cold. I'm a survivalist," Ryouga replied. Then he shivered
Crap. It IS cold! He looked away, trying to push down the reflex and keep her from seeing.

He felt the warmth of the comforter wrap around his shoulders. Before he could react, a small warm body moved in against his side.

"Dumbass," Ranma repeated as she wrapped the comforter around them both. "A real survivalist knows to share body heat."

"I…" Ryouga's brain locked up.

She peeked up at him from the folds of the comforter. She apparently noticed him stiffen. "I guess… this is too weird, huh?"

"No! Not at all! Weird, I mean!" Ryouga babbled.

"I guess… I should probably decide what I am before I do stuff like this." She moved to slip back out from under the comforter but he quickly put an arm around her shoulders.

Ryouga forced himself to take a deep breath and relax. "No. It's okay, it's just…" He closed his eyes and focused on calming his thoughts. "You don't gotta figure it out right now."

She blinked at him a moment, then leaned against him. He fought the urge to tense up again.

"Is it okay to… just be like this for right now?" she asked softly.

"Yeah," he breathed. He closed his eyes.

"..."

"Ryouga?"

"Yeah?"

"Is it better to be manly, or warm?" She was mumbling sleepily now.

"Warm, definitely," he replied. He could feel his eyelids starting to droop, in fact.

"Mnn," she replied. "Good. S'good to be warm. S'posed to find the right girl to keep you warm."

"Mn," Ryouga replied noncommittally.

"I'm sorry about Akari."

"I know," Ryouga sighed. "She wasn't the right one, though."

"'Kay," Ranma said softly. "I'll keep you warm until you find her."

He blinked and glanced down at her, but she was already starting to snore.

000 (Chapter 30 End)

I just thought I'd clarify, Nabiki's comment about business suits and skirts is a lampshade on the sexism that still exists in the business world. Be cute and sexy until you're highly ranked enough that you don't need to be anymore. That might offend people, but it fits with Nabiki's biases and beliefs. It is not intended to offend.
I hope you guys liked the glimpse of Jiro's Tea Shop. I may never fully explain what it actually IS, but I will probably include it in some form in future stories. Yes, even stories that aren't in the Ranmaverse or time period.

The Week of the Link is now coming to a close. The next Chapter? The Cure, The Kiss, and the Calamity!
Nabiki was the first one up, much to her surprise.

It was partly due to the dojo being chilly; the down comforter she was wrapped in was barely doing the job. It was also partly due to the fact she was used to a soft western-style bed and her back was complaining about the hard floor.

Akane, Ukyou and Shampoo were thoroughly tangled up and, from the grin Akane was sporting, Nabiki had some guesses as to the kinds of dreams they were sharing. She half remembered a few images before she had rolled over and broken contact.

You are a bundle of repressed hormones, sis. You might just be the one to finally wear Shampoo out, she thought, bemused. She glanced past them to see another blanket with a lump under it and crept around to check.

She paused, a little surprised. She walked around to the side of the bundled sleepers and knelt.

Ryouga and Ranma were huddled together, likely for warmth. Nabiki was well-acquainted with Ranma's vampiric tendencies regarding heat, and it seemed she had latched onto Ryouga and compacted herself against him, arms tucked in against his chest and her head tucked under his chin. He had both arms wrapped around her and she doubted it'd be possible to separate them without a prybar until they regained consciousness.

That... might be explosive when they wake up, Nabiki considered.

Nnh. Need coffee first. Figure out how to prevent holes in dojo walls later. Unless... he told her? She reached out and placed her hand on the back of Ranma's head and closed her eyes, listening through the Link.

Their ki was calm. Deep, dreamless sleep most likely. There were just a few gentle swirls of contentment and warmth.

They're happy, she thought, smiling a little, but WAY too placid for a bomb like that to have been dropped. If only it was this simple when they're awake. She leaned over and kissed each of them on the forehead in turn. Well, for now, sleep well. I love you both.

She paused a moment as she realized that had come unbidden. She tousled Ryouga's hair gently then stood up. Maybe it's a little early to be thinking that way about Ryo? Well... I'll give him the benefit of the doubt for now. She stood and gave them one last smile before she walked out of the dojo and towards the main house.

She could hear Kasumi humming away in the kitchen long before she got there and smell the rich and savory aromas of breakfast already cooking, as well as...

"Tea?" Nabiki poked her head into the kitchen. A very familiar tea. "Kasumi, is that...?"

"Mr. Jiro said this was your preferred type," Kasumi turned and handed Nabiki a steaming cup of Earl Grey. "It's probably better for you than that coffee you drink every morning."

"Eh, that's debatable," Nabiki muttered and took a sip. Her eyes widened and she looked at her sister in shock. It tasted exactly like Jiro's blend. "Sis, how did you...?"

"I... well, I hope you don't mind... the tea is actually a bit of an apology, but..." Kasumi grinned. "Mr. Jiro offered me a part time job!"
Nabiki blinked at her sister's almost ecstatic demeanor, then casually took another sip of her tea. "Umm… congratulations? Good for you getting a part time job. Just don't let Daddy snaffle your paycheck."

Kasumi blinked. "I thought you'd be more excited?"

Nabiki shook her head. "No, no, don't get me wrong, Kasumi, this is great. It's just… I mean, it's a tea shop. That's hardly going to be a challenge for someone like you. You're not exactly lacking in employable skills."

Kasumi frowned, then brightened again. "Oh! That's right…! Yes, it's just a tea shop… but it's something to do. And Mr. Jiro has let me sample different teas from all over! Even a couple of coffees he says he keeps for his 'problem customers'."

"So… you stayed out all night drinking tea in a tea shop with an eccentric old transvestite?" Nabiki asked, taking another sip. "I mean, as far as Friday nights go, that's actually not too bad."

"You… don't suppose Father will be upset, do you?" Kasumi asked nervously. "I know he was very opinionated on the subject when I last asked him about it."

"Yeah, and you're also twenty, Kasumi. You're old enough that it's not his decision." Nabiki snorted. "He's just worried that his breakfast might not be on time." She drained her cup and Kasumi refilled it before returning to breakfast preparations. "Actually… that might work to our advantage. When given the choice between relying on Akane for breakfast or accepting our arrangement and having Ukyou and Shampoo here… well, thinking with his stomach is another habit he's picked up from Mr. Saotome."

"Oh! Speaking of which, I noticed Father didn't come home last night," Kasumi said. "Normally I would call the Saotome house to find out if he stayed there, but… given current events…" She sighed, pausing in chopping vegetables. "After what I've heard, dealing civilly with the Saotomes will be difficult."

"I'll figure something out. At the very least, send 'em off on a cruise or something to give us a reprieve," Nabiki replied. "We'll have to set some pretty harsh boundaries with those two sooner rather than later, but that fight can wait until we've dealt with Himura."

"How is that going?" Kasumi asked.

Nabiki swallowed. "Whoops. So, how much do I tell my sister about me potentially pissing off some serious underworld figures and making deals with shady criminal organizations? Anything she knows makes her a target… not that just being my sister hasn't made her that already…"

Kasumi put down her knife, turned, and took Nabiki by the shoulders. "Is it that bad?" she asked with concern.

"Do you want the comforting lie, or the truth that will make you an accessory?" Nabiki asked. She immediately regretted her glib choice of words as the look of concern on her sister's face deepened. "Kasumi… Himura is… Her grandfather is deeply involved with the Yakuza. They're not interfering because they see this as some sort of test, where her win condition is to get control of Ranma. If she does… I don't like the thought of what she might make him do, but she isn't likely to take a loss lying down, either."

"I see. So… this isn't Ranma's challenge anymore, is it?" Kasumi murmured softly.

Nabiki shook her head. "I don't think Ranma will have any trouble winning a straight up Volleyball
game, no matter how good Himura thinks her team is and I don't see how she couldn't have figured that out herself by now. But she's not at all worried - which tells me she's got something else planned, and I have no idea what it is yet."

"Are you all right?" Kasumi asked.

Nabiki took a deep breath. "I'm... As long as I can see a way forward, I'm okay."

Nabiki looked her sister in the eyes, waiting for the inevitable lecture. She could see that look on Kasumi's face, that one that their Mother had worn when Nabiki had knocked over a prized vase, or neglected to do her chores.

Instead of a lecture though, Kasumi closed her eyes and sighed. Her expression became more determined. She opened her eyes and nodded. "All right. What can I do to help?"

Nabiki blinked. "That's... that's it? I just admitted that I'm basically in a turf war with a Yakuza Princess and have waded up to my eyeballs in underworld shenanigans, and that's all?"

Kasumi smiled weakly. "Were you expecting a lecture? Something about being disappointed, but knowing you can do better? That... was my first impulse. But," she shook her head, "that's not appropriate. You're not a child anymore, and this isn't a broken vase. And it's not your fault, either."

"I don't think you want to be involved, sis," Nabiki said. "This... this is some bad stuff. I mean... our plan pretty much involves letting the Amazons abduct us if things go south, because spending the rest of our lives in Jusendo would be better than dodging Yakuza hitmen for the rest of our short lives."

"My choices are to stay safe and pretend nothing is going on or to do something, right?" Kasumi said with a smile. "If I'm not going to get involved now, when will I ever?"

Nabiki was forced to smile at that. "If... if things go bad... You're okay with coming with us? Leaving the house... the dojo?"

Kasumi looked around, closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "I was always going to have to leave someday, Nabiki. As much as I love this house... It was never meant to be mine." She gave her sister a crooked grin. "But I'd much rather it stayed in the family if possible, so... please win?"

Nabiki nodded and smirked, regaining a bit of her old confidence, even if she didn't quite feel it. "Don't worry, sis. I'm pretty sure the Yakuza won't want to mess with Nerima once I'm done."

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Her head hurt. It was the sort of splitting migraine that reminded her how desperately tired she was, yet wouldn't allow her the respite of sleep. Her mind was a whirl of confusing images and the notion presented itself that maybe things would get better if she opened her eyes.

She slowly cracked an eye open and winced. The notion had been very very wrong. She tried closing her eyes again but that just started the dizzying brain whirl all over again. She wanted so desperately to sleep but she kept tumbling back to consciousness.

She groaned and accepted defeat, opening an eye again. She managed to pry her tongue from the roof of her mouth, realized that her throat was so dry it hurt and that there was the most awful taste in her mouth.

She was in a white room. It was sterile in the way that hospital rooms tended to be, though there was
a large window that had the curtains drawn back, letting in the daylight. She couldn't quite see out from her angle so she had no idea how high up she was. Her training kicked in and she glanced around for other escape routes. The door was closed and did not appear to have a lock, however, she could hear footsteps outside. There was a vent in the ceiling but it looked far too small for her to slip through and she doubted she could muster the effort to reach it.

The bed she was on was very soft. To someone used to sleeping on the floor or on a pile of flour sacks, it felt like a marshmallow. The sheets were crisp, white and clean and had been recently changed. Where am I?

The door opened. She opened both eyes and looked blearily towards it, though she was having trouble focusing. Two figures entered, but she couldn't make out enough detail to identify them.

"Konatsu?" a familiar voice asked. It was a voice she liked, but… something about it made her feel sad too. Or… hurt? She didn't know. Whatever the feeling was, it swam away in the haze of her confused thoughts.

"W-who…?"

The figure hurried closer. It was a girl, a teenager, with brown hair sporting streaks of vivid color in her bangs. She took hold of Konatsu's hand and gripped it. "Konatsu? Do you remember me?"

Konatsu? Yes, that's right. That's my name. Konatsu… She closed her eyes for a moment, but the whirling only got worse. "Nnnh..." A name came up from the whirlwind, however. "Mineko…?"

Mineko's smile widened and she nodded. She took Konatsu's hand and squeezed it. "Yeah… Yeah, it's me. How are you feeling?"

Mineko is my friend. Konatsu found the concept among the confusing jumble of thoughts and memories. It felt a bit odd… like something someone had told her. But at the same time, deep down, it felt correct. She curled her fingers around that hand… had Mineko's hand gotten bigger? No, that would be ridiculous. "My head…"

"We'll get you something for it," The other figure said. She stepped forward. Blonde, long hair, tail, piercing eyes. Konatsu didn't recognize her, though she had the odd feeling she should. "For now… you're probably dehydrated. Mineko?"

Mineko nodded and quickly retrieved a glass of water from the side table. She held it to Konatsu's lips, allowing her to drink until Konatsu was able to reach up and take the glass and drain it. It barely felt like enough to notice.

"Who… are you?" Konatsu croaked to the blonde girl.

"My name is Himura Tanaka," Himura said. "You remember the Tanaka family, don't you?"

Konatsu frowned. The name 'Tanaka' rang in her head almost like a bell. One of the few things that was absolutely crystal clear. But… oddly detached. Tanaka… My parents were retainers to a family named Tanaka. I was… I… don't remember them, but I know they were the ones my parents served. "My family have… been your retainers, right?"

"Exactly. Until your stepmother broke the agreement and spirited you away as a child when your father died," Himura said. Her eyes seemed oddly intense. Like she was searching Konatsu's face for a reaction.

"Yes." Konatsu nodded. That sounded right. Not honoring father's commitments certainly sounded
like something her stepmother would have done. "Have… you come to claim a debt on my honor?"

Himura smiled widely, as if she had heard what she had been waiting for. "No, my dear Konatsu! I've been searching for you! Since your mother died, my family has been very concerned about your welfare, but then your father passed and, much to my Grandfather's chagrin, we lost track of you. Your stepmother kept you from anything that might have left a paper trail. It wasn't until Mineko found you that we were sure. If anything, I am the one who has the debt of honor to repay." She bowed deeply before her.

"A… debt?" Konatsu asked, confused.

"Your family have been our retainers for generations. Though you have always managed your own affairs, we've done our best to ensure your family was well taken care of. However, in the tragedy that claimed your parents, we failed you twice. And then again in being unable to find you and allowing you to be exploited for so long. First by your Stepmother, and then by Ms. Kuonji."

"Exploited?" Konatsu murmured, frowning. That word didn't seem right connected to the name 'Kuonji'.

"I… don't wish to speak ill of her. She did certainly provide you an escape from an abusive situation that had become intolerable. But, when we found you, you were terribly malnourished. You could barely remember your own name. She had been paying you perhaps a few yen a day, and forcing you to work her shop while she indulged in… more 'recreational pursuits' with what appears to be several lovers." She dusted off her shoulder as if she felt soiled by mentioning it. "Mineko found you collapsed after having worked long hours without food or water… ironically serving food and water to Ms. Kuonji's clientele. I wanted to respect your wishes as much as possible, but I felt at that point that I needed to intervene."

"Intervene…" Konatsu repeated, frowning again.

Mineko squeezed her hand. "Yes, Konatsu! It's not fair how that girl treated you! She made you work for her basically for free because… because she knows you…” she bowed her head, "She's been exploiting your feelings for over a year now, all while rubbing your nose in her relationships. And you'd just accepted it… like you didn't deserve anything better! I couldn't just watch anymore!"

"I… thank you," Konatsu smiled. Mineko's earnest sincerity reassured her. She squeezed back, then glanced at Himura. "I… have no way to repay you for this."

"Oh, I know," Himura said, beaming. "That's hardly a concern. My family has always helped yours out whenever we could. That's why your ancestors pledged fealty to us so long ago." She waved her hand. "Honestly, it's all a bit silly and I'd hardly expect to hold you to such an agreement…"

"No…” Konatsu shook her head. "No… you honored your part of the agreement by helping me." She closed her eyes and swallowed. "I can't… things are still fuzzy… confused… but I know honor is important and my parents were honorable people. And if they chose to uphold this…” she looked back up at Himura, her eyes taking on a determined gleam "then so must I."

Himura raised an eyebrow, a bemused smirk on her lips. She nodded her head once. "If that is your wish… your help in my life would be sorely appreciated. But!" she held up a finger to forestall Konatsu's inquiry, "Later. Once you have recovered your strength to Mineko's satisfaction. Presuming she is agreeable?" Himura cocked her head, glancing at the girl.

Mineko nodded quickly. "Y-yes! Yes, I'll get Konatsu back on her feet for you, I promise, Himura!"
Himura grinned again. "Good. We've got a lot to discuss, the three of us. Rest up… I'll come see you both in a couple of days. I have some business to attend to."

Ryouga sighed as he leaned against the wall, waiting. His arms were crossed and his expression made it clear to most that he wasn't interested in talking.

He currently had a free period. Ukyou, Akane and Ranma had been shunted off to Home Economics, with much grumbling by Ranma, leaving Ryouga with a free period by himself. That generally meant standing wherever he was left and not moving from the spot until someone came to get him for fear he might end up somewhere outside of the school.

He tapped his foot and fidgeted. Most days he could simply meditate to pass the time, but it wasn't happening today. His thoughts were in a whirl and he couldn't focus enough to settle them.

"Got ditched again, Ryo?" A familiar voice asked.

Ryouga looked up to see Nabiki walking towards him. He sighed, closed his eyes and nodded. "The girls had home ec. I've got a free period. Nowhere to go."

"That must have burned for Ranma," Nabiki said, walking up to him and leaning against the wall next to him. "You wanna get out of here? I'm free too."

Ryouga exhaled heavily in relief. "Please. I'm going to go insane if I have to keep on counting floor tiles."

She smiled and offered her arm. At any other time Ryouga probably would have protested, or at least been a bit more shy about it, but he was already full up on anxiety from other things. He looped his arm through hers and let her lead him down the hall.

Nabiki raised an eyebrow at him as she made contact. "Woof. What's got you all churned up?"

Ryouga scowled. "Not having any privacy for my own thoughts, for one?"

Nabiki raised an eyebrow. "All right. Come on." She led him up the stairs without another word.

Ryouga winced. He had stuck his foot in his mouth again. He wasn't getting much of a sense that she was mad, but then again Nabiki was hard to read. Her emotional landscape tended to be guarded.

She took him up the stairs to the roof access, producing a key from her pocket and unlocking the fire door. She led him onto the roof then released his arm, walked over to a large industrial vent and leaned against it. "All right… Now we can talk," she said. "No contact, no Link. Better?"

Ryouga nervously rubbed the back of his head. "Uh… yeah. Look, sorry about…"

"She cut him off with a wave of her hand. "Don't. Trust me, wanting privacy in your own head is something I can understand. I've had Shampoo, Ranma and Ukyou second guessing me so far based on the Link and… while it's nice to be understood at times, there are also times you want to keep some stuff to yourself." She smiled. "Or at least get to decide what and how much you share."

Ryouga sighed and leaned back against the door, closing it behind him with a click. "Thank you."

Nabiki chuckled. "I'm pretty good at identifying needs. It's important for a mercenary, you know?" She sighed. "So… Did you want to talk about any of that stuff in your head? Last call before I claim
the floor because I could really use someone to talk to right now."

Ryouga blinked. "You need to talk?"

Nabiki looked away, appearing uncharacteristically shy. "Ryouga… I'm… in kind of over my head, on a lot of things right now. Everyone knows bits and pieces of it. Everyone owns a piece of it. Everyone except you. So… I guess I'm kind of hoping for an outsider's perspective." She swallowed nervously. "A-and… I'm also dreading it because… I'm pretty sure by this point you're neck deep with the rest of us, and I haven't told you anything."

"You're worried I'm gonna be mad?" Ryouga asked.

"I'm certain you're going to be mad," Nabiki replied. "I'm worried about how much of it will be aimed at me… and, to be honest, I probably deserve a lot of it. Most of it." She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "All of it, if I'm honest."

Ryouga swallowed. This behavior was so far removed from the Nabiki he knew that he was having trouble figuring out what to say. "L-look, Nabiki, I promise I won't get angry…"

"Don't make a promise you can't keep, Hibiki," Nabiki warned him sternly, then looked away again. "Look… I just got done talking this over with Kasumi this morning and… I realized I hadn't thought this through all the way. I'll just start at the beginning." She took a breath. "Himura Tanaka's family, specifically her grandfather, is in deep with the Yakuza. Like founding member deep. She's being groomed to be his eventual successor. When her Granddad found out that she was using his resources to mess with a bunch of high school students… he wasn't happy."

"So… he's going to put a stop to all of this?" Ryouga asked hopefully.

Nabiki shook her head. "No… He decided to make it a test. And worse? Apparently, because I outplayed Himura at the school assembly, I'm being tapped. So either she wins and can force Ranma to do who knows what… or I win and we're all forced to do who knows what." Nabiki closed her eyes. "Then… I was approached by a group of… well, let's just call them 'criminal social activists' - hackers and thieves with an agenda. I got into bed with them to try and find a way out… and they want me to help them torpedo Tanaka Pharmaceuticals itself. I've gotten so tangled up that no matter what I do I'm dancing to someone else's tune and pissing off people it's not healthy to piss off. Which would be fine if it was just me. But it's not. These people… all of them… they're the sorts who go after the people you care about. With guns, or with technology or with other things that you just can't fight with martial arts. So everyone I care about - my family, Ranma, Shampoo, Ukyou, you… maybe even Sayuri and the others… they're all on the hook for this." She laughed bitterly. "And the best plan I've got so far to get out of this…? Is to sell us all to the Amazons!" She rolled her head back and thumped it against the aluminum with a *Bang*.

Ryouga just stared at her for a moment. Funny thing about being stuck in your own head with no way out; Sometimes the only way that you could escape it was to be faced with someone else who needed help getting out of something even worse than you.

He pushed off the door and walked over to her. He gently gripped her by the shoulders, earning a startled look. He held her eyes and made sure she could sense his sincerity through the Link before he spoke.

"Then we take 'em all on," he said. "We've been in worse fixes before…"

"No… no we have not," Nabiki said firmly. "Ryouga… this could include your family too! They could go after your Mom if they think you're involved…"
"Then we don't let 'em!" Ryouga shot back. "You think I'm afraid just because we might lose? I've put my life on the line plenty of times in fights I didn't know I could win… hell, there were a few I was pretty sure I couldn't. Ranma, Ukyou, Shampoo, Akane… They're all the same. If it's important, they'll fight for it. And you are important."

Nabiki looked stricken. "Ryo… I don't think you understand…"

"You're saying I might die," Ryouga said. "You're saying Ranma might die, or Akane, or any of us or all of us. And… you're saying they might not stop with us. Right?" He set his jaw. "You think these are the only bad guys who ever resorted to that? If nobody is willing to take risks to stop them then they never stop. So… Don't try to get out of it. Don't run. Don't… don't do damage control. Do what makes everyone fear and respect Nabiki Tendo. Walk in to the middle of the fire without any fear and make them afraid of you."

She stared at him. Her jaw trembled a bit. "Ryouga, I'm… I'm just a high school student. I'm not…"

"You are everything you need to be for this," Ryouga said firmly. "You've stared down gods and demons and stuff that scared the hell out of me, because you always knew what to look for. And now you've got all of us at your back, so… I wanna be there when they get that look in their eyes."

He smiled. His own problems felt far away now. "Do you want to know why I was all anxious earlier? I was scared. Not of anything bad that might happen, but of something good. I was scared of losing the curse… the family curse. For the last… god, I don't even know… my whole life has been just one day. A string of just one day. Each day, everything I did was just to get through to the next. Sometimes it was easy. Sometimes it was hard. But I never had to worry about the future or make plans or get attached to anything, because I never had a future to plan, or a place I could stay even if I wanted to. My whole world was just what was in my pack and that one day I had to get through. My biggest and only plan was finding Ranma. It was simple and I could manage all of it. But now? You and Ranma and Tofu and the others… you're about to give me a future, a place, things to hold on to… and that scared the hell out of me. I was…" he chuckled and shook his head, "I was even considering backing out. Not seriously… I can't afford to. Mom needs this too badly. But it was enough for me to wish that I could and to think 'maybe the wandering wasn't so bad'. You're giving me a whole life and I don't know what to do with it and it scares the hell out of me." He released her shoulders and straightened. "But you just solved my problem for me. Figuring out my future? All those possibilities? That's… that's too much. I don't want it. I'm not made for that. But living for a cause? Dying for it? Bleeding for it? That's easy. That I know. And you've got a cause that needs someone to do just that. So I'll solve both our problems." He stepped back a pace and dropped to one knee, bowing his head. "Nabiki Tendo, I pledge myself to your service, and the service of Ranma Saotome, and your combined families. My life, my strength, and my… uhh… umbrella are yours to command."

Nabiki was silent for a few moments, her eyes wide. Then, a small smile and… tears? She hiccuped, which became a giggle.

"Ryouga, for the love of… get up off the ground. You look ridiculous!" she managed to say, covering her mouth and a smile. But at the same time, tears were still running down her cheeks.

He stood. He was a little concerned about the crying but he could sense, even from here, that what was driving it was relief. "I… uhh… guess that was a bit melodramatic of me…” He rubbed the back of his head and chuckled. "I guess I'll have to…"

Nabiki took advantage of his momentarily lowered guard to step in towards him, inside his reach, slip her arms around his neck and pull his head down for a kiss that immediately shorted out whatever he had been about to say and obliterate the notion from his mind.
Nabiki kept the kiss short and sweet. Ryouga had the sense that she didn't want him completely going incoherent, though recent events seemed to have built up his resistance a little. Still, he wasn't quite sure exactly where he was anymore. His perception of reality had narrowed down considerably to consist of very little more than the girl who was in his arms right now (When had he put his arms around her?) and who was looking up at him with something much closer to Nabiki Tendo's usual confidence, though it contrasted a bit with the tear stains along her cheeks.

"That was your own fault," she said softly.

"I… uhh… I… I… ummm…" Ryouga stammered. Some part of his brain was telling him he should really let go and step back. Another part was telling him he could probably get away with another kiss, judging from the look in her eyes and the sense of her surging through the Link. She was warm and close and fascinatingly complicated and she wanted him and that stoked a fire in him he had never felt before. But a third, nagging voice reminded him that she wasn't his, and that she belonged with someone he very much couldn't bear to hurt. The conflict kept him paralyzed.

"Thank you," she whispered. "Sometimes a girl likes to be saved… but do you know what's better? Being reminded that she can do the saving too. That she can save herself. That someone believes in her. And to know that you meant every word of that… honestly and without any sort of ulterior motive?" She pressed herself a bit closer. "Well… that's just plain arousing."

"I… we… probably shouldn't…" Ryouga managed to croak out, hating himself for every syllable.

"I know," Nabiki said softly. "Though… It'd be really nice to get back at my sister. But… you have some things to sort out with Ranma first." She gently pulled him a bit closer, until their foreheads were touching. "I want to make it clear though… I am going to hold you to every word of that… except with one change. You're not allowed to die of anything other than old age if you want to be with me. Got it?"

"I… uhh… I think that's a price I'm willing to pay…" Ryouga managed. He even managed a lopsided smile though it felt a bit insane to him. He should have been a gibbering wreck, and an incoherent mess bleeding out from the nostrils and making a fool of himself.

*She believes in me too,* he realized. It wasn't Akari's blind faith, or Anna's misapplied belief in a hero that he wasn't. Nabiki knew him, knew what a mess he was, knew all of his flaws and mistakes. And she believed in him anyway. That knowledge was keeping him anchored in the moment. *I was always afraid before,* he thought. He wondered how long it had been since he had simply been happy like this - without the ever present fear of it being taken away.

But there was still that one reminder needling the back of his mind.

"I feel… like I'm betraying Ranma a bit here…" he murmured. It was a bit of a struggle to get the words out. He wanted to simply enjoy the feeling of the moment a bit longer.

"You're not," Nabiki replied. "Not yet, anyway." She smirked. "And I'm just as guilty. But I'm greedy. I think you're someone Ranma needs in her life. And I think you're someone I need. You're certainly someone I want. So… I'll push a little, if it will help you two sort things out. Then I can have you both."

"Should… Should I go…" Ryouga shifted, gesturing at the door.

"No… not right now. Ukyou wanted to talk with Ranma alone and I think we should probably save this last resolution until we've got your curse out of the way. Besides…" her smile widened and she gave him a playful look, "What's the rush?"
Ah, THERE'S the terror. Ryouga swallowed. "I… uhh… I thought we weren't…?"

"Oh, not that," Nabiki smirked. She slipped away from him and reached into her bag to pull something out. She turned and raised an eyebrow, hefting a camera in her hand. "Still want to learn about photography?"

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Ranma slid the tray of cookies out of the oven smoothly, nodding in satisfaction at the golden brown color. Even color, not burned at the edges, nice shape… She set the tray on the counter to cool, pulled off the oven mitts and sighed heavily.

What the hell am I doing? she thought, staring at the cookies.

It would be easier if she hated this, or if she were out of her mind in tea ceremony lala land, puttering around 'making goodies for the boys' or some of the other nonsense that she usually spouted whenever there was some kind of magical personality alteration involved.

But she wasn't out of her mind, and she didn't hate this. It had just become another kata, like math problems had become. It was like she had started applying that method to everything, whether she wanted to learn it or not. And… there had been a kind of zen to it. Before she had always cooked for some ulterior motive or goal, but this time it had just been to cook.

"Something wrong, sugar?" Ukyou leaned against her counter. Ukyou had finished her own cooking early, even while coaching Akane with hers. There were no handy 'Greek Cookie' Recipes lying about, so Akane was back to form and needed supervision for most of the class, leaving Ranma to her own devices.

"I'm just… having another small identity crisis, Ucchan," Ranma sighed, gathering her recently washed utensils to put away. "Sorta… worried about how far this whole 'girl side' thing has gone, you know?"

"What, cookies are enough to get you off-kilter now? It's not even like it's the first time you've baked cookies," Ukyou replied. She glanced sidelong at the cookies.

"Yeah, but… always been some purpose to it before," Ranma grumped. "That always used to distract me. I guess having a reason for it made it okay to enjoy myself doing it?"

"Cooking isn't exactly a female-only profession, sugar. Unless you wanna say that to my Dad and pretty much my entire family?" Ukyou reached for one of the cookies. "You just like being good at things, and you're naturally good at cooking."

Ranma rapped Ukyou on the knuckles with a wooden spoon. "Wait for them to cool. You know better than that!"

Ukyou scowled and shook her hand. "Geez, you're as strict as the girls in my old middle school!"

"You weren't baking?" Ranma raised an eyebrow.

Ukyou shrugged. "I was attending as a boy, remember? And the school wasn't exactly progressive if you get my meaning. I wanted to cook, but boys were supposed to wait outside and beg for treats from the girls. Say what you want about Furinkan, but at least it's my choice if I wanna take cooking or shop class."

"Wait… then why did they say I had to take cooking if I was registered as a girl!?" Ranma protested,
gesturing at the cookie tray.

"Because the Principal is messing with you and he probably figured changing out your course load for a bunch of 'girly' classes would make you crack," Ukyou replied. This time she managed to move fast enough to snag a warm cookie while Ranma was distracted. She winked and took a bite. "Honestly, the best revenge you can get on him is actually enjoying yourself..." She immediately opened her mouth and fanned with her hand due to the high temperature of the molten chocolate chips.

"I did warn you," Ranma said. "Okay, maybe cooking isn't the example I thought it was. But..."

"This is about this morning, isn't it?" Ukyou jumped in.

Ranma scowled and crossed her arms tightly over her chest and looked away. "L-look, I said that wasn't what it looked like..."

"We know, Ranma," Ukyou replied, putting a hand on the redhead's shoulder. "Ryouga was warm, and you're a little heat vampire. Besides... you worry too much about what other people think about all of this."

"Y-yeah, well... losing face is something pops said I gotta avoid..." Ranma said weakly.

"And your father would know anything about that?" Ukyou said, giving Ranma a bemused look.

"I... I just don't wanna give anyone the wrong idea, is all!" Ranma huffed. Her cheeks were burning and she hated that she couldn't get it under control.

Ukyou sighed and shook her head. "Ranma... do you know why nobody woke you guys up until breakfast was ready?"

"I'm guessing you found me and Ryo snuggled up amusing," Ranma grumbled, putting the rest of the things away in the drawer with more force than was strictly necessary.

"No... well, yes, but mostly..." Ukyou walked up behind her and put a hand on her shoulder. "We could sense through the Link that you felt safe. We know... I know... that's a rare feeling for you. We didn't want to take that away."

"I'm not... like that, okay, Ukyou?" Ranma said, resisting the urge to slam the drawer, and forcing herself to close it with exaggerated care to avoid drawing attention to herself. Her hand was shaking.

Ukyou's eyes narrowed. "Care to explain to me what you mean by that, sugar?"

"Careful," Ukyou said, a warning tone entering her voice. "Because I am 'Like That'. I like boys and girls, and depending on the day my preference about which one I want to be changes too. And I was under the impression you were too. So... care to explain what 'Like That' even means in this context?"

"I..." Ranma started, then trailed off. "I don't know, okay? I know... I know on some level I can get my parents to be okay with all of this... with all of you. But... but Ryo? That's..." She squeezed her eyes shut. "That's a line."

"So... this isn't about how you feel about him, this is about holding onto some hope that your parents will one day accept you, huh?" Ukyou said. She scowled. "Sugar, give it up."
"How can I?" Ranma hissed. She glanced around, but no one was paying attention to them. "I'm supposed to save the Saotome family line. I'm supposed to revive our martial arts legacy and become the Grand Master of Anything Goes Martial Arts. I'm supposed to be a Man amongst Men… even if it's just a show!" She huffed in frustration. "You wouldn't understand…"

Ukyou grabbed her shoulder and turned her to look at her with a bit of force, startling Ranma. Her eyes were cold and angry.

"Don't tell me I wouldn't understand about living up to family expectations, Saotome!" She said harshly. She closed her eyes, took a breath, and calmed herself. She opened them again, some of the hardness gone. "Listen to me, Ranma… when you and your Dad ran off? I blamed a lot of my troubles on that, but the truth was the engagement was just my Dad trying to 'save face'. Even back then he knew I wasn't 'right' in his eyes. I acted more like a son, dressed like a boy, talked like a boy… he knew I wasn't going to be a 'good wife'. So he tried to sell me off to your father like I was damaged goods. And then when that failed? He gave up on me. And do you want to know the stupidest part? It was all because he wanted a son."

Ranma blinked. "I thought… I mean, isn't that why you…?"

Ukyou looked down. "Don't get me wrong… I wanted to be that son for him. More than anything. Even before I met you. But… That wasn't enough for Dad. He made do with his tomboy daughter for a while, but… In his mind I couldn't be what he wanted me to be. I couldn't be his true heir. And it turns out he couldn't trade me in to get the heir he wanted, so…" she shrugged, "he gave up. Packed up one day and headed off to a monastery somewhere. Said he couldn't live with the shame of it."

"Ucchan… God, I'm sorry…" Ranma said softly.

"Don't be," Ukyou shook her head. "That's not the point. The point is Ranma… you can't be what your parents want you to be if that's not what you are. No matter how much you want to be."

Ranma looked at her. "But…" she trailed off, "but…" She clenched her fist, then relaxed it. "It's not right."

Ukyou's eyebrows shot up. "Seriously, Ranma?"

"No, not…!" Ranma said quickly. "I don't mean because… because he's a guy and…" She swallowed nervously. "I mean because… don't you think he deserves to be with a real girl? A-and not one who's already shared four ways?"

Ukyou frowned at her. "That's a stupid argument, Ranma. By that logic Akane shouldn't be with you because she deserves a real girl. Or me."

Ranma felt an odd lurch. Selfish… a little voice whispered in the back of her mind. It sounded oddly like her mother's voice. "Well… maybe you shouldn't," Ranma said heavily. "Sometimes… sometimes I don't get why you are. If I can't be what my parents want, how am I supposed to be what you want, huh?!"

The shock was obvious on Ukyou's face, and Ranma felt a pang of guilt. "Ranma, that's not… We want you! Not… not…"

"Wasn't always like that, though," Ranma replied. "Maybe it still isn't, huh? Akane and Ryo want a girl, you want a trans, Shampoo wants a breeder, and Nabiki wants an action movie star. Maybe I ain't ever gonna be all of those things. Maybe I won't be any of 'em. What then, huh? What if one
day the curse goes away? Or… or… it did something and I can't have kids? Or…"

"Ranma…" Ukyou stepped forward and took her by the shoulders. "We'll deal with any of that if and when it happens, okay? But… You can't live your life around trying to account for who you *might* be in the future. Just be who you are now… that's all we want from you."

There was a yelp from the other side of the room, and a *fwoosh* as flames leapt up from one of the ovens.

"Oh crap, I left Akane too long!" Ukyou said. "Uhhh… we'll talk more later, okay Ranma?" She released Ranma's shoulders and raced past her towards the fire as Akane started hosing down the flaming oven with a fire extinguisher.

Ranma watched. The fire was already dying down and seemed to be under control without her. The girls could take care of themselves perfectly well without her, of course.

"Yeah… okay, Ucchan." Ranma said softly to herself. "We'll talk later."

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"Anything?" Hiroshi asked in a tired voice. He was slumped over on a table littered with file folders, index cards and discarded wrappers.

"Nothing," Yuka sighed, carefully putting the papers back in the file, and dropping it on top of a somewhat precarious stack. They had given up on carefully re-filing the dossiers sometime after noon, when the prospect of spending another uncomfortable night sleeping on the floor loomed.

"This is a mess," Daisuke said, leaning back from the microfiche reader and rubbing his eyes. "Most of these files aren't sorted and are crammed so full of irrelevant crap you can't tell who's actually *in* the family!"

"Well, it's not like they *use* these files anymore," Yuka replied off-handedly. "I don't think they've even updated these files in ten years."

"Great. We've got nothing to report, and we can't even *report* that we've got nothing to report because there's no flippin' cell service this deep in the catacombs…" Hiroshi tossed his useless cell phone onto the table.

"We should take a break," Yuka said with a sigh. "What have we got left for food?"

"Well, I've got a few cups of instant ramen," Daisuke replied, digging through his pack.

"Oh?" Yuka asked. "Did you happen to bring a microwave or kettle to heat the water with?"

"Ummm…"

Yuka slapped her forehead.

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Kodachi slowly turned the envelope over in her hands. The wax seal was broken - she had read the contents thoroughly and returned them to the envelope. Now she was lounging in one of the soft chairs of the main study, regarding the letter in the flickering firelight. The paper was coarse and cheap, the envelope plain and unadorned, save her name. There was no perfume or gold embroidery. It was an attempt to ape the customs of the aristocracy by someone who utterly lacked any
understanding of them.

"You have been staring at that envelope for over an hour, dear sister," Tatewaki said, walking in bearing a tray with a tea kettle and two cups. He set it down on the stand next to her and began pouring tea for both of them.

"There are servants for bringing us tea, dear brother," she said off-handedly, not shifting her gaze from the envelope.

"I find peaceful contemplation in making tea," Tatewaki replied.

"You steep it too long. I vastly prefer the tea Ling makes," Kodachi groused, though she accepted the cup and took a sip.

"Not attending school today, sister?" Tatewaki asked, not rising to take the bait.

"It would be… awkward," Kodachi said, turning the envelope over again.

"Are you perhaps finally willing to tell me what is in this mysterious envelope you have been worrying all day?" Tatewaki asked as he sat in the chair across from her with his own teacup.

Kodachi scowled. While her brother finally being on proper medication made him far less odious to deal with… and indeed almost pleasant at times… it had also made him that much harder to misdirect. She sighed. As the legal head of the Kuno family, I do suppose I would have to discuss this with him at some point. She flicked the letter over to him. "Here. Indulge your curiosity. It was delivered yesterday by my Darling Ranma's father, according to Sasuke."

He caught the letter, opened it and pulled out the letter inside. She watched the play of emotions across his face as he read; He might be much less prone to outbursts now but he was still very much the open book.

"I… suppose congratulations are in order," he said carefully, folding the letter once more. "Presuming this is what you really want?"

Kodachi smiled. "If you mean being wed to my Darling Ranma? Yes, of course, don't be foolish," she scoffed. She took a deep breath. "However… the… circumstances of that marriage concern me."

"You mean the stories we have heard of Ranma Saotome's family, the treatment of his sister and his mother's apparent plans for your offspring," Tatewaki said, closing the envelope and handing it back.

Kodachi scowled and nearly snatched it from his fingers. "You needn't be so glib, brother dear. Yes, all of that concerns me." She regarded the envelope wistfully. "As much as I want a chance to finally be with my Darling Ranma, the idea of being beholden to that woman for it irks me. I would have my love choose me as his rightful bride of his own free will… or at least by a machination of my choosing. This… barbaric contract that she holds over his head offends my sensibilities!"

She paused, expecting the usual retort about her own 'flexible' morals, but Tatewaki merely nodded.

"What do you wish to do about it, then?" Tatewaki asked.

"I'm not certain," Kodachi said softly. "My first impulse is to accept, swoop in and spirit my Darling away, and leave the wretched woman pining for the grandchildren she will never see. But I worry dear Ranma would still feel bound by that ridiculous contract. And if I tip my hand that I'm aware of it, I worry about reprisals towards my dear Ran." Her eyes narrowed. "As much as I am loathe to admit it, I am… considering entreating Nabiki Tendo for her assistance."
Tatewaki's eyebrows rose. "Does she not have a claim on Ranma Saotome as well?"

"Yes, which is why I am only considering it at the moment," Kodachi growled. "She and the other harridans hounding my love are entirely too friendly with each other. The moment word of my victory slips to one, they will all know." She sighed sadly. "They will protest; perhaps mount a 'rescue'... and my moment of triumph will be ruined, just as every other moment with my Darling has been."

"Yet you still consider it?" Tatewaki asked, curious.

"What good is my victory if it's in name only? If he remains a slave to another, even his own mother?" She crushed the envelope in her hand. "I will not make such a Faustian bargain! My Darling Ranma will be mine... solely mine... or not at all! But either way he will not belong to that woman one moment longer than necessary!"

"I see," Tatewaki smiled. "It is good to see the fire in your eyes, sister." He stood and walked over, surprising her with a kiss to her forehead. "Whatever you decide, I will support you. Do what you must."

Kodachi blinked. She hadn't expected Tatewaki to oppose her of course, but neither had she expected him to offer support. Normally he would want to be left out of whatever plans she had for Ranma. "And what price your support, brother? Or do you feel this will endear you to your beloved Akane Tendo? Or that perhaps Ran would see merit in you for facilitating her brother's happiness?"

Tatewaki winced visibly and she felt the odd, rare pang of guilt.

He gave her a weak smile. "Call it... the first step of my penance. There was once a time where you did not have cause to believe me so... mercenary. Perhaps I can make some small progress toward earning that sort of trust once more. At the very least, I can make amends in some way for the behaviour that caused me to lose it in the first place."

Kodachi considered. Part of her wanted to deride him for acting and sounding so weak but... sincere support was something she sorely needed now. Do I dare trust your newfound sanity this far, brother?

"I... will let you know when I've decided then," she said finally.

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The walk to the hospital after school did little to ease Ryouga's apprehension. What if this doesn't work? he thought, his mind whirling through dark fantasies of doom and despair. What if this makes it worse? What if... if it SPREADS? Doc Hirano said my ki was keeping that from happening, but if we suppress my ki, then what?

He felt a nudge at his side. He looked down to his right and saw that Ranma was walking next to him, hands jammed into her pockets. She had just nudged him with her elbow.

"You're projecting," Ranma muttered, eyes on the pavement ahead of her. "I can feel it, like, five feet away from you."

"Sorry..." Ryouga replied, unconsciously mimicking her as he jammed his own hands in his pockets. "I'm just... nervous."

"Oh yeah? About what?" Ranma asked.
Ryouga chuckled softly. "Stupid stuff. Just… worried about what happens if this doesn't work. Curses don't go away easily. We've both got experience with that."

"Yeah…" Ranma replied. "Uhh… hey, Ryo… You don't… I mean… about the Jusenkyo curses… Do you think they'll… last?" She glanced up at him.

Ryouga blinked. "What do you mean?"

"I mean… we've only had them a couple of years, right?" Ranma said. "The springs are a flooded mess and we haven't messed with any magic for a while. I was just thinking… the whole dragon whisker thing - that wore off after a while. Do you think the same thing might happen with the Jusenkyo curses?"

Ryouga frowned. "Y'know… I never even really considered that. But… I don't think it's on the same level." He shrugged. "Your dragon whisker only wore off because the whisker expired, right? And doesn't that thing have a shelf life of something like 4,000 years?"

Ranma's eyes widened. "Oh yeah, I forgot that part…"

"And that's for a stupid hair restorative," Ryouga continued. "Jusenkyo… well, that's a whole other level, right? I mean, look at my directional curse. It's been in my family for something like 500 years and it's as strong as ever."

"You mean… we might pass our curses onto our kids?" Ranma suddenly looked nervous. She rubbed her chin. "No… no, the Musk used Jusenkyo to turn animals into women to become their wives."

"And then they locked them with the ladle. Herb seemed to be pretty convinced it was lifelong." Ryouga shrugged. "Like I said, curses don't go easy. Something as powerful as Jusenkyo probably can't be cured by anything."

Ranma sighed and seemed to relax. "That's a relief."

Ryouga raised an eyebrow. He opened his mouth, then shut it, deciding that was a rabbit hole he didn't want to go down.

"I'm surprised you don't have a stronger opinion, Ryo," Nabiki said, suddenly appearing to his left and looping her arm through his. "Don't you have a preference?"

"Urk." Ryouga shot her a look of panicked betrayal, then glanced at Ranma, who was giving him an apprehensive look.

He closed his eyes and forced his panic down. He could sense Nabiki through the contact of her arm and got the sense that she wasn't trying to sabotage him… but give that 'push' she had been talking about. Just be honest, Ryouga.

"I… uhh…" He rubbed the back of his head. "L-look… Ranma is Ranma. She shouldn't have to pick just one if she doesn't want to."

"Yes, but this isn't about Ranma picking one, this is about which form you prefer." Nabiki nudged him in the ribs with her elbow. She frowned and nodded towards Ranma.

She wants me to say I like her as a girl? Ryouga glanced at Nabiki, then back at Ranma. I mean… I DO, but… but that's not all of it… Arrgh, how do I say this right?
"Well?" Ranma prodded. "C'mon, Ryo… this is getting weird. Just say it, okay?" She scuffed her shoe on the ground. "I mean… it's not really a big deal, is it?"


"There, see? Was that so…" Nabiki said, but Ryouga held up his hand.

"I'm not finished," he said. "That's hard for me to say because I like Ranma. Not just girl-Ranma. Ranma the person. I prefer her as a girl because she's cute, but… Her being cute isn't why I like Ranma. It's just… a bonus." He relaxed. "There. Happy?"

He doubled over as a fist slammed into his midsection, driving the air out of his lungs.

"Pervert," Ranma muttered, cracking her knuckles as she walked away.

Ryouga groaned and sank to his knees. "What… was I supposed to say?" he wheezed.

Nabiki crouched next to him, patting his shoulder sympathetically. "No, no, that was beyond perfect, Ryouga. I'm kind of impressed. I don't think I could have worded it better myself!"

Ryouga turned his head to glare at her, his arms still cradling his wounded midsection. "Yeah, thanks a bunch, Nabiki. Remind me why I trusted you to help me with this?"

Nabiki winked and whispered. "Because I'm a fantastic kisser? And also… because our little redhead just stalked out of here with a blush and struggling to hide a grin that might just crack her face."

"That was the good outcome?" Ryouga gasped as Nabiki helped him to his feet.

"She didn't even go for the face. Trust me, she ate that up. Most of what Ranma has learned about being a girl has come from Akane, Ukyou and Shampoo. 'Tsundere' barely covers it." Nabiki slipped his arm across her shoulders to help steady him. "Now come on and see if you can muster some more of that charm. The blood loss will be worth it."

"I'm never going to survive this... " he moaned.

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Ranma had just about recovered her composure by the time they stepped through the doors of the hospital. Her hand still hurt from the punch. Stupid Ryouga... stupid concrete gut... stupid... STUPID! Why did he hafta say all that weird stuff, huh?

Because you told him it was okay.

Shut UP! Shutupshutupshutup! She thwacked the side of her temple with the heel of her hand to knock the voice loose.

He said he likes you.

That's not what he meant! Ranma howled mentally at the infuriating voice. Why did it sound so much like her? He likes... her like the girl in the mirror! He likes the girl I look like!

That's not what he said.

"Shut up!" Ranma barked out loud.
"Ranma?" Shampoo asked, putting a hand on her shoulder. "Shampoo not say anything…"

"What? No, not you, Shampoo. It's just… I… Ever get a song stuck in your head and it won't go away? Even though you really don't want to hear it?" Ranma replied hastily. "It's like that."

"Aiya! Shampoo have same problem! Is ad for Sapporo Ichiban too?" Shampoo asked.

Ranma frowned. "No… but now that's stuck up there too. Thanks."

"Shampoo! I just got rid of that stupid jingle!" Akane whined. "Now my head is full of noodle-selling cowboys!" Her stomach growled. "And I'm hungry!"

"Actually, why don't we take care of that?" Nabiki said, clapping her hands. She glanced at Ukyou and gave her a meaningful nod when the others weren't looking.

"Uhhh… yeah… we should… uhh… check out the vending machines?" Ukyou said, giving Nabiki a quizzical look.

"Actually, I was thinking more the cafeteria," Nabiki replied. "I heard they do a great… great…" she struggled, then sighed, "Okay, fine, it's hospital food, so it'll be awful. But I'm hungry and I'm buying, so let's go."

Ranma perked up. "You're buying, Nabiki? Have I told you lately how much I love you?"

"Not you," Nabiki said, pointing sternly at Ranma. Then she pointed at Ryouga. "And not you, either! You need to stay put, sign us in and wait for Doctor Hirano."

"What?! But… but why?" Ranma's eyes misted up with tears that weren't entirely fake.

"We'll… bring you back something, Ranchan. I promise," Ukyou said. She helped Nabiki herd Shampoo and Akane down the hall.

Ryouga shook his head and sighed. "Here, I've got a few yen. Maybe you can get something from the vending machine to tide you over." He dug into his pocket and produced the few coins he had been holding onto and handed them over reluctantly.

Ranma beamed at him in a remarkably decent impression of Akane's 1000 Megawatt smile. "Thank you, Ryo!" She clutched the coins to her chest and then scampered off to the vending machines by the door.

"Yeah… I'll just… do the paperwork…" Ryouga glanced at the front desk and sighed.

Ranma grinned as she stared through the glass of the vending machine, trying to decide what to pick. "Hmmm… something sweet… hmm, chocolate maybe?" She blinked. "Oooh, there's Pocky! I can…" she trailed off as she suddenly remembered the 'game' that was sometimes played between a boy and girl with Pocky, "Aheh… no, maybe not. Something else, then… Definitely something else… Chocolate… chocolate…"

She glanced up towards the reception desk, considering asking Ryouga to come help her decide. He was still over by the desk, but the receptionist…

It wasn't the usual bitter, middle-aged woman. The nurse manning the station was young, attractive and leaning over the desk far too close to Ryouga, ostensibly to help him fill in the forms. She was smiling far more than Ranma liked, as well.
And then he smiled back.

It was one of his clueless, goofy smiles, too. The one that told her that he was well aware of just how pretty the nurse was.

Ranma didn't take her eyes off them as she stabbed the buttons on the control panel, then snatched up the Pocky that dropped out. That's MINE!

She stalked over to the desk. As she did she calmed her outer demeanor, though she was still seething inside.

"I can't believe you don't remember me!" The nurse poked Ryouga's shoulder playfully. "I was working your floor both times you were brought in!"

"Yeah… aeh… well… bad memory?" Ryouga said nervously. He looked like he was trying to focus on the form. "Are… you sure you need my phone number on this?"

"We need a contact number, naughty boy," she said with a wink. "For emergency use only, of course. Unless you want to write it out a second time on the notepad for me."

Ryouga swallowed.

"Ryo! Darling!" Ranma latched onto Ryouga's arm, trilling in her cutest cutesy voice. "Where did you run off to?"

"Gah!" Ryouga started badly. He relaxed slightly when he saw that it was Ranma, but then tensed up again as he noticed the look in her eyes. "Uhhh… hi, Ranma! I was just… y'know… Forms… paperwork…"

"Oh! You're the little redhead who came in with Mr. Hibiki the second time," the nurse said. "I'm Reiko. Are you Mr. Hibiki's little sister?"

Ranma's right eye twitched. She hugged Ryoga's arm a little tighter and puffed out her chest. "I'm his fiancee. And I'm pretty sure I got a few inches on you, sweetheart."

Reiko raised an eyebrow. She smirked and folded her arms, leaning across the desk on them. "Really? Hard to tell in that schoolgirl outfit. I can check, though. I'm pretty sure we got your measurements when we were cleaning you up. I couldn't help but notice that poor Mr. Hibiki took the worst of whatever happened. How very gallant of him! I imagine a little thing like you would have been torn to shreds."

"I'll tear SOMETHING to shreds…" Ranma growled under her breath. She decided to change her approach, fishing out the Pocky and shearing the top off the box in one quick motion. "Look, Ryo dear… I got Pocky!" She fished out one of the chocolate coated cookie sticks and put the very tip in her teeth, holding it with light pressure as she stood on her tiptoes, offering the other end to him. "Want one?"

Ryouga's eyes widened with panic. "Y'knowI'vebeentryingtocutbacktoomanyssweetsdon'twanttogetfatRannawhattheHellsiswrongwithyou!?" He hissed the last part.

Some part of Ranma's brain prickled, trying to alert her that maybe this wasn't the best way to approach things, but she wasn't listening. Instead she twitched the Pocky stick in her teeth and gave him her best seductive look. "C'mon P-chan… C'mon c'mon c'mooooon!"
Reiko blinked, then straightened and sat back in her chair giggling. "Oh my God, the Pocky Game?! You two are just too precious!"

Ranma's attention immediately swivelled back to the nurse, who was lounging back in the chair and crossing her long legs. Ranma had a moment of hesitation as she realized that the nurse's miniskirt was quite short. She snapped up the Pocky stick in one bite. "H-hey…! I don't see you doing any better!"

Reiko smirked. She sat up, fished a pen from her breast pocket, pulled out a business card and wrote something on the back. She then held it out to Ranma. "Here. You two seem like a lot of fun. You've got some fire to you and it's been forever since I've found a nice couple to play with."

Ranma blinked and accepted the card. On the back was a phone number.

"Just don't tell my boss, okay? He gets uptight about me propositioning patients." She stretched, stood up and picked up the clipboard with the half-complete paperwork on it. "Don't worry about the paperwork, sweetie. I've got all your info from the last two times you were here. I do hope the next time I see the two of you things are a little less formal though." She winked and walked around the desk, her heels clicking as she strode down the hall.

Ryouga and Ranma both blinked and watched her go.

"What just happened?" Ryouga asked.

Ranma squinted at the phone number on the card, confused, until something clicked and her eyes widened. "Don't tell Nabiki."

"Don't tell Nabiki what?" Ryouga asked. "What did she give you, anyway?"

"Don't tell Nabiki!" Ranma repeated. She shoved the open box of Pocky into his hands. "J-just… shut up and have some Pocky!"

"I… I don't… What?" Ryouga said uncertainly.

Ranma swiped a handful of the Pocky from the box and crammed them into his mouth, then snatched the half empty box back. "Oh shut up, let's just go sit."

"Mmmrf mmrr mmr mff," Ryouga replied and followed her obediently. He sat down heavily on one of the plastic chairs and started chewing.

"Hmpf… You should know better than to go all dopey just because a pretty girl smiles at you. Don't you have enough pretty girls around you these days?" Ranma pulled out a Pocky stick and bit it angrily.

"I wasn't… Look, you told me to go fill out the paperwork! She was the receptionist! What was I supposed to tell her?" Ryouga replied as he swallowed his mouthful of cookie stick.

"How about that you're married!?" Ranma shot back.

Ryouga coughed, choking on a remnant of Pocky. Her thumped his chest. "What?!!"

"I mean… Technically," Ranma folded her arms and huffed. "Until we get that sorted out, it's… it's just not right for you to… to… to flirt with any pretty girl you see!"

Ryouga was silent for a moment. Then a slow smile spread across his face. He leaned forward,
resting his elbows on his knees. "You're jealous."

"What?!" Ranma squeaked. "Why would I be jealous of you?! Get me a little hot water and that Nurse wouldn't even look twice at you!"

"Not what I meant," Ryogya replied. "You're jealous of her."

Ranma flushed red, another indignant squeak escaping. "I am not, you pig-headed, pig-for-brains… pig!"

"Your insults get repetitive when you're lying," Ryogya replied with confidence. "How many times did you call Akane 'Uncute' because you couldn't think of anything better, huh?"

"I… you… you!" Ranma grit her teeth, staring daggers at him.

"Look, you can't just pull out the 'we're married' card when it suits you!" Ryogya said. "I'm probably doing your fiancees a favor on this. You're either married or you're not. Married girls don't flirt with soda jerks for free ice cream, they don't vamp the guys at the beach for free treats and they don't stick their spouses with the jobs they don't wanna do. So pick." He sat up and crossed his arms. "You can be jealous, or you can be single."

"You can't be serious!" Ranma huffed.

"I totally am!" Ryogya shot back, closing his eyes and raising his chin. "Gimme the card, or give me a Pocky."

"Why do you want the card?!" Ranma yelped. "Don't tell me you're actually…?!"

Ryogya scowled. "No, of course not! That'd be… Look, I want it because it's none of your damn business! Weren't you talking about how I needed to find a girlfriend?"

"Then find a girlfriend, not a hookup, you sleaze!" Ranma gripped the card tighter.

Ryogya gave her an exasperated look. "I'm not… It's the principal of the thing! Besides… Reiko seems like a nice girl…"

"Ryogya!"

He shrugged and leaned back, looking away as he stretched his arms across the chairs. "You're jealous, then."

"I am not!"

"I'm sick of being jerked around, Ranma," Ryogya shot back indignantly. "Card or Pocky. Pick one."

Ranma glared at him, then thrust the box in his direction.

"Uh uh," Ryogya shook his head. "With your mouth."

Ranma froze. "You can't be serious."

"You were gonna do it in front of Reiko, weren't you?" He locked eyes with her, challenging her. Finally, he broke the stare, rolled his eyes and sat back. "Look, this is stupid, Ranma. You get all jealous and competitive and you do stuff like this and it's frustrating because you don't really mean any of it, and you won't admit you're doing it! You can't keep holding onto me if you
don't actually want me, so… just gimme the card. I'll tear it up if you want, I just want you to let go of this stupid…" He grunted as something dropped into his lap.

He blinked and looked down to see Ranma had sat herself across his legs. Her blue eyes were flashing with defiance and she had a slightly cracked Pocky clenched between her teeth.

"What are you doing?" Ryouga squeaked.

"I thought you wanted Pocky?" Ranma said. She was blushing and, though she was scowling, she was also shaking slightly. "Here it is. Take it already."

Ryouga's looked around wildly, but no one seemed to be taking notice of what was going on. "You can't be serious!" he hissed.

Ranma scowled. "That's my line!" She swallowed. Her heart was thudding in her chest and she did not feel any of the defiant front she was putting up.

Ryouga just stared at her a moment. Then, slowly, he reached out and took her by the shoulders. For a moment, she was afraid he was actually going to do it, but instead he seemed to just be studying her.

"I… Look, I'm sorry," he said, bowing his head. "I'm… it's complicated and I've got no right to push like that. I'm not even sure what I hoping for."

Ranma slowly reached up and took the Pocky from her mouth. "You… wanted the card, then?"

"No!" Ryouga said, with more vehemence than strictly necessary. "I…" He sighed in frustration. "I guess… I'm just sick of not knowing where I stand with you. Or where I could stand. I don't know what I am to you anymore."

"I… you're…" Ranma stammered. She frowned. It was an easy question. It should be an easy question! It was obvious to her, right? Nothing had changed! He was… he was… "You're… You're Ryouga."

Ryouga gave her a sad look and sighed heavily. "You're the only one who knows what that means, Ranma. If you even do?"

"W-well… what do you even want to be to me, huh?" Ranma shot back. "You keep acting like you're on the edge of telling me something… just tell me!"

"It's not that simple!" Ryouga replied tightly.

"Well it's not that simple for me, either!" Ranma retorted.

"I'm… sorry, am I interrupting something?"

"AAAHHHHHH!" Ranma and Ryouga yelped in unison. Ranma tumbled over backwards off of Ryouga's lap, landing awkwardly on her neck on the floor as Ryouga tried to scramble up. Ryouga stumbled, shoes slipping on the freshly waxed floor, then landed heavily back in his seat.

Doctor Hirano gave them both a quizzical look. "I… can come back if you both need a few minutes?"

"No, we're fine!" Ryouga said quickly.

"Everything is fine!" Ranma scrambled to her feet, dusting herself off.
"We're fine here," Ryouga added.

"How are you?" Ranma finished, plastering a big smile across her face.

Doctor Hirano raised an eyebrow. "I… am ready for you and your friends now. If you could gather them we can begin the procedure."

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"Before we begin, I wish to state that I am still rather… hesitant to proceed with this whole scenario," Dr. Hirano said as he paced before the group. "Normally I wouldn't even dream of proceeding so quickly and recklessly, but my colleague…" he shot an annoyed look at Dr. Tofu, who looked away awkwardly, "appears to have elected to override my concerns and proceed anyway." He looked at the group of them appraisingly. "And you claim you are now all connected through this Link, yes?"

Ranma nodded, taking the lead. "Yeah. We think that if we get enough of us working together, we can flush that curse right outta Ryo's system."

Dr. Hirano sighed heavily, took off his glasses and started methodically polishing the lenses. "You do realize there is absolutely no basis in observed fact to support that hypothesis, yes? That there is no precedent, either in medical science or the extensive homeopathic documentation that Dr. Tofu has provided?"

"I mean… well, there's gotta be a first time, right Doc?" Ranma said with a grin.

Dr. Hirano put his glasses back on and gave Ranma such a stern glare that she found herself withering under it. "Yes. A first! A single first, under controlled conditions where the factors are known and understood! We have barely progressed to the stage of proving that all of this… this level of physics actually even exists! This is all firsts, and to proceed under these conditions is incredibly dangerous and irresponsible!" His glare shifted to Dr. Tofu, who also wilted visibly under it. "Especially for someone who has ostensibly sworn to uphold the Hippocratic Oath!"

"Doctor, we understand you're uncomfortable with this, but we're short of time," Nabiki said. "We have no idea how long Ryouga's mother has without a Link of her own. We're willing to take some risks to find a solution for her before it's too late."

"Some risks, perhaps," Dr. Hirano replied. "However, I find very little in this that is not risk!"

"If healer no help, we go to Great Grandmother, find other way!" Shampoo said, stepping up behind Nabiki and putting a supportive hand on her shoulder.

Dr. Hirano clenched his fists and took a deep breath, closing his eyes. He visibly forced himself to relax. "And it is the assurances of my colleague that you will proceed anyway, with or without proper medical supervision, that is the sole reason I am electing to participate in this… this ritual," he said tightly. "However, I will not trade six lives for one! Or a dozen, or a hundred! If, at any point, I deem that any of you are in danger, I will terminate this experiment and there will not be another. Is that perfectly clear?"

Ryouga swallowed. "Y-yeah, Doc, we got it."

"I am not finished," he replied sternly. "And… and regardless of the outcome, the six of you are going to agree to participate in a proper medical study of this phenomenon! One that is conducted with proper scientific rigors, controls, and precautions, and this… connection you have created between yourselves is not to be replicated again until we have a much better understanding of the
process behind it, as well as the long-term effects!"

"We understand," Ukyou said, stepping forward slightly.

"Do you?" Dr. Hirano asked, folding his arms. "This is not a two week medical trial I am referring to here. I am asking for a commitment for a lifelong case study of this effect. One that I intend to publish the results of so that all of this… this voodoo might one day be properly understood and harnessed for the betterment of mankind and medical science."

Ranma blanched. She suddenly had visions of being locked in a glass tube full of liquid while men in white lab coats poked at her and took notes. "L-like… like in a lab? With… dissections an' stuff?"

Dr. Hirano frowned then scowled at Dr. Tofu again. "Ono, you and I are going to have to have a long chat about setting proper patient expectations!" He returned his gaze to Ranma. "No, absolutely not, Ms. Ranma. This is not some afternoon science fiction drama on television. A case study would mean you and your friends would commit to making regular contact with myself and whatever research team becomes involved in studying this effect, and agree to periodic medical examinations, interviews and consultations. You would continue with your regular lives - it would simply be something you would do on a yearly basis, like a more in-depth version of a full physical exam. It requires honesty and openness on your part to ensure the validity of the data, and the understanding that that data will inevitably become public information once it is scrubbed of details which might directly identify you. But otherwise it is intended to be as unobtrusive as possible."

Ranma felt a bit better at that, but still somewhat apprehensive. After all, how many people had told her something would be 'no big deal' only for it to end up being a nightmare? Granted, that was mostly her father… "I'll… uh… Nabiki?" She glanced towards Nabiki uncertainly. Nabiki will know if this is a safe deal to take. "You'll provide us with proper agreements covering our expected commitments to this?" Nabiki asked, raising an eyebrow.

Dr. Hirano waved his hand. "Yes, yes, we can negotiate the details later. I'm not interested in interrupting your lives, merely in getting enough solid, publishable data to move this forward. I just want an agreement in principle. Ono tells me you are all martial artists and concerned with honor. I simply want a commitment that you will continue to work with me once your own needs are met."

"Oh!" Ranma said. "Uh, sure, of course. You have our word of honor, Doc," Ranma said.

Dr. Hirano regarded them for a moment, searching each of their faces, then finally nodded. "Very well. I hope that this all bears fruit before I am called to task for misuse of hospital equipment. If you will follow me…"

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The next few hours were spent with everyone taking a turn in the MRI to get a baseline scan, including fresh baselines for Ranma and Ryouga. Shampoo in particular was nervous about the device, though seeing the others being brave reassured her.

"Is strange… know Man's World have many strange devices, but Shampoo not even begin to understand this one," Shampoo said, running her hand along the humming toroid as Ryouga was prepared for the final test. "Never imagine need to see inside of own head."

"It is vastly more than that," Dr. Hirano sniffed. "But… such is progress. Technology evolves to meet our needs and, as our understanding expands, new needs are identified. This is to examine,
understand and treat diseases that were mysterious and tragic for our ancestors. What they might have thought a single ailment we know now to be a dozen different maladies or defects."

"That is difference from village healing," Shampoo said softly. "Healers know many things. Many potions and remedies. Know what works. But Man's World… seek to know why it works, yes?"

Dr. Hirano smiled, the first smile he had sported since the day began. "Yes, very much so. That is an excellent way to look at it. I have found many from more traditional communities tend to be scornful of our approach to medicine. It's refreshing to find an open mind on the subject."

Shampoo blushed lightly and shook her head. "Is… is just interesting. See much like this when working as Dr. Tofu's assistant."

"She was spending every spare moment reading through my medical journals," Dr. Tofu added. "She's actually got quite good instincts."

"'Instincts' are barely a fraction of this discipline, Ono," Dr. Hirano retorted. "But… If you have an interest in it, I would be happy to discuss the more advanced fields of medicine when we have time. An interest in medical science is always a pleasure to encourage. Japan needs all the doctors it can get these days!"

"Oh! S-shampoo not… I mean, only know a little healing," Shampoo said, stammering uncharacteristically.

Ranma sidled up to her and poked her arm while Nabiki flanked her on the other side. As soon as Dr. Hirano moved on to other things, they each pinched one of her cheeks.

"Is that a blush?" Ranma asked.

"I do think our little Shampoo has a twinkle in her eye," Nabiki continued. "Is that the blossoming of a new profession I see?"

Shampoo folded her arms and sniffed. "Shwampoo jwust cwurious!" she huffed, somewhat distorted by the tugging on her cheeks.

"Too bad. I bet you'd be hot in a nurse's outfit," Nabiki said, wagging her eyebrows.

Shampoo pulled free and raised her chin indignantly. "Hmpf! Shampoo be doctor. Pintou and Airen wear nurse outfits!"

A slow, seductive smile spread across Nabiki's face. "Sound like a pretty fun Saturday night to me."

Ranma swallowed, realizing that somewhere, the conversation had veered away from medicine dramatically.

"All right, I believe we are ready to begin," Dr. Tofu said as he applied the last of the sensors to Ryouga. Ryouga was laid out on the table for the MRI and looking nervous.

The rest of the group gathered around, sitting down in five plastic chairs that had been arranged around the MRI machine. Ranma took up position on Ryouga's left side. She could see that he looked nervous, so she automatically took his hand.

"You okay, Ryo?" Nabiki asked, looking concerned.

"Yeah, yeah… we haven't done anything yet… I'm fine," Ryouga lied badly. Ranma could already
feel his apprehension through the Link.

"Because of Ryoga's exceptional levels of Ki, I'm afraid an oral dose of the herbal extract would not suffice," Dr. Tofu said, holding up a needle and an IV bag. "With Dr. Hirano's help, I've refined the active ingredient in the pill and created an intravenous form. With this we'll be able to precisely control the dosage and bring Ryoga's Ki levels down in a controlled manner without any of the 'crashes' the rest of you experienced."

"I still feel that assessment is overly optimistic," Dr. Hirano snorted. "We are still guessing at the dosages. What we will be able to do is monitor and adjust accordingly, as well as make sure that Mr. Hibiki's vitals remain stable. I am still not entirely happy with the drop in body temperature that accompanies the use of this compound."

"I am quite familiar with the effects, Dr. Hirano," Dr. Tofu said, slightly testily. "I am also aware of how uncomfortable you are with it. You needn't remind me at every opportunity."

"You do realize this drug is approved as a food supplement, don't you Ono?" Dr. Hirano replied, sticking his head out of the MRI booth. "I could lose my medical license just helping you refine the stuff into an injectable, much less participating."

"Well then," Dr. Tofu swabbed down Ryoga's arm with alcohol. "We must hope Ryoga decides to be cooperative and not die, hadn't we?"

Ryouga whimpered.

"Great bedside manner, Doc," Ukyou muttered.

Dr. Tofu inserted the needle then set up the IV bag and the infusion pump that would regulate the flow. "All right, if you girls would all gather around and make contact with Ryoga…"

Ranma leaned a little closer and squeezed his hand. She could feel the cold spikes of fear coming from him.

"Ranma," Ryoga whispered softly. "Promise me… if anything feels off, let go, okay?"

"Ryoga, I'm pretty sure all of this is going to feel off," Ranma whispered back. She felt Akane scoot her chair closer and put her hand over Ranma's.

"That's right, Ryoga. We're not going anywhere, no matter what!" Akane said, squeezing gently.

"No, listen to me!" Ryoga hissed. Ranma could feel his Ki starting to ebb as the drug seeped into his system. "You have to let go if anything goes wrong. Even if it doesn't seem like a big deal! Dr. Hirano is right, I'm not trading the five of you for Mom. I can't risk this thing jumping into one of you."

"You think it might be infectious?" Nabiki asked.

"I've got a gut feeling," Ryoga replied. "It's been getting worse the stronger the Link gets. Like it's… struggling."

"Struggling? As in… alive?" Ukyou asked nervously.

"Then we kill," Shampoo replied. "Shagua not worry. We protect you this time."

"That's not…!" Ryoga protested, trying to sit up. Ranma stopped him with a hand on his chest.
"Ryo, what's the worst that happens if we get infected?" Ranma asked.

"You get lost!" Ryouga replied. "It'll start slow… you'll just take a wrong turn now and then… then you find it harder to get to places you're trying to go… then it gets hard to follow a straight line… You don't want this, Ranma!"

"But we're still Linked, right?" Ranma pressed.

"I… y-yeah…" Ryouga said, unsure.

"Then we'll always be able to find each other, won't we?" Ranma smiled. "And heck… getting good and lost might just solve some of my other problems… or at least put 'em off a while. Generations of Hibikis have dealt with this, right? If it comes to that, we'll manage."

Ryouga relaxed and lay back down, but Ranma could still see the fear in his eyes. She squeezed his hand, staying close. I've never seen him honestly SCARED like this before, she thought.

She could feel the drain now as Ryouga's ki levels dropped and the Link tried to equalize between them. She felt him shiver and she rubbed his hand with her free one.

"Mr. Hibiki, how are you feeling?" Dr. Hirano asked through the small intercom built into the MRI torus.

"Tired," Ryouga said.

"That's normal. Try and stay awake as best you can, though with the dosage you are receiving it's understandable if you can't stay awake. However, your friends will need to ensure contact is kept regardless."

"Nnnh…" Nabiki groaned softly. "This is… a lot more of a pull than with Akane…"

"Shagua have much ki," Shampoo replied. "Very deep reservoir to fill."

"Is he going to be okay doing this?" Akane leaned in next to Ranma, looking concerned.

"Ryo?" Ranma said. She could see Ryouga struggling to keep his eyes open. "Ryo, stay awake…"

"I'm starting to feel woozy myself, actually…" Ukyou said, leaning against Ryouga's cot. "Woof, this takes a lot… out…" she trailed off int mumbling as her head nodded.

Ranma could feel it too. It was almost like when Ms. Hinako drained her, but slower. She could feel Ryouga's hand slacken in hers and tightened her own grip, though her hand felt like it was responding only reluctantly.

"I can see the mass of corrupted ki now," Dr. Tofu said from the booth. "Another moment and it should be fully exposed to erosion. You'll have to…"

The rest of his words became indistinct and distant-sounding. Ranma saw Nabiki slump over against Ryouga on the far side. Shampoo was crumpling as well. Her own head felt too heavy to hold up. Everything sounded like she was underwater. Something was wrong. She tried to muster the energy to panic, but she couldn't. She just wanted to lie down and sleep.

"L-let… go…" Ryouga managed to croak. He was starting to twitch now.

Ranma felt his hand start to slip from hers, and that was enough to snap her awake, just a little and just for a moment. She tightened her grasp, her vision focusing on him, even though she still felt like
something was dragging her down.

"No," she stated simply.

Then everything went black.

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It was raining.

Ranma remembered this rain. It had been the kind that had a bite to it, like little needles stabbing through your clothes. She had always hated rain for many obvious reasons; it always seemed to symbolize losing her right to choose. This might be where that notion had come from.

The empty lot was just like she remembered, the pile of lumber off to the side, the retaining wall with the loose bricks, and the bare patch where their tent had stood for nearly a year, until just the day before. It could easily be a snapshot of her last look back as she and her father left. Except for the youth kneeling on the ground in the middle of the lot, slumped and motionless.

"Where are we?" a voice to her right asked.

Ranma glanced over to see Nabiki and Akane on her right. They looked younger than normal. Akane's hair was back to being long, though not as long as it had been when they had first met, and her school uniform was different. Nabiki was wearing overalls, and her face showed that she still had a bit of her babyfat.

Ranma glanced down at herself. She was wearing her old middle school uniform. It was a bit tight in the chest (But then it always had been) and there were some dark stains on the shoulders. She brushed at it, realizing it was black dye. She remembered that, too. Pops had made her throw the outfit away after that.

"Ranchan, what is this?" Ukyou asked. She was wearing a middle school uniform too, her hair tied back and her poise and demeanor more definitively masculine, as it must have been when she was in middle school.

Shampoo was just to Ukyou's left, wearing traditional Joketsuzoku clothing and staring at her hands as the water ran down them. "How...?"

"This is a dream," Ranma said. "Or... or a memory? It's just like the day Pops and I set off for China."

"Is that why I look fifteen again?" Nabiki asked, scowling. "This wasn't a good age for me, y'know..."

"This... before curse then," Shampoo said, looking up to the sky and closing her eyes. "Feels so real... Shampoo almost forgot what rain like without fur."

"Wait, if this is before the curse... then why are you a girl, Ranchan?" Ukyou asked, peering at Ranma. "And what is that black stuff in your hair?"

"I'm probably a girl because I'm one in real life right now." Ranma said, though something seemed off about that explanation. "And Pops used to make me put dye in my hair when I was younger."

"What?" Akane asked, frowning. "Why?"
"I…” Ranma trailed off. She realized she wasn't sure. It was just a thing she had always done. "He didn't like the color, I guess? It must have darkened up enough to make him happy after we left for China, because he stopped making me do it."

"Is that Ryouga?" Nabiki asked softly, taking a step towards the kneeling figure.

Ranma followed suit. "Yeah… I guess this is him when he finally managed to get here the day after Pops and I left," She started walking faster. "Ryo? Ryouga? Hey, are you okay?"

"As she got closer, she realized that he wasn't entirely there. He was translucent, though the rain was deflecting off him as though he were solid. There was a deep red glow, too, coming from his torso, about where his heart would be."

"D-don’t… come any closer," he said weakly, his eyes shifting towards them though he didn't move otherwise. "G-get out… you have to… acckght!" He suddenly doubled over, clutching his midsection as the glow brightened.

"Ryouga!" Ranma ran closer, but something held her back, some force that made it harder to press forward the closer she got to him. Her feet skidded on the slick ashphalt.

Black smoke was billowing forth from Ryouga's mouth, nose and eyes as he gagged and choked. It didn't dissipate or expand into a cloud, but remained coherent, swirling around Ryouga like a serpent before extending to a spot a few feet away from him and gathering, coalescing into a humanoid shape. It solidified, taking the form of Ryouga at his current age and wearing his usual training pants and yellow sleeveless shirt.

The force holding her back disappeared suddenly, causing Ranma to stumble. She recovered and made it the few remaining feet to Ryouga's side, kneeling and helping him sit up as he coughed and retched.

"Well now, that’s better!" the image of older Ryouga said, stretching and working his shoulders. "You have no idea how cramped it was in there!"

Ranma's eyes narrowed. It looked like Ryouga, but the stance… the way he moved… it was nothing like Ryouga. "Who are you?"

The doppelgänger smiled. "Why, my dear Ran… I'm Ryouga." His voice was slick and smooth, full of confidence and contempt. He smiled and the expression was something that didn't belong on Ryouga's face.

"Obviously not," Nabiki replied, standing next to Ranma and folding her arms. "You're the curse, aren't you?"

Ryouga's doppelgänger chuckled and shrugged, still smiling in a way that gave Ranma an almost uncontrollable urge to punch him in the face. "Ah, how cruel! Reduced to a mere affliction. That's very depersonalizing, you know." He held out his arms and frowned. "Hmmm… no, no… tch. The boy has no fashion sense, does he? And in this world that is so full of so many better options!" He snapped his fingers and suddenly he was wearing a tailored black 3 piece suit with a black shirt. He straightened the yellow and black checkered tie and cleared his throat. "Much better. Saw this in a store window he passed… oh, maybe a year ago? In Australia I think. European brand, though. I think maybe Europe is where I'll go first…"

"Go? Where exactly do you think you're going, sugar?" Ukyou asked, stepping forward. She reached back for her battle spatula, but realized she didn't have it.
The doppelgänger raised an eyebrow. "Ah, yes, I suppose it's a bit optimistic to hope you had figured that out at this point. Here, allow me." He snapped his fingers again and Ranma felt a lurch. Suddenly, she was fully grown once more, in her blue Chinese shirt and training pants. Ryoga had changed as well, ironically wearing the outfit the curse had just been wearing. Ukyou was back in her Okonomiyaki chef's outfit, complete with bandolier and battle spatula. Shampoo was wearing her magenta pants and shirt. Akane was in her yellow training dogi, and Nabiki was dressed in a regular T-shirt and jeans.

"Yes, yes, that's better." He sighed. "Honestly, it was a more than a bit difficult to take the middle-schooler versions of you all seriously. Not that the current versions are all that much better, but... I suppose I should at the least grant you your due, yes?" His smile was wide, showing off his teeth. "As for where I'm going... Why, out of course." He gestured vaguely towards the horizon. "I've been trapped in this boy's bloodline for... oh, what has it been? Five centuries or more? I had honestly lost hope of ever getting out. You all have my gratitude."

"Gratitude...?" Nabiki said, frowning. "You're not just some part of Ryoga's psyche, are you?"

Shampoo growled. "This not curse at all. This something else!"

"Very astute, my dear!" The doppelgänger clapped, chuckling. "If only that I stopped short of outright telling you." He gestured and a black umbrella appeared in his hand, folded. Ranma realized that the rain wasn't actually falling on him like it was the rest of them. "My tragic tale started five hundred years ago, give or take a generation or two. I was a yokai, a demon if you prefer, though that is such a Judeo-Christian influenced misnomer. My name was... was... Well, it's been so long since I've been aware, I suppose I've forgotten it. You may call me 'Axis', however."

"All right, 'Axis'," Nabiki said, frowning. "How did you end up inside the sense of direction of a modern day teenager?"

"Oh, I'm there because he killed me," Axis replied airily. "It wasn't actually him I suppose... though the resemblance is certainly there... but it was someone of his mother's line. The boy has yokai blood himself, you know. Faded, but..." He pulled back his lip and tapped a canine with his fingernail. "there, nonetheless. Wolf demon, if I'm not mistaken, not that it's terribly relevant. It's the source of what you call 'the Link', you see." He started pacing, twirling the umbrella like a cane. "I was an admittedly minor player in those days, content to get by on what scraps of spiritual energy I could get. Then I stumbled across a wolf yokai princess... lost, injured and vulnerable..." He smiled, reminiscing. "The taste was... exquisite. Of course her mate was none too pleased to lose her... and who could blame him, really? She was quite attractive. A redhead, too, like yourself." He pointed at Ranma and gave her a smile that made her feel like squirming. "I see that Ryouga has that preference in common with his ancestor as well. Well... I imagined I'd just slip into the shadows and be on my way, like always."

He slowed his pacing. "I hadn't counted on his unique ability... I'm not even sure he was aware of it, but he used it to mark me. No matter where I went, no matter where I hid, no matter how far I ran, he found me... hurt me. Then set me loose to run again so he could do it all over." His lips peeled back in a snarl. "For years he tormented me! Cutting... pieces from me... always taking something from me, bit by bit! I was only feeding! A creature like him should have understood that! But he had been around humans too long - been corrupted by their notions of vengeance. He wasn't content to kill me, he needed to take everything from me!" He thumped the end of the umbrella on the asphalt, causing it to crack. He took a deep breath, closed his eyes and visibly relaxed. "But that was five hundred years ago."

His smile returned as he resumed his pacing. "So, by the time he got tired and decided to finish me
off, I was in quite a state. There wasn't much fight left in me by that point but, by then, I understood
the nature of his mark and how he kept finding me. And I had a plan. I would use this… 'Link', as
you call it… to cheat death! At the moment he took my life, I sent all that remained of me through
our link and into him." He chuckled. "I had some… uneducated notions about possessing him and
resurrecting myself through it. I suppose I wasn't thinking clearly. I believe about half my skull was
missing at the time, but I found myself trapped within the deepest recesses of his mind. Mute and
paralyzed, I was no more than a silent observer. I lacked the energy either to escape or to improve
my situation. I couldn't even die."

Axis stopped and focused his gaze on Ryouga. "So, I spent the next few years, forced to watch as he
wandered, mourned, recovered, found love again… and fornicated." He shuddered. "Human woman
this time. Raven black hair. Reminded him of another girl he knew I believe? It didn't matter. By that
point I'd had quite enough. And I knew… I knew that my consciousness was fading. So… I put
everything I had left into my own 'special ability'. You see, I was known as the Demon of
Misdirection. I had a nifty little trick where I could mess with someone's spatial awareness - make
them get lost. It was a temporary thing, a little parlor trick… unless they happened to stumble into a
dangerous part of the woods or take a bad fall and then get eaten by a demon like his pretty little red-
headed first wife. Oh my! Perhaps I deserved some of that rancor of his after all…" He smirked as
his gaze shifted to Ranma. "Her screams were delicious, you know. Her sobbing even more so."

"Okay, that's enough!" Ranma growled, getting to her feet and cracking her knuckles.

Axis held up a hand and the barrier was back. "Now now now my dear… Ayame was it? No, that
was the other redhead. Ranma, that's it!" He chuckled darkly. "You must let me finish my tale! You see…I cannibalized everything that was left of myself to make my little trick permanent. I wanted to
die… I needed to die… and the only way to do that would be for him to die. And so the mighty wolf
king wandered off into the wilderness, away from his new wife and halfling babe, and eventually
starved to death, lost and alone. It was the perfect pyrrhic victory."

He sighed heavily. "Except… I didn't die with him. It seems he passed on a fragment of me to his
offspring. And that fragment repeated the effect, adding the poor lad's brains. He found a way to
compensate, using his mark to find something to return to, a lovely young girl who took pity on him
I'm sure… and around we went." He began twirling in circles. "Around and around, over and over
and over again, your ancestors stubbornly refusing to die until they had spawned and repeated the
cycle, always with just a little less of me each time… UNTIL!" He stabbed the umbrella into the
ground again and grinned at Ryouga, motioning to him with his hand. "Until our prodigal son
here! Ryouga. The one who set me free!" He beamed, feigning being overcome with emotion. "You
and your lovely chosen here ripped the Link wide open and woke me up. And what did I find?
Spiritual energy! What you would call 'ki' of course… oceans of it! But… not quite enough. It
needed a little more. So, I bided my time, and when lovely young Ranma here learned she could
share her ki with you? I backed off." He clapped his hands. "I had no idea if it would work, of
course, but you… you wonderful madman! You found a way, didn't you? You sweet talked your
way into the hearts of four more lovely girls and now, finally, I have enough." He sighed.

"Okay… so you got what you wanted," Ukyou said warily. "Congrats? So… this is the part where
you leave and go off to do whatever… demon… things you lot do… right?"

Axis chuckled. "Yes, of course, of course!" He spread his arms wide. "I'll be on my way and not
bother you for the rest of your lives." He took a breath, and then his smirk widened. "Just as soon as
I claim young Ryouga's body for my own and purge what remains of his essence."

"My old body is, I am afraid, quite thoroughly destroyed, and as distasteful as I find the idea of
spending any amount of time as a human, I am limited in my options. But aside from that, I am
perfectly happy to…"
He didn't get to finish. Ranma darted forward, pushing past the barrier and charging, fist cocked to smash Axis in the face.

He caught the punch. Or, more accurately, he stopped the punch about six inches before it struck his palm. Ranma felt like a vise had closed around her, holding her immobile.

"Oh, you've got fire in you, don't you?" he purred. "All passion and emotion… mmmm!" He smacked his lips.

"I'm going to kill you," Ranma growled.

"I'm sure you'll try," he replied. He swept his hand through the air and flung Ranma back to send her sprawling across the ground.

"Leave her alone!" Ryouga snarled, forcing himself shakily to his feet. He winced as the light in his chest pulsed.

"Ah-ah-ah!" Axis wagged his finger. "Now Ryo, are you sure you want to do that? After all, you're the one I want to consume! At this point, with your ki so badly depleted? One touch buddy… fhtfhtfhtfhtfht! Now, if you want to sacrifice yourself heroically to save your lovely ladies…" he smirked, "I'm afraid I'm still going to eat them. They just look so tast-

Axis was cut off by a mighty *Clong* as Akane, swinging an impressively large hammer, hit him on his left side and sent his body careening through the brick retaining wall and the nearby house.

"I hate it when they monologue," Akane muttered.

"Did you get him?" Ukyou ran up to her, Battle spatula drawn and peering into the cloud of dust.

"Where Akane get hammer?" Shampoo asked, peering at the weapon. It was impressively large, with a handle nearly as long as Akane was tall, and a heavy, ornately etched head of solid metal.

"It was on a TV show I think," Akane said. At their confused looks, she shrugged. "It's a dream, right? I figured that meant if he can make stuff appear, then I can too."

Ranma made her way over to them, holding her side. If this is a dream, why does stuff hurt?

"Be careful, Akane. Guys like him don't usually go down that easy in my experience."

"She's right," Axis murmured from right behind them. "We don't."

Everyone dodged frantically out of the way except Akane, who immediately whirled and made a wild swing, the heavy head of the hammer on course to collide with the side of Axis' head once more.

The demon merely stopped the hammer with one hand, again halting it six inches from his palm.

"You figured out the rules much more quickly than I expected!" He gestured and flung Akane away from him.

Shampoo immediately altered course, changing direction to catch Akane, grunting and barely keeping her feet as Akane slammed into her.

"Shame that's just a lump of metal," Axis said, nodding towards the hammer. "Not going to do you much good against a yokai, even in a dream. You'll have to think bigger."

Two throwing spatula whizzed by Axis' head. He dodged them easily, turning as his eyes started to
track Ukyou while she circled him at a run, flinging her sharpened minispats at him.

"You should be careful, 'Ucchan','" Axis said, catching one out of the air. "These are sharp and you could hurt…"

A bag of flour hit him in the face, exploding into a cloud.

"Really?" Axis said, tossing the spat away as he glared, somewhat less amused. "Of all the things to throw at me… flour?"

Ukyou was silhouetted by the fog of finely ground power. He could still make out her smile though as she held up one last minispat. She threw it, not at him, but at the ground, aiming it to skip off the asphalt. The blade ricocheted off a small pebble of chert in the tarmac and struck a spark.

The explosion was brilliant, blasting away the rain for a moment.

"Yeah, flour," Ukyou said.

The smoke cleared and Axis was still standing there, arms crossed. But the smile was gone from his face.

"That hurt," he growled, and started stalking forward.

Suddenly, Ranma was impeding him, moving like a blue and red blur. He stopped reflexively as she crouched in front of him.

"That hurt, huh?" Ranma said, drawing her hands back. Pulsing yellow light gathered between her palms. "Then I bet this'll feel real good… MOKO TAKABISHA!" She drove her hands forward, releasing the ki blast into his chest at point blank range.

Axis actually screamed as the force of the blast burnt and frayed his suit and slowly pushed him back. He struggled and his form seemed to waver as though he was fighting to keep himself together.

Finally the blast ended. Axis's form was smoking, and black ichor was leaking from the corner of his mouth. He wiped it away with the back of his hand, and the grin slowly returned.

"No wonder he's in love with you," he said, chuckling softly. "I wonder if it's just coincidence that it was a redhead last time, too? I'll have to preserve some fragment of his consciousness so he can watch as I eat you… eventually." His grin spread. "Remember that Oni? It had some nifty ideas, and I remember all of them…"

"Aww come on!" Ranma panted. "What's it take to take you down?"

As if to answer the question, Akane ran past Ranma, hefting her hammer once more with a battle cry on her lips.

Axis sighed and held up his hand to stop the hammer as it swung towards his head. "I told you…"

He never finished as the hammer, unaffected by his gesture, passed his hand and impacted his temple hard enough that his head actually deformed, spurting streams of thick, black ichor.

Akane followed through, shifted her weight and brought the hammer back around, batting Axis away as though he were a doll made of straw. His body slammed through the pile of lumber and left him twisted and broken in a pile of two-by-fours.

"You tell us 'lump of metal' not enough," Shampoo said, coming up beside Akane. She took hold of
the haft and held it up a bit to reveal the head of the hammer was now covered in a mix of foreign runes and Shinto spirit wards. "Now blessed lump of metal."

"Thanks for reminding us about the Oni, by the way," Akane shouldered the weapon and smirked. "I remembered a bunch of the spirit wards that the priest used for that. I bet a mix of Chinese, Japanese and Greek enchantments probably really sting, huh?"

"Shampoo throw in a couple of Norse, too," Shampoo added. At Akane's curious look she shrugged. "Norse know hammers."

Axis struggled out of the pile of wood, bones cracking as dislocated limbs snapped back into place. "Y-yuh-you think… think you're winning, don't you?" he said, spitting a mouthful of tar-like bile onto the ground as his ruined face slowly reformed itself. "Th-that's adorable."

"None of us are spitting up our pancreas, pal," Ranma said, putting her hands on her hips. "You should probably just give it up right now."

Axis smirked. "I mean… you're right." He shrugged and dusted off his suit. "As long as you're willing to kill Ryouga in the process."

Ranma felt the blood drain from her face. She spun, looking for Ryouga.

He was back on the ground, struggling to hold himself up on his hands and knees. He had gone from translucent to almost transparent. Only that red, pulsing mass in his chest remained relatively solid.

Ranma sprinted toward him and skidded to a stop as she crouched next to him. Ryouga coughed, wheezing and gasping as he struggled to breath.

"You see… the instant you lot all came here, I had already won," Axis said with a grating laugh. "If you kill me, you kill him. My vengeance will be complete and I can rest in peace. If you try and keep him alive then, inevitably, I will overwhelm you, devour his soul and then I will have all the time in the world to hunt you down in the real world, thanks to this lovely link we all share."

"Ranma…" Ryouga wheezed.

"Don't you dare say it, Ryo," Ranma snarled. She grabbed his head in her hands and forced him to look at her. "We're not sacrificing you! Do you hear me?! I haven't come this far just to lose you. Not now!"

Ryouga coughed and a slow smile spread across his lips. "Nah… I gave you my word of honor that I'd stick around, didn't I?"

Axis smirked. "Isn't that touching?"

Ryouga took Ranma's hand and placed it over his chest, over the red light that was pulsing beneath his ribs like a lurid heartbeat. Ranma swallowed, her eyes going wide. Is… is he going to…?

No wonder he's in love with you.

"R-Ryo?" she stammered.

"Rip it out," Ryouga whispered.

Ranma blinked. "What?"

Ryouga grunted and pressed her hand harder to his chest. "Rip it out!"
Axis's eyes widened. "H-hey, hold on a minute…" He started towards the couple, hands outstretched.

"Ryouga, if I rip your heart out, you'll die!" Ranma said. "You said you weren't gonna…!"

"It's not my heart!" Ryouga said. "This is a dream! We're… we're all ki phantoms or something! That red thing thudding in my chest… it's him!"

"Stop!" Axis snarled, charging forward. He blocked a strike from Akane's hammer, though the force of it arrested his momentum. He grabbed the haft of the weapon and his hand started to smoke and the flesh bubble and char as the wards started to glow, but he paid it no mind. "Out of my way!"

"I… I don't… How do I do this without hurting you…?" Ranma wailed, looking from the red pulsing mass back to Ryouga's eyes.

"You don't. You just do it!" Ryouga said through gritted teeth. "It's a dream! Just… imagine it happening!"

"NO!" Axis ripped the hammer from Akane's grasp only to be struck by bonbori and a huge battle spatula similarly adorned with wards and runes as Shampoo and Ukyou dogpiled him. With a roar and a surge of force, he cast all three of them off him.

"Do it!" Ryouga cried desperately.

Ranma swallowed, squeezed her eyes shut, tried to visualize her hand passing harmlessly through Ryouga's ribs, and jabbed her stiffened fingers into his chest.

Her hand wasn't passing into his chest harmlessly.

She could feel his bones crack and his ribs split as her hand plunged into his chest. She heard the breath wheeze out of his lungs. She opened her eyes and looked into his, full of pain… she dared not look down. "I'm sorry! Oh god, Ryo…!"

"Not… real…" Ryouga reminded her weakly.

"Also not happening!" Ranma looked up to see Axis stomping towards them. His eyes were glowing red now as he reached for Ranma, intending to tear her away.

A gigantic metal fist slammed into him from above and drove him into the pavement. Ranma was forced to withdraw her hand to steady herself and Ryouga. The metal hand closed, scooping up a handful of asphalt, concrete, and Axis.

Ranma looked up to see a huge red mech. It looked like it was 5 stories tall, with a single glowing red eye. Ranma recognized it from one of those classic anime series. A Zaku.

It straightened and the chest opened up. From the right side, a figure in a crimson uniform pulled herself up from the control seat and removed her white helmet and mask in a properly theatrical manner.

"Nabiki!?" Ranma squeaked, gaping.

"Took me a bit to visualize it properly. Sorry I'm late," Nabiki called down from the cockpit. She turned her gaze to the fistful that the mech was holding, specifically the doppelgänger of Ryouga struggling in its clutches. "Now you have been a bad boy, so just sit still and let Ranma kill you."
"No!" Axis squirmed frantically. The metal creaked ominously, but it held. "Not while he lives! Not while there's a single one of that damndable wolf's spawn left in the world!" He turned his blood red gaze to Nabiki. "This can't hold me! I'll get a hand free in a minute, and then I'll find the breaking point of it. And then I'll find your breaking point!"

Nabiki cocked her head at him. Casually she reached down and manipulated a control on the yoke. "What was it Gendo Ikari said at the end of the Evangelion series?" she asked.

As she did, the mech's thumb pivoted, pressed against Axis' face, and flicked his head off his body. "Oh yeah. That," she said with a smirk.

The head hit the ground, still cursing as it bounced. Though decapitated, Axis' body continued to struggle, and black smoke started to seep from the mech's fingers as his form started to lose cohesion.

"Ranma, hurry up!" Nabiki called. "He's doing... demon things!"

Ranma swallowed. She risked a glance down at Ryouga's chest, and found to her surprise that it was intact and undamaged. However, he was getting fainter and fainter, and he was starting to feel light against her. She looked into his eyes, biting her lower lip. "I'm sorry!"

He nodded, then howled in pain as her hand drove into his chest once more.

Ranma grit her teeth and forced her hand deeper, pushing aside bone, muscle and cartilage, her fingers questing until she felt something sickly and warm against her hand.

"STOP!" Axis roared. The black smoke was re-coalescing around his head to form an arm and part of his torso which he used to try and pull himself forward.

Ranma pushed in deep enough to grab hold of the pulsing thing. It felt horrible, pulsing and writhing in her grasp, desperate to escape. It wasn't just a physical sensation, either. She could feel echoes of all the horrible things the demon had done; the corruption and hate within him. It was cold and slimy and yet it burned at the same time. Her instinct was to jerk her hand away, but she closed her grip more tightly and started to pull. "Hold on, Ryo!"

His form flickered and he grunted, coughing up blood, a hitch in his breathing. But his eyes didn't waver, so she pulled harder still. Sickening wet squelching noises and bone twisting cracks came from his chest as she slowly wrenched the thing out.

"NoOOOOOOOOOOO!" Axis howled and struggled, hastily reforming his other arm, more of a malformed stump than a usable limb as he tried frantically to crawl forward.

With a final yell, Ranma wrenched the red, pulsing mass free. She could feel it throbbing and writhing in her hand, little cillia probing and gripping at her flesh, like it was trying to find a way into her now.

Ryouga's form flickered, growing even more faint. Ranma could see a sort of tether - a faint line of force that still connected it to him. He reached up weakly and put his hand over hers, on top of the mass. "Do it."

Ranma nodded, closed her hand into a fist and crushed the thing while Ryouga held her hand in his.

Axis didn't cry out or struggle. He just abruptly came apart. His form, or what was left of it,
dissolved into black ichor that splattered across the ruined pavement, steaming and bubbling.

After a moment, Ryogu's tenuous form started to grow more opaque. He groaned and slumped against Ranma, plainly exhausted. She caught him and slipped her arms around him, holding him up as his weight returned.

"Ranma," he croaked.

"Shut up!" She wrapped her arms around him more tightly, closed her eyes and balled her fists up in his shirt. She was shaking as she buried her face against his shoulder. *Never again!* I'm *not going to go through that again!* *Not ever again!*

She felt his arms tighten around her and the others embrace them both as Akane, Ukyou, Shampoo and Nabiki encircled them, with herself and Ryogu at the center. Her aches started to fade as she could sense all of them through the Link.

"Thank you…" Ryogu managed, his voice still hoarse and weak.

"Y-you have to promise…" Ranma said haltingly, struggling around the lump in her throat as she fought to hold back tears. "Promise that you'll stay now."

He chuckled weakly. "I thought I already had?"

"That was before, when I was your Anchor! Promise again!" Ranma insisted hotly. "No wandering off or d-dying or *anything!*"

"I promise," he breathed.

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When they woke up, they discovered the entire battle had literally been the blink of an eye; they had all nodded off at once and, by the time Dr. Tofu and Dr. Hirano had reacted, it was over and they were all awake - including Ryogu.

They all had to endure another full spectrum of MRI scans. Their ki levels were low all across the board and all of them were cold so the group huddled under blankets as each of them took their turns getting run through the torus. Since Ryogu was first, he found himself in the center of the pile, struggling to stay awake. The fatigue and low body temperature did a lot of override the usual hangups about physical closeness, otherwise he imagined that huddling under a blanket with five girls would have caused him fatal blood loss.

Ranma was the last to get scanned. She had been reluctant to leave him the entire time, yet she had kept her hands either behind his back or wrapped around herself and away from his chest. She'd also kept her head resting with one ear to his breastbone. She said she just wanted to reassure herself that his heart was still in there and still beating.

"Can I… have a minute?" he asked, nudging a dozing Ukyou off his shoulder as he tried to extricate himself from the pile.

"Going somewhere?" Nabiki asked sleepily.

"I just want to look outside," Ryogu replied. "I want to see what the streets look like when I know where I'm going."

"Don't go far," Ukyou cautioned him and nodded towards Ranma on the MRI bed. "You've got
Ryouga nodded slowly. "I won't. Promise."

He got up, making sure to rewrap the blanket around the four girls as he did. He liked the idea of taking care of them in some way, no matter how small. It was a way to start to pay all of this back to them. He already owed them more than he could repay in several lifetimes.

He slipped out the door and walked down the hall. Across from the elevators there was a doorway that led to an open-air patio that afforded patients or staff a place to step out for fresh air or to indulge in a cigarette without having actually leave the building. It overlooked the road leading to the hospital and was high up enough to have a decent view of the city.

The patio was vacant, save for him, and he stopped to look out over the surrounding bits of Tokyo. The sun was starting to set and lights were flickering to life as dusk settled over the landscape.

There, Ryouga thought, picking out a spot in the distance. That's where my house is, isn't it?

He smiled, now able to remember all the twists and turns they had taken to get to the hospital. He shifted his gaze a bit. The Tendo Dojo is… there… and the Nekohanten is over a bit to the east of that... the school is… there! I can actually see it! He felt a warm surge as he got first hand confirmation that his newly won sense of direction was actually working.

He strode forward and leaned on the railing of the overlook, scanning to the horizon, as far across the city as he could see. It was all there; every path he had ever taken. Some of the details were still a bit blurry, especially how he’d managed to cross the ocean multiple times, but that was all right. Some things he didn’t really want to know. His world had navigable boundaries once more - for the first time since he was a child. That was all that mattered.

"Here you are!"

Ryouga glanced over his shoulder. Ranma was standing in the doorway. Her hair was unbound, blowing in the slight breeze, and her eyes were bright in the gloom.

"Wandering off again, Ryo?" she asked, stepping out onto the patio and walking over to stand next to him. "I thought we'd just fixed that."

"We did," he said, smiling a little as she joined him at the railing. "I was just… taking in the view. Now that it actually means something to me."

Ranma leaned her elbows on the railing but remained quiet. There was a pensive look on her face.

"You're not… going back out there," Ranma said softly. It wasn't quite a question but not really a statement either. "You promised you'd stay. You're staying, right?"

"I don't ever want to wander again," Ryouga replied. "I plan to stay for the rest of my life… If you'll let me."

Ranma turned and stared at him. She blinked a few times in confusion. "I-if you mean… like, in Tokyo? I-I mean, that's not really my call… I mean, lots of people stay their whole lives in Tokyo…"

"That's not what I meant and you know it," Ryouga said, though there was no edge in his voice. He kept staring out at the cityscape, watching her from the corner of his eye.
Her cheeks colored and she fidgeted, spluttering a bit before she gained some sort of traction. "I… it… Ryo, if this is about what the demon said about you being in love with me… I mean, he was trying to mess with us, I didn't really pay attention…"

Ryouga pushed off the railing, straightened and turned to look at her. She had that slightly panicked, trapped expression she usually wore when she was being confronted with any sort of deep or strong feelings. He took a deep breath. *She can't do this for me. I've got to be the one to say it.*

"Ranma Saotome, I love you," he said, opening his eyes. The words weren't nearly as scary as he thought they'd be.

At least, for him.

Ranma's eyes went wide. Her expression shifted to a nervous smile. "Aheh… I mean… Yeah! I love you too, bud! We're… we're… best friends… right?"

Ryouga sighed. "Ranma, that's not how I meant and we both know it."

"N-no… it's just… just… an emotional high… from the fight an' stuff…" She backed up a step, the look of panic in her eyes growing stronger. "You're just… woozy from the drugs! Yeah… that's it…"

Frustrated, Ryouga reached out and grabbed her by the shoulders. Her terrified squeak immediately made him regret the decision but he was committed now. "Ranma!" he hissed. "Would you just stop? Just… just listen to me for once, would you?"

"But… but you can't!" Ranma shook her head. She was shaking in his grasp, trembling like a leaf on the wind. "You can't… I can't! It's… it's not…"

"You don't owe me anything for this, Ranma," Ryouga said. "You aren't… obligated. You don't have to feel the same way. You don't have to protect me from anything. I'm not saying this to try and claim you or anything. I just… I just need you to know. That's all."

"Why?" Ranma shook her head. "Why? Why why why why!?!" She was shaking harder now and tears were starting to run down her cheeks. "Why do you have to be such an idiot?! Why would you fall for someone like me?! I'm literally the worst person on earth for you! I'm… I'm stupid and selfish and a glutton and I'm already engaged to a half dozen people and… and…!"

"You forgot that you're a guy," Ryouga added helpfully.

"I was getting to that! I'm a guy! I'm a man amongst men! I'm… I'm supposed to be a man amongst men! I'm not… I'm not supposed to be a girl! Not like this! I'm not supposed to feel…!" She was starting to hyperventilate, the tears flowing more freely. "I can't! I can't! Because… because…!"

Without thinking, Ryouga moved his hand from her shoulder to her cheek to brush away the tears. Ranma froze, her breath hitching as she stared at him with a mix of terror and pleading in her eyes. Her emotions through the Link were so chaotic that he couldn't make any sense of what she was feeling and he doubted she could either.

"Then don't," Ryouga said softly, still cupping her cheek. "Just tell me you don't. Tell me you don't feel the same. That's all I need from you. That's all I ask. Say that you don't love me… that you can't… and mean it. So I can move on from you."

Her lower lip trembled. "But… you'll leave…"
"No I won't," he said solemnly. "I'm not going to make you choose, Ranma. I'll stay as your friend, as your ally... family, even. But... I need to know how you feel." He leaned a little closer. "Just tell me."

"I can't..." she whimpered, shaking her head slightly. "I can't I can't I can't!"

She was terrified - he could feel that - but not of him. There was... something else. She couldn't acknowledge something, as if admitting how she felt would lead to disaster. But she wasn't taking the escape he was offering her. He could feel her struggling.

She can't say it, he thought. He felt a pang of guilt for the turmoil he felt roiling within her. There was one other thing... but it scared him. If he was wrong, he'd push her away forever.

Time to be brave, Hibiki! he thought. He pulled her forward gently, eyes locked on hers as he leaned in. Her eyes widened as she realized what he was about to do.

He stopped and waited.

All she needed to do was push, now. Just a gentle shove, or pull away. One last easy escape.

Her breathing slowed. The fear was still there in her eyes, but at the same time... relief? Her emotional landscape seemed to be wavering, trapped in anticipation, waiting to see what he was actually going to do. He could hear his own heartbeat thudding in his ears and he realized that he was terrified, too.

He shifted his hand from her cheek to the back of her head, tilting her head back gently as he stared into her eyes. Do or die. He leaned in, turned his head a bit, drawing on what he had learned from Nabiki and Shampoo, and gently touched her hips with his.

She made a soft noise, and then her eyes slid shut and she leaned in against him, her hand against his chest as she pushed back into the kiss. And then everything cut loose. Through the Link he could feel the relief as all of the feelings she had been suppressing and denying surged forward. He moved his arm around to her back and pulled her closer, deepening the kiss as, for one brief, glorious moment, everything was right.

He felt it in the same moment she did. A black, bubbling, mewling horror from that deep, dark place that she kept sealed. It surged through her and then into him - a paralyzing black wave of fear, suffocating and binding. She shuddered in his arms and then abruptly pulled away, eyes wide with terror.

And then she mewed.

"Ranma?" Ryouga's breath caught in his throat, his heart pounding with fear as the mere memory of that wave of terror left him unable to move. NO! Why now!? He scanned the area, looking for the cat that had triggered her without ever fully taking his eyes off her, but there was nothing he could see. What had set it off!?

Ranma whimpered and clutched the sides of her head, shrinking back. "Nnnnh!" she panted, trying to steady herself on the railing, but as her fingers came down on it they slashed right through the metal, as though invisible claws were extended from her hand. "I can't! I can't! I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry!"

"Ranma!" Ryouga reached for her but she flinched away, shaking her head.

"N-no!" she cried out. "I can't... the pit... I'm sorry!" She turned, leapt up onto the railing on all
fours then bounded off into the night.

"Hey, I think I've got something!"

Daisuke started from his doze, head jerking up from the table as he glanced blearily over at Hiroshi. "This had better not be another false alarm, Hiro."

"No, no, this is it!" Hiroshi said excitedly. "Genma Saotome… Nodoka Saotome… ages look right… and Ranma Saotome!" He thumped the side of the mirofiche reader.

Yuka got up and walked over to him, peering over his shoulder. "And… Ranma Saotome, apparently."

"I just said that," Hiroshi blinked at her, confused.

"No, look… it's here twice on the register," Yuka pointed to the screen. "Ranma Saotome here, and then a bit further down, Ranma Saotome again."

Daisuke walked over and joined them, squinting at the screen. "That's weird…" He read the specifics under each name. "One male… the other female? Same birthdate though."

"That would explain why Ranma never got investigated by the Athletics Board," Yuka mused. "If there's a female Ranma Saotome on the Saotome family register who's got the right birthdate, then there'd be no grounds."

"But why is there a second Ranma Saotome?" Daisuke asked. "If Himura could get in here to change the records, why add a second Ranma to the register?"

Yuka scoffed, crossing her arms. "Did you see the dust on these files? Face it Dai, no one has looked at these for over ten years, much less altered them."

"Secret twins?" Hiroshi suggested. "Maybe Ranma had a sister, but she died at birth and his parents never told him?"

"Then where's the file? There should be medical records in there." Daisuke rooted around for the hard copy of the files Hiroshi had displayed on the reader. He found the folder and flipped it open. "Marriage license… Driver's license… Mr. Saotome can drive…? Here it is." He fished out a faded pink sheet of paper. It was covered in barely legible scrawl. "Looks like they used a midwife. 'Assisted Home Birth. Mother, Nodoka Saotome. Child name, Ranma Saotome. Male…' birth date and time match the Family Register… okay, so the girl Ranma is fake then."

"Hold on…" Yuka flipped a bit further into the file and pulled out another set of documents, these much more legibly typed up. "This is from Nerima General. 'Cesarean Section, Nodoka Saotome. Child name, Ranma Saotome. Male…' birth date and time match the Family Register… okay, so the girl Ranma is fake then."

"Wait, what?!" Daisuke took the sheet from her and compared it to the one he was holding. "That doesn't make any sense. How could the same woman give birth to two different kids in two different places at the same time?"

"One is fake, obviously!" Yuka snatched both sheets back and held them up for both to see. "And which one of these is slick, professional and authentic-looking and which one looks like 'Genma Saotome paid for this'?"
"So… the Nerimal General sheet is fake?" Hiroshi said, taking it from her and scratching his head. "But… then why put it as a C-section? Doesn't that leave, like, a really noticeable scar? That seems like a awfully easy way to prove your faked records are false."

"You ever seen Nodoka Saotome? She dresses like it's the Feudal Era." Yuka scoffed. "Nobody has seen her bellybutton since the doctor snipped her own umbilical."

"Crude, Yuka, even for you," Daisuke muttered. "You got a point, though."

"Still seems like a weird oversight," Hiroshi said. "It's like Nabiki says, 'if you gotta lie, keep it simple and keep as much to the truth as you can.' Also, didn't you say that that nobody has been down here in ten years?" He glanced at Yuka.

"Yes, but…" Yuka chewed on her lower lip. "I mean, Himura faking Ranma's girl-type birth records? I can totally see that. Screwing 'em up by making them overly complicated? Sure, she's arrogant enough to put in something like that because she'd figure we'd never find it. Going to the trouble of tracking down the original physical file and stuffing it with fake documents, then sprinkling dust on it?" She shrugged. "That's pushing it, I agree. But it's not like both sets could be authentic. Nodoka couldn't have given both to a boy in one place and a girl in another at the same time. We know the crappy fake-looking one is the real one because Ranma is a boy, and Genma Saotome is cheap. The problem is convincing other people of that."

"Well, we've got the way to do that, right?" Hiroshi said. "Just gotta get Nodoka to prove she doesn't have a C-section scar and we can debunk the fake documents!"

Yuka snorted. "Yeah, good luck with that."

"Hey, to help her son? It's not like we're asking her to strip or anything!" Hiroshi replied.

Daisuke leaned back against the table, stroking his chin and frowning. He had a worried expression on his face.

"What's wrong, Dai?" Hiroshi asked.

"What if Nodoka Saotome does have a C-section scar?" Daisuke asked quietly.

"What, you've seen it?" Hiroshi asked. "Have you been taking surveillance photos without me again?"

"Daisuke, you creep!" Yuka punched him on the shoulder.

"OW!" Daisuke protested. "No, I haven't… I'm just speculating!"

"But that's stupid!" Yuka said. "A midwife wouldn't be able to do a C-section! So the only way Nodoka could… have… a scar…" she trailed off, eyes widening.

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Ranma didn't know where she was going.

Her perceptions of the world shifted back and forth. Sometimes she was aware of the terrain she was running through, other times… there was darkness and the echoes of that awful yowling.

Please please please let me out! I'll be good! I'LL BE GOOD!

She was slipping into the pit. But it wasn't like before. This wasn't like concealing herself from the
cats, where she could go somewhere deep inside herself and hide. Her safe haven was gone now -
exposed. And she was slipping into the pit and the cats were going to get her and girls couldn't get
out of the pit.

Girls couldn't get out of the pit.

Only boys.

She came to awareness as she smashed open a door with her shoulder, stumbling as she nearly
tripped over a mop and bucket. It was the maintenance shed at the school. There was salvation here!
She stumbled over to the sink, whimpering as the edges of her vision darkened once more and the
cats struggled to crawl out of her throat and take her again.

She turned the hot water tap on full blast and shoved her head under it. The hot water scalded her
scalp, and the sudden change to male form caused the back of his head to bang painfully against the
metal tap as his height changed.

He stumbled backwards, landing in a heap, panting and sobbing as the darkness finally receded. He
was out. He was safe. Boys could get out of the pit, and he was a boy. He was a boy.

He clutched his head as the pain flared up again. Darkness was coming for him, but at least it wasn't
the darkness of the pit. He slumped against the shed wall, his arms dropped and his breathing finally
slowed as he sank into merciful unconsciousness.

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Hiroshi frowned. "No. No way. That's not how the curse works! I researched this thoroughly!"

Daisuke raised an eyebrow. "You mean back when you still held out hope Ranma was really a girl?"

"Yes!" Hiroshi punched his palm. "Cold water is the cursed form, hot water is the natural form.
That's how it works! I even begged a pamphlet on the whole thing from Shampoo's Great
Grandma!"

"You got a pamphlet?" Yuka asked skeptically. "They have pamphlets on Jusenkyo curses?"

"Oh yeah. Apparently the Joketsuzoku flirted with the concept of tourism before deciding that it was
a really terrible idea," Hiroshi said. "It had a whole section about 'What To Do If You Get Cursed'.
It's pretty clear about the basics of the curses."

"Does it cover stuff that messes with the curse though? Like that ladle, or the Full-body Cat
Tongue?" Daisuke asked. "How do we know there isn't some way to invert the curse?"

"Ranma would know," Yuka said. "Unless you figure he's been lying to us all along?"

Daisuke sighed in frustration. "Okay, fine, there are a couple of flaws, but… we've seen enough
brainwashing Chinese snack cakes and love-inducing cufflinks to know weird stuff can happen,
right?" He gestured at the folder. "I mean, something doesn't add up!"

"We should get this to Nabiki," Yuka said. "Hiroshi, can you print out the register from the
Microfiche viewer? I'll go photocopy these medical records."

Hiroshi centered the appropriate parts of the document and hit the print button on the reader.
"Guys… I think we're missing the more pressing crisis here."
"Oh yeah? What constitutes a bigger crisis than knowing that either Himura has magical document-changes or one of your best friends might have been brainwashed and gender swapped by his parents?" Daisuke asked dryly.

"The building is closed and locked down until Monday. How are we gonna get out?"

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"And then she just ran off?"

Nabiki studied Ryouga's face as he nodded. From the subtle play of emotions, she could imagine him tearing himself up inside, even without the Link. His head was bowed as he stared at the concrete.

"Never hear of Neko-ken happen without cat," Shampoo said, examining one of the sliced bits of railing on the ground.

"Ranma's never talked while in the Neko-ken, either," Akane added. "This is different."

"It's happened once before," Ryouga said quietly.

Nabiki turned, walked over and sat next to him. She was close enough to feel the turmoil through the Link.

"We were experimenting with the Link," Ryouga said softly as the others all listened. "She was trying to help me. She tried to... I don't know, project feelings through it? There was some kind of feedback, and... and she started meowing - like we had popped the tab on a shaken can of soda."

"So... emotional stress caused it?" Nabiki asked, frowning. "It's not like Ranma hasn't been stressed before..."

Ryouga slumped a little further. "I pushed her. I pushed her somewhere she couldn't go."

"It's not your fault, sugar," Ukyou said. "We were all pushing. We figured she needed to get this out, not that it would... Ukyou shook her head.

"It was too close to something," Ryouga continued in a near whisper. "The cats... the Neko-ken... when I got a glimpse of it... there was something else there. Something behind it all. Something the Neko-ken was blocking. I should have known. I should have seen it coming this time..."

Nabiki put a hand on his arm and squeezed. "Ryo, this isn't your fault. You didn't put her in that pit."

"We should be out looking for Ranma," Akane said.

Ryouga made to stand, but Nabiki held onto his arm. "Not you," she said. She winced a bit at the flare of frustration from him. She nodded to Akane, Shampoo and Ukyou to head out, then turned him to look at her.

Ryouga sighed heavily. "That's... yeah, I get it. I'll stay out of the way..." he muttered.

"No. It's not the reason you think," Nabiki said softly. "Ryouga, please... you're exhausted from what you just went through. We all are, but you especially. I want you to come back to the dojo with me."

"Why to the dojo?" Ryouga frowned.
"Because you're exhausted and I want to make sure you rest and because the rule is that fiancés shouldn't be alone, especially when they're feeling bad." She straightened his shirt a little without thinking about it.

"I'm not a Fiancé, Nabiki," Ryouga muttered.

"Yes you are, Ryo," she insisted. "Ranma didn't reject you! She kissed you back. Heck, we could feel it two rooms away! Something… something just happened that detonated some kind of mental landmine. Shampoo has found her way around that, you can too. Don't give up on Ranma just yet. Please?"

He sighed and closed his eyes. "I promised not to go anywhere. You don't have to worry about me."

Nabiki put her arms around him and hugged him. She could feel him stiffen at the unfamiliarity of the act. Nabiki, what is it with you and the kicked puppies? she thought, squeezing a bit tighter. "Good. Because right now I can't do anything for Ranma but wait, since I can't leap tall buildings or run along fences. I kinda need you here right now."

Tentatively he put his arms around her. "I'm… not sure I can do much," he mumbled. She could feel concern muffling some of his own darker emotions as his focus shifted to her.

"Yeah… you and me both," She pulled back slightly to look up at him. "I've spent all this time frantically running around, trying to fix everyone's problems… and I just seem to dredge up new ones. You nearly get your soul eaten by a demon, Ranma is popping the lid off of her own bottled imps, Mousse's psycho ex fiancée has brought the circus to town Stephen King-style and I managed to get the Yakuza interested in our sleepy little corner of insanity."

"I wasn't eaten by a demon, my direction curse is cured. Tatewaki Kuno is sane, the Principal is out of our hair, Mousse's ex is not your fault and the Yakuza are hardly a problem you created," Ryouga countered.

Nabiki sighed and hooked her chin over his shoulder. "I know… rationally I know all of that, but still…" She closed her eyes. "Thank you, though. It's nice to hear someone else saying it."

"Ah, there you are!" Dr. Tofu peeked out through the doors. "I was wondering where everyone had wandered off to!" He stepped outside and looked around, noticing it was just the two of them. "Where are Ranma, Akane and the others?"

Nabiki gently disengaged from Ryouga. "It's… complicated, Doc," she said a little sheepishly.

"Oh, well…" Dr. Tofu awkwardly rubbed the back of his head. "Well, we just wanted to let you know the MRI images all look good. We'll want you all back in a week of course to verify, but there's no sign of the corrupted ki in any of your scans."

Ryouga breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank you. Really. I… don't know what I'd do if it had jumped to someone else."

"Honestly, the chances of it were low. There was a flare up right at the moment you lost consciousness, but the influx of the uncorrupted ki from the girls seems to have done the trick. Simple, really!" He blinked at the slightly horrified expressions they gave him. "… What?"

"Nothing!" Nabiki said quickly. "Just… healthy skepticism from a couple of people for whom things are rarely ever simple." She chuckled weakly.

"Ah! Well, that is true…" Dr. Tofu rubbed his chin. "At least in this case. Though, I'm optimistic!"
Once we've verified the results, the next stage will be to figure out how to generalize this procedure for other uses. For now, though," he smiled at Ryouga, "I'm guessing you can find your own way home?"

Ryouga blinked, then looked away, a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth even as it trembled slightly. "I... yeah... Yeah I guess I can."

Nabiki waited until Dr. Tofu walked out before she took his arm. "Congratulations, big guy," she whispered, smiling. "Instead how about you find your way to my home?"

Ryouga's eyes widened, and Nabiki realized what she had just said. She sighed and clapped a hand over her face.

"That sounded like way more of a come-on line than I intended. I'm tired, I'm sorry," Nabiki groaned.

"No, no, it's okay!" Ryouga laughed weakly, waving his hands as if to dispel the awkwardness.

"I really wasn't intending anything untoward, despite making some rather shameless passes at you in the past." Nabiki took hold of his arm and leaned against him. "I think that whole demon slaying thing took more out of me than I thought. I'm pretty sure right now I'll be lucky if you don't end up carrying me home."

Ryouga swallowed nervously, probably getting some mental imagery from that too. "It's totally fine! I should never have thought anything like that." He straightened, looking forward as he started leading her back into the hospital to guide her home.

Nabiki smirked a bit. "Oh, you probably should. When I've got my energy back, and we've found Ranma and calmed her down, I absolutely plan to go back to making shameless passes at you."

Ryouga made a small strangled noise in his throat.

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"[I need to make a new example, I think,]" Himura said with a sigh.

Tan Pohn gave her a quizzical look, something of a break from her usual stoic boredom. "[An example?]"

Himura smiled. Part of the fun of having someone with you who spoke a different language than the herd was that you could be far more open. "[My players are getting complacent.]" She gestured at the current group of second stringers running drills at the instruction of Sanae. "[I find it useful to pick one as 'The Example'. The one who always gets picked last, gets the terrible jobs... nothing overt of course. Just enough that they know they're The Example, and everyone else knows it too.]"

"[I see. So you punish the weakest with ostracization,]" Tan Pohn said with a sniff.

"[Oh, no, no my dear!]" Himura said, smirking. "[Never so obvious. In fact, most of the time it's random. The speculation as to what displeased their betters is what keeps them going in circles. Sometimes it's the least popular, but not always... can't let them think they select The Example. Sometimes I make the least popular my favorite, just for that reason. It's how I picked up little Omi.]" She stretched.

"[And they don't rebel when you ostracize one of them without reason?]" Tan Pohn asked, looking
more interested.

"[Oh there's always a reason. Everyone is guilty of something, or at least they think they are. Small things, unimportant things. You just need to learn to see it, pick it up and then point them out. Publicly. You can always invent larger crimes later, but you start with the small, real, petty crimes everyone commits every day. Mock them. Deride them. Hold them up as examples of why they can't be trusted. Convince the others of the same. Do it long enough, and your target will believe it."
She waggled her eyebrows. ":Then you can start to have some fun."

"[I don't see how that it effective leadership…]" Tan Pohn said.

"[It keeps them too divided to unite against you, but united against a 'common bad'. It gives you someone convenient to blame when things go wrong. And it keeps them competing to keep from being next."
Himura stretched. ":[Sayuri was barely started before she decided she'd had enough. A miscalculation on my part. She and her defiant little group work well enough for now, but I'll need more soon."

The buzzing of her phone interrupted. Himura brought the phone to her ear and tapped the screen with her thumb to answer. "Hello, Himura Tanaka."

"He's at the school," A familiar voice came over the line. Low, but not a whisper.

Himura raised an eyebrow and sat back in her seat, the social structure of her team momentarily forgotten. "Is he now? Alone?"

"SOMETHING happened. He busted into the shed as a girl, changed back to a guy, then passed out on the floor. Still in his girl's uniform. You want me to take pics?"

Himura considered. "Hmmmm… No, don't risk it. We don't know how heavy a sleeper he is. Make sure no one disturbs him, and see if you can't slip a boy's school uniform inside for him."

"What? Why?!"

Himura gave an exasperated sigh. "Because, my dear Hana… this is the opportunity I've been waiting for. He's vulnerable and alone now. Keep an eye on him and call me the moment he stirs. I will take care of the rest. Don't do anything to provoke him."

"He looks like he's out for the night…"

"Then grab a coffee and get comfortable. I'll send some backup to keep you company. Don't screw up this time." Himura thumbed the call closed without waiting for the reply.

"[The Godslayer is alone?]" Tan Pohn asked.

"[Oh, you caught that?]" Himura said, mentally filing away the fact the Chinese girl understood Japanese far better than she spoke it. ":[Yes. Ranma is having a bad night, apparently."

"[I should tell the Elder,]" Tan Pohn stood.

Himura reached up and caught her arm. ":[Not yet, dear Tan.]"

For a moment Himura thought she had miscalculated. The looks of pure ice she received made her wonder if she had overstepped. She carefully withdrew her hand as casually as she could, maintaining her smile and eye contact.
Tan Pohn grunted and sat back now. "[For now. Don't forget, he belongs to us when this is all done.]"

"[Of course not.]" Himura said. "[The game is almost over, after all. Though if you're anxious to help things along, I'd like to ask a favor of you and your sisters…]"

000 (Chapter 31 - The Cure, The Kiss, The Calamity End)
Ryouga stirred. He started to roll over, stopped himself to avoid disturbing whoever was sharing his bed with him, then realized that there was no one.

He opened his eyes slowly. He could see the ceiling of the Tendo’s guest room through the gloom - the room that Ranma and Genma had lived in, and that he had slept in himself many times. It seemed he had it all to himself for once. It felt so empty.

*I haven't been alone when I slept for a whole week*, he realized. He shivered. It reminded him too much of endless nights alone in that beat up old tent, without anyone around for a hundred miles. The Link just made that reminder of being alone more acute. Perhaps one day solitude would be something he would crave again, but for right now, having finally had a break in the loneliness… of simply having someone else *there*… just being alone in a room at night felt depressing.

He stared another few minutes. It was late… or early… most likely the point where the two intersected. Dark. And probably pointless to try and sleep. He sat up and rubbed his eyes. He was exhausted but the emptiness of being alone in his own dreams echoed.

*I would give anything to be a piglet in Akane's bed again*, he thought with a hint of dark mirth. *I'm right back where I started. All that bravado about how I'd rather be alone than live a lie anymore? Didn't even last a single night. You're PATHETIC, Hibiki.*

He heard a soft groan and abruptly discovered that he wasn't alone after all.

To his left was a shape under the covers of another futon set close to his, but not touching it. He blinked, knowing he had been alone when he went to sleep. He carefully got on all fours and crept over to get a better look. The mass was far too small to be that of Genma Saotome, so who…?

Gingerly, he peeled back the covers, revealing familiar short brown hair.

Nabiki stirred and turned her head, blinking blearily. "Mnnn?"

"Ahh! S-sorry!" Ryouga threw himself backwards, wondering how he was going to explain being in Nabiki’s room at night while she was sleeping, looming over her and pulling back her bedspread, before his brain caught up and pointed out that *she* was in *his* room. "W-wait… Nabiki? Why are you here?"

She groaned again and sat up slowly, rubbing at her eyes. She was wearing a light T-shirt and boxers, and looked a little rough. "Couldn’t sleep alone." She gave him a sheepish look. "Sorry for disturbing you. I know I didn’t ask, but…” She sighed and wrapped her arms around herself. "I guess I just got too used to not being alone at night."

"Yeah, you and me both," Ryouga muttered without thinking.

Nabiki raised an eyebrow, the old smirk coming back. "Well, if you needed a bed buddy, Ryo, you only had to ask…”

Ryouga stiffened, eyes widening. Then, he wasn't sure if it was the fatigue or something else but, something else managed to push past the initial mental short circuit; Annoyance.

"You know, I really wish you wouldn't do that," he muttered.
Nabiki blinked. "Do what?"

"The come ons!" Ryouga shot back. "Where… where you turn stuff around on me like that!"

Nabiki shrugged expressively. "I'm not teasing, Ryouga, I'm dead serious."

"Are you?" He scowled. "Then why do you always say it in a way that you know will make me lock up? It's that same sly come-on you use to put people off-balance." He sighed and closed his eyes. "I like the other Nabiki better."

"The… other Nabiki?" Nabiki repeated, confused.

"The Nabiki who likes photography. Who's earnest and enthusiastic and enjoys sharing something that interests her. The one you are when you're not trying to control things or stressing out because you're not in control of things. The one you were a minute ago when you said you came in here because you couldn't sleep, but you didn't just crawl into my futon because you respected my space."

Ryouga turned away for a moment, his voice dropping lower. "Besides… you know how Ranma feels about all this! You remember how twisted up she got when Shampoo kissed me! She's just barely okay with all of you being together because she knows how she feels about you and how you feel about her. She and I… aren't there right now. She's not ready, and I'm certainly not!" He noticed her stricken expression and closed his eyes. Well, that's it. I've wrecked things with her. Good job, Hibiki.

Nabiki was silent. She wet her lips as she seemed to be weighing his words. Finally, softly, she said, "You're right. I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry, I'm… I'm tired and I-wait, what?" Ryouga said, head snapping up to give her an astonished look.

Nabiki shook her head and chuckled sadly. "When I take a second to think about it, you're right. I know damn well that you'll lock up when I do that. I know because I do stuff like that to make boys lock up." She drew her knees up to her chest and hugged them. "I shut Shampoo down because I knew it was wrong and that Ranma wasn't ready… then I go and do it myself when she's not looking, because, somehow, that does make it okay. I keep pushing because… because I want it. And I keep using come ons because I won't actually take that step and be wrong… I keep trying to push you into doing it. I came in here promising myself I was going to be respectful and just try and sleep and it was okay as long as I gave you your space. And then, as soon as you showed some vulnerability, I turned it into a come on."

Ryouga swallowed, then carefully scooted over onto her futon, moving in a bit closer and kneeling. "L-look… I'm sorry, I didn't mean to snap like that." He rubbed the back of his head awkwardly. "I mean… I do messed up stuff like that when things get uncomfortable too. I just… usually resort to… well… violence…" He winced at that. Great, I just compared her flirting to me screaming 'Prepare to die!' and smashing things!

Nabiki gave him a shy smile. "I know. That's a little of what I like about you. We're… really very different, but under it all… a lot of who you are makes sense to me." She studied her hands a minute. "I… do like you, Ryouga. Not just as an extension of my relationship with Ranma. I'm just a mess at actually showing it."

"Yeah… well…" Ryouga looked away self-consciously. "I… haven't got room to talk there." He took a deep breath. "When Ranma comes home we should probably… y'know… talk about all this. Assuming I haven't screwed things up with her, too."
She reached out and put a hand on his arm. "You haven't," she said earnestly. "Trust me. There's something wrong… but that wasn't a rejection."

"I still need to hear it from *her*," Ryouga said.

Nabiki nodded. "I know."

There was an awkward silence between them for a few moments.

"We… uh… should get back to bed," Ryouga said, struggling to suppress a yawn.

"Can… I stay?" Nabiki asked. She waved her hands quickly. "Not a come on. In my own futon, I swear, I just…" she looked away. "I don't like being alone." She laughed softly. "That's so weird for me to say. The Ice Queen can't sleep on her own anymore."

Ryouga nodded. "Yeah… Please do. I'd like it if you did. I'm the same way." He crawled back over to his own futon, sparing a glance to her before he slipped back under the covers.

She smiled over at him. "Hey, Ryouga?"

"Yeah?" He settled down himself.

"I like that you like 'other' Nabiki," she said. "I'm always afraid that no one will."

"Well… I can't speak of 'other people'. Just me," Ryouga replied. He closed his eyes. The sense of loneliness wasn't pressing in on him anymore, even without the Link. He was pretty sure he could sleep now.

"Hey, Ryouga?" Nabiki asked again.

"Mmmm?" Ryouga replied.

"Keep reminding me?"

"Of what?"

"To be… better, I guess?"

He was quiet for a time, then smiled to himself. "As long as you keep teaching me photography."

"Deal."

000

The door to *Ucchan's* slid open and three figures trudged tiredly inside.

"That was everywhere I could think of," Akane said, settling heavily into a seat in one of the booths. "Even the old campsite where Ranma trained to face off against Ryouga and the *bakusai tenketsu*.

"I'll make us some coffee then we can head back out," Ukyou said as she dragged herself behind the counter and pulled out her kettle and french press.

"Why we not check at school?" Shampoo asked, sitting down across from Akane.

"The school is bugged and watched all the time, and being on school grounds this late would give Himura a perfect excuse to come down on us," Akane muttered. "We went around the outside, but I
didn't see anything on the grounds. We'll have to wait until morning so the groundskeeper can let us in to look."

"Until then… well, the Tendo Dojo and the Nekohanten are covered," Ukyou said. "I was expecting Konatsu to be back by now…" She sighed heavily.

"You mean he hasn't been?" Akane asked, curious.

"He left a note saying he was going out a few days ago. I don't normally press him. I think he's started spending time with someone and I didn't want to get in the way of that," Ukyou said, unconsciously busying herself with checking the supplies. "Things have been awkward between him and me since… well… Akane started coming home with me."

"Oooohhhh…" Akane said, blushing and sinking down in her seat. "I… I should have realized! Poor Konatsu…"

"He's taken time off to go train before, which is fine. I can't really afford to pay him a proper wage so I tell him he can come and go as he pleases as long as he lets me know in advance," Ukyou set the kettle on the burner after filling it with water and started to load the French press. "He's usually only gone for a day or two."

"Ninja waitress strong," Shampoo said. "Can take care of own self. Have to trust strength for now until Airen safe."

"Ranma is even stronger and yet we're out searching for her," Akane retorted. "I mean… what could have set off the Neko-ken like that?"

"Ryouga mentioned something buried. Something behind the Neko-ken," Ukyou said thoughtfully. "We all know Genma Saotome is a piece of crap… what if the Neko-ken training wasn't the worst of it and Ranma just doesn't remember because it was before the Neko-ken happened?"

Akane shook her head. "I think it's related. Nabiki and I went through Genma's pack. We found some letters… just fragments of stuff, but they made it sound like he used the Neko-ken training on Ranma quite a bit. What if he was doing more than just trying to teach Ranma the Cat Fist?"

"Trying to sort out what idiot Panda skin rug-in-law thinking when do anything make Shampoo's head hurt," Shampoo muttered. She yawned and slumped back in the booth.

Ukyou slid in next to Akane with a tray with three mugs. "Well, we might as well relax for a bit. Since Konatsu isn't here to man the fort, we can wait here for a while to see if Ranma shows up. Then when it's morning we'll head to the school." She passed out steaming mugs to the other two and took the last for herself. "Just don't fall asleep on me. Morning isn't that far away, and we want to be ready to move in case Nabiki or Cologne call."

000

Nabiki stirred as she felt a buzzing under her ear.

She squeezed her eyes shut, groaning, but some part of her brain wouldn't let her block it out. Her hand was already reaching under the pillow, fishing for her phone. She rolled onto her back and tapped the answer key on the screen. "Mnnnn… hello, Ukyou? Did you find anything?"

"Not quite, boss," Daisuke's familiar voice came through instead of Ukyou's.

"Daisuke?" Nabiki's eyes opened fully. She sat up and cupped the phone to her ear. "Did you find
something? Tell me you found something!"

"Oh, we found something," Daisuke replied. "We're... uhhh... not entirely sure just WHAT we found, but there is definitely weirdness in the Saotome Family Register. And we're not entirely sure that Himura was the one who caused it."

Nabiki blinked. "What do you mean?"

Daisuke could be heard audibly sighing on the other end of the line. "We're kinda hoping to get the documents to you and that you could figure it out, because it doesn't make a lot of sense to us. But... we've got a bit of a snag. The hall of records is still closed."

"And it doesn't open until Monday," Nabiki concluded. "Did you ask Alibaba for help?"

"We can't. I'm talking to you on one of the office phones here in the basement. We've got no cell phone signal and the guard is upstairs by the elevators so we can't get up and out," Daisuke replied.

Crap! I didn't think of that! Nabiki glanced at her phone. I didn't confirm the incoming number before answering, either. I'm getting sloppy. "All right, sit tight and I'll come get you. I'll just need to come up with an idea of how to do that." She glanced over to her right where Ryouga was sleeping. An brief image of Ryouga poking a wall and making it explode flitted through her mind before she firmly tamped it down.

"Actually, boss, I've got an idea for that," Daisuke cut in. "We just need some outside help. Have you ever seen the American movie 'Ghostbusters'?"

000

Weekend shifts were pretty sweet.

The security guard lounged at the desk with his feet propped up, flipping through the newspaper as the small TV on the desk blared some mindless game show. Every so often he'd take a walk around the building, then go back to his reading. He had a couple of manga to go through once he was done with the newspaper.

Of course, his bosses would be a bit miffed if they learned that's what he was doing, so he fudged the patrol logs a little - particularly when it came to patrolling the basement levels.

No one patrolled those.

Well, there was Reo, but that old fool was crazy and what did he know? He only worked during business hours, when the lights were all on and there were people and noise.

The desk guard had been down there when it was quiet - when there was no one about. He had seen things... heard things. All of the guards had, especially the night crews and weekend crews. Reo had told them that it was nothing more than old noisy pipes, but the desk guard, he had heard stories.

This weekend had been particularly bad. He had been hearing faint voices - indistinct whispers - floating through the vents all weekend. He had heard from another guard that the building had been built atop an old shrine and that no priest would even come near the place because of the angry spirits the desecration had released. It was said that the ground had been broken for the foundation during World War II, and the very next day? Hiroshima.
There was nobody down there. He knew there was nobody down there. All of the records down there were a minimum of ten years out of date and had long since been digitized. Nobody had any reason to go down there.

He certainly wasn't going to go down there!

He rustled his paper and did his best to ignore the fact that the phone switchboard kept lighting up as if someone were making outgoing calls, or that he could hear, ever so faintly through the floor, some kind of machinery running from time to time.

He had heard the stories about the last guard who went down there alone.

He started so badly he almost fell backwards in his chair as someone hit the door buzzer for the main entrance. The desk guard frowned and took his feet off the counter. It was Sunday - there were no deliveries scheduled for today. He hit the intercom. "Front Desk Security."

"Hello. I'm from the Paranormal Investigation and Elimination Service. I was scheduled to come out today to do an evaluation on this building?"

"Para-whatsis?" The desk guard frowned. "Wait, do you mean ghosts and stuff?"

There was a long sigh from the intercom. "Yes, if you MUST use the vernacular. Though that is a terrible oversimplification of the situation. There have been reports of disruptions at this location up to and including sightings of focuses and free-floating apparitions of class IV or greater, so my organization has been contracted by the government to ensure the location is suitably cleansed…"

The desk guard shook his head. "Okay, okay, woah, I'm coming to the front door, hang on." He got up, snagged his keyring from the wall hook and walked over to the front door.

The woman he saw through the glass door was not what he expected from the usual kooks who buzzed in. She was wearing a very smart looking brown miniskirt and blazer over a white dress blouse that was unbuttoned just enough for a glimpse of cleavage, and the outfit was tailored just snugly enough to show that she had some rather interesting curves under her businesslike facade. Long black hair framed a face dominated by a pair of shaded spectacles and she presented the general demeanor of a lawyer or government official. He unconsciously quickened his stride.

He unlocked the door and cracked it open. "How might I help you, Miss…?"

She tipped her shades down slightly. "I represent the firm of Venkman, Spengler, Stanz and Zeddemore. I was told this site was going to be prepared for me?" She pushed past him and strode with a frustrated sigh. "I can see the message wasn't passed down the chain. Not surprising when you're dealing with government work."

"Ummm… I… excuse me miss, but…" the desk guard stammered. He was momentarily distracted by the view as she walked smartly down the main reception hall.

She tugged on a pair of light gloves and pulled out a phone and a funny looking gizmo that she attached to it and started holding it up, frowning at the screen. "Hmmm. PKE readings are already spiking. I understand that the majority of the sightings or other incidents have been in the basement?"

"I… ummm… yes ma'am," the desk guard said. "I… uhh… I hate to be a bother, but if I could just get you to sign in…"

"I'll need to see the area of greatest concentration, of course. We'll need to do at least a preliminary survey of the site before we can begin to consider extraction, even if it's not properly prepared." She
paused and looked at him. "Did they happen to at least set up the thermal imaging equipment?"

"Thermal… what…?" the guard parroted, confused. There was a thumping coming from downstairs, like those worrisome noises that had been happening all weekend, but now it was louder.

She sighed heavily, then walked back towards him, heels clacking on the tile. "You have been properly briefed, yes? And you've taken the proper precautions? Unprotected exposure to the site could be dangerous at this unstable stage."

"D-dangerous?" the guard stammered. "W-what… from ghosts?" He could hear a metallic tapping noise now, in addition to the thumping.

"What we are dealing with is a build-up of stagnant psychic residue that has been allowed to fester for far too long - leading to a structural deformation of the local space-time which has allowed a continual ectoplasmic feedback loop that could very well lead to a Class V Full Torso Repeater, so unless you are looking forward to being challenged to a death-duel by Miyamoto Mushashi nightly, then yes, you are in danger from ghosts." She resumed scanning with her phone. "Now, to your knowledge, was this building constructed on any sort of consecrated soil? A graveyard, perhaps, or a temple…?"

"I… uhh… I heard rumours of a shrine…?" the guard said nervously. He kept eying the elevators. They were starting to go up and down the floors on their own, starting from, of course, the basement.

"Mnnnh… that could be very bad… There is obviously significant agitation going on. Is it usually this bad?" She looked around.

"Umm… n-no, this is as bad as it's ever been. Usually the ghosts are pretty quiet…" the guard whimpered.

"Living Impaired, please. Most sentient and quasi-sentient apparitions find the appellation 'ghost' insulting. Especially if you're dealing with a kitsune or some other small kami who was never alive to begin with. Is there anyone else in the building?" She fixed him with a hard look.

"I… no, it's just me!" There were sounds of doors slamming downstairs and he found his knees were trembling slightly.

"Good. This site is growing increasingly unstable. Since they haven't properly briefed you on the situation, I strongly recommend you vacate the building until we can get an emergency containment team on site." She frowned at her phone. "This is actually very, very bad."

"B-but… if I leave the site without permission, I could lose my job!" he protested. There was a loud bang from the basement. "You know what? Nevermind! Screw this job! I'm just a part-timer anyway!" He turned and ran towards the door, pushed it open and sprinted into the street.

A few hours later he wondered if he had been scammed.

000

Nabiki walked from the building, twirling a ring of keys around her finger. She tossed them into a nearby mailbox (after making sure that it wasn't Tsubasa), then pulled off her wig and her gloves. The clamor of the building's fire alarm could be heard in the distance as the group walked.

"I have to admit, that was pretty awesome," Yuka said. "Do you… talk your way into places like that often?"
Nabiki smirked. "That's probably information you're better off not knowing." She pulled the bit of techno-junk off her phone and tucked it into her pocket. It was just a circuit board with some LEDs that plugged into the phone's power port and blinked at random, with some greebles glued on. It was amazing how much credibility a bit of custom-looking gadgetry with blinky lights could give to things. She tapped the dial button and brought the phone to her ear. "How are we doing?"

"The fire department is on their way," Alibaba's filtered voice replied. "Security camera footage for the last half hour has mysteriously ended up corrupted, both the originals and the backups uploaded to the archive site. I added some fun ghostly audio to it. The security guard will probably still lose his job, but with the fire alarm they can't penalize him for evacuating the building. He'll get the full two weeks severance and in another week he'll astonishingly get a job offer from ANOTHER security company he doesn't remember applying with."

"Awful lot of work just to get us back out," Hiroshi muttered.

"But it also saves us the trouble of cleaning up the mess in the basement," Daisuke replied.

"You wiped down everything you touched?" Nabiki asked.

"Everything," Yuka reassured her. "It wasn't hard. Anywhere the dust was disturbed we gave a once-over. That place probably hasn't been that clean in years."

"I'll keep an eye on it, but enough weird things have happened in that building over the years that it'll probably be written off, since no records are actually missing." Alibaba said. "Anything else I can do to help?"

"Not for right now. Thanks for the assist," Nabiki replied.

"If you're ever interested in this line of work beyond our arrangement, we could use skills like yours," Alibaba suggested. "Just… putting that out there."

Nabiki raised an eyebrow. "I'll… keep it under advisement." She tapped the phone screen to end the call and tucked it away. Industrial espionage as a career? Well… not like it's an option I haven't considered…

"So… about what we found…" Daisuke said.

"Not here," Nabiki said. "C'mon… let's go have a cup of tea. I know a place where we won't be bothered."

000

Ryouga awoke to find a note pinned to his blanket.

Gone out to get Daisuke, Yuka and Hiroshi out of a situation. If Ranma shows up, call me. Don't get lost. If you need anything, ask Kasumi. Back soon.

Love,

Nabiki

'Love', huh? he thought as he dressed and left the dojo. He knew not to read too much into the tagline, but it did make him think. There was certainly something between him and Nabiki. As it had been with Shampoo, there was this dawning realization that he had truly not been paying attention to the people around him.
He had decided to take a walk - an easy enough thing, except… it was the first time he had ever been able to do so, without ending up in Osaka or Oslo, or Omsk, or Oklahoma. It was a new sensation to be able to walk along a street and trust that he could turn around and it would take him back the way he had come.

_I need to stay focused on Ranma before I worry about any of that_, he decided. _Maybe I should go looking for her myself?_ He still felt nervous about the idea of ranging too far afield. The route between his house and the Tendo Dojo was fresh in his mind and well-known, but the idea of going beyond that still worried him. He had been able to find his way without problem so far, but what if his directional problems came back while he was out searching?

_Akane, Ukyou and Shampoo can find her_, he thought finally after a brief internal struggle. _I need to stay somewhere THEY can find ME._

He looked up and realized that in his reverie he had found his way to the vacant lot behind his house. He looked across it to see the windows of his own house on the far side. _How on earth could I get lost going from there to here?_ he wondered, bewildered. He knew it made some kind of sense at the time, that everything had been twisted and confused and turned around; but now he could see why his inability to find his way was so maddening for other people.

_I guess that's what having a demon in your brain will do to you_, he thought, shuddering a bit at the memory. He narrowed his eyes a bit but couldn't tell if his mother was around the house or not.

_His gaze passed over the empty lot, mysteriously unoccupied for many years, and finally fell on the retaining wall._

He frowned. _I wonder…_ He walked over to a certain spot at the wall and started to tug at the bricks.

At first he thought someone had re-mortared the loose bricks but, after a bit of wiggling, the ancient masonry started to come free. He put the brick aside and reached into the hollow behind it. His fingers brushed something and he carefully pulled it out.

_It was a sandwich bag, the kind that had the sealable top, and inside was a sloppily folded piece of paper. The bag was filthy and still damp, covered with years of slime and gunk, but it was still sealed._

_Ranma really did leave me a note_, he thought with some amazement. He opened the bag carefully, the plastic brittle and yellowed with age. He pulled the paper out and unfolded it. It was one of the lined sheets from an old school notebook, torn out and covered with a familiar, nearly illegible scrawl.

He felt a pang of regret as he read the first line. He turned and leaned against the wall and sighed.

_He hated him for so long. He knew… He knew I wanted to do it on my own. He kept reading, feeling a nostalgic ache as Ranma mentioned their times together. I miss him. Why does it feel like I'm thinking about a friend who's died?_ he wondered. _I guess… our relationship is so different now._

The next line gave him pause, though. He frowned and re-read the paragraph to make sure he was interpreting Ranma's terrible handwriting right. The next paragraph was no better. _Something wrong with his body? What…?_

Then he finished the last paragraph. He flipped over the sheet to find the last line Ranma had written.

_All the blood drained from his face._
That's not possible, he thought. He turned and looked at the wall that he had pried the brick from; the moss on the grout had grown to cover even the loose brick, partially cementing it in place. That's why it had been so tough to remove. No one had opened this hidden spot for three years.

How can Ranma have written this two years before ever reaching Jusenkyo?! He stared at the letter again.

Hastily, he folded the letter, stuffed it into his pocket and stood up. I have to find her... I have to find her NOW!

000

Nabiki scowled at the set of photocopied documents.

She liked her ledgers balanced. She liked it when things added up. Most of the time she could look at a situation and figure out what was going on, so much so that it was often frustrating how oblivious other people could be to what was utterly obvious. Things always added up.

What she had in front of her? It didn't add up.

They were all seated around a table at the Clara's Leaf tea shop. Daisuke, Yuka and Hiroshi had been distracted by Jiro's tea-guessing ritual, which left Nabiki a few moments to peruse the material they'd uncovered.

One was official-looking, standard government-issue, filled out by someone who filled out such forms on a daily basis. She didn't know enough about medical jargon to decipher a lot of it, but the gist was clear: Nodoka was admitted to Nerima General in labor, the decision was made to perform a Cesarean Section because of complications, and a baby girl was delivered at 4:13 AM.

The other was the standard form filled out by midwives who conducted the more traditional births, which made sense for someone like Nodoka. It was filled out competently, even if the handwriting was a little shaky, and listed Nodoka as the mother, Genma as the father, and outlined the birth of a baby boy at 4:13 AM. Birth weight and other specifics were the same; the only differences were hair color and, obviously, gender.

"So... it's pretty obvious one of these sheets was cribbed from the other," Nabiki said with a scowl. She had a bad feeling and she didn't like it.

"My money is that whomever Himura hired to forge the Nerima General document got too fancy for their own good." Hiroshi said, sipping his tea.

"Yeah, but look at the midwife certificate," Daisuke pointed at it with his spoon. "See how the handwriting changes? It's like someone else filled out the rest of it afterwards."

"That's not unusual," Yuka said. "They pre-fill most of the fields before the birth even takes place, so they just have to record the specifics after. I have a cousin who works as a midwife."

"Well, we know Ranma is a guy, right Nabiki?" Hiroshi said, looking to her for confirmation. "Just from how the curses work, right?"

Nabiki set her jaw. Things were falling into place in her head and the picture they were forming was one she didn't like. "I used to think that before. Then some crazy prince from China came along with a ladle." She pushed her chair out and stood, fishing her phone from her pocket. "There's only one person who can answer this question. Come on, we're going to have a chat with Nodoka Saotome."
"But… we've not finished our tea…" Hiroshi said, glancing at his cup mournfully.

"Next one is on me," Nabiki replied as she strode out the door. For some reason she didn't get very good cell reception in the Tea Shop. She suspected Jiro had some sort of signal jammer to avoid distractions to his customers. She dialled home.

"Hello, Tendo Residence!"

"Kasumi, is Ryouga there?" Nabiki asked. She mentally started plotting a route to the Saotome residence as she walked.

"Oh, hello Nabiki. Ryouga went out for a walk. Is something wrong?"

Nabiki slowed to a stop and stared at her phone. She brought it back to her ear. "He went for a walk!? Kasumi…!"

"I DID ask him to stop, but he was already halfway out the door," Kasumi replied, seeming to sense her concern. "He appeared to be managing a straight line, and was walking towards his house. You DID say you had a cure for his directional issues, didn't you? I thought it wasn't a problem any longer?"

"It doesn't seem like it's a problem anymore, but we don't know for sure. But that's only part of the problem. When he gets back, tell him I need him at the Saotome residence. Bring him there yourself if you have to."

"Why? What's happened?" Kasumi asked, a note of worry creeping into her voice.

"Hopefully? Nothing. But I want him there anyway. I'll explain later, sis. Gotta go." She ended the call then started dialing again.

"Hello, Ucchan's…" a tired-sounding Ukyou picked up the call after too many rings.

"Ukyou, are Akane and Shampoo still with you?" Nabiki asked.

"Nabiki? Yeah, yeah they are. Uhhh… we kinda fell asleep trying to… not fall asleep. What time is it?"

"About midday. I'm assuming you didn't find Ranma?" Nabiki said, quickening her stride once more.

"No, but we narrowed it down. We think she's at the school. Or… WAS at the school, anyway. We couldn't check without breaking a mess of rules. We were gonna go this morning, but…"

Nabiki blew out a breath in frustration. "I get it, Ukyou. Just go now, quickly, and then meet me at the Saotome residence whether you find Ranma or not. I've got a potential bomb on my hands."

"… a LITERAL bomb, or…" Ukyou's tone was more worried than joking.

"Metaphorical, but potentially worse than actual explosives would be," Nabiki replied. "Just hurry."

"We'll be there. And… sorry sugar. For letting you down."

Nabiki took a deep breath, calmed herself and reminded herself she was dealing with family, not employees. "It's all right. You're human and you've had a very long night, and I spent it in a soft bed, so I don't get to judge. Just hurry."
"Will do, sugar."

Nabiki ended the call and put her phone away. She was regretting the heels that came with her disguise now. *Damnit, please, for once let me be totally off base about this!*

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Ranma woke up with an awful taste in his mouth. The instant he moved, the abused muscles of his neck screamed in protest as his spine finally shifted out of its unnatural bent. He groaned and took a few quick, short breaths. His chest felt constricted.

*Where am I?* He slowly, painfully worked himself up to a sitting position. Wherever he was was dark, what light there was filtering in from an open door.

He shifted and realized he was in his male form, but still wearing his girl's uniform. He grunted, reached back and popped the clasp on the bra, which immediately reduced the pressure on his chest. *Ugh... why am I a guy in girl's clothes?* He got up carefully and walked to the door, mindful of anyone seeing him as he was.

There was a bundle of clothing by the door. He knelt to examine it: a set of boxers and a Furinkan Boy's uniform. He checked the tags and they seemed to be in his size. *Who would leave this here?* he wondered. He didn't own a Furinkan school uniform, so why would there be one in his size just sitting here?

He nudged the door closed, deciding to get properly dressed before facing whatever was waiting for him outside. He changed clothes rapidly, using the quick-swap technique he had mastered. He folded the girl's uniform and underthings and set them aside, planning to retrieve them later.

*This is the schoolyard shed,* Ranma thought, recognizing it from when he and Nabiki had taken refuge inside it. *That means I'm on school grounds as a guy. I should change back.* He glanced back at the tap but felt a sudden surge of apprehension. There was something *bad* connected with being a girl right now - something far too close to the surface. *No, you know what? It's Sunday. There's no school and no teachers to bust me, and it wouldn't even be legit if they did! I already got changed... I'll just stay this way. I've been spending too much time as a girl anyway.*

Something itched at the back of his mind. Not so much something he had forgotten, but something he was very deliberately trying to avoid remembering at the moment. He opened the door again and peeked outside.

There was a figure standing outside the door, hands clasped behind her back. Tall, blonde, wearing a nondescript white blouse and a blue skirt, with a large designer purse slung over her shoulder. She wore a mirthless smile that didn't reach her eyes which reminded him of a doll's mask.

"Himura," he said, stepping out of the shed. "I guess you got me, huh?"

"Hmmm?" Himura raised an eyebrow. "Oh! Being on school grounds as a boy! I think we both know that since school isn't in session that would be a flimsy premise. Although…" she leaned a bit to the side to peer at the door behind him. "It does look like you've done a number on that door. Still, hardly the worst damage you've caused to school property."

"I'm sure you could spin it if you really wanted to." Ranma replied carefully. "So what *do* you want? If you were gonna bust me over this you'd pull me into the Principal's office on Monday with a couple of photos. You hardly ever say 'boo' to me - you've got your minions to do that."

Himura laughed lightly. "Ranma, Ranma, Ranma... You silly goose! I've been respecting your
space!"

"Uh huh. Respect," Ranma replied dryly. "Care to try again?"

Himura sighed dramatically and started to pace. "Ranma, I know we got off on the wrong foot, you and I. I had simply mistaken you for another dumb jock who was causing an undue amount of chaos and damage to my precious school. I admit… I came on strong and I was very confrontational."

"You threatened to get me charged with sexual assault," Ranma shot back in a low growl.

"As a martial artist you use what weapons you have, yes? That was what I had. You'll forgive me if I was somewhat inelegant in my approach." She turned to face him. "But as I learned more about you… as I looked into your past… I learned that you were so much more than what I thought. I found there are secrets there that even you aren't aware of."

Ranma blinked then a look of horror passed across his face. "Please tell me we're not engaged…" he moaned softly.

Himura broke out laughing. Much to Ranma's surprise it was actual, genuine laughter, not the scornful, manufactured titter in which she normally indulged. He actually found his guard dropping a bit.

"No… no… absolutely not!" she chuckled, regaining her composure as she wiped away a tear. "Though, learning about your father's activities I can see why that's a legitimate fear for you and not just the chauvinism I originally felt you were guilty of." She took a few steps closer, eyes locked onto his. "But even if we were engaged it wouldn't matter. It wouldn't be legal. None of your engagements are legal… save one."

Ranma blinked, wanting to step back but realizing his back was to the shed. "Uhhh… you mean to the Tendos?"

Himura smirked. "No." She opened her purse and pulled out what looked like a very old scroll. "Perhaps we should go sit down? I could have my driver take us to that local ice cream shop you frequent?"

Ranma's eyes narrowed. He folded his arms. "Honestly? I'd rather you just get to the point."

Himura shrugged. "All right. Though I think you'll really rather have sat down first. Here, catch." She tossed the scroll to him.

He caught it by reflex. For a moment he was worried it was some sort of spell trap meant to ensnare him, but there was no crackle of energy nor the tingle of a spell taking effect. He examined it suspiciously.

"I'm no Amazon. My family deals in pharmaceuticals, not magic," Himura said. "Open it. Take a look. The translation is rough and, regrettably, defaces the original document, but your father has little respect for such things I understand."

"Pops?" Ranma unfurled the scroll. The bottom third of the scroll looked like it had been mended, as though that section had been torn away and re-attached, but most of it was clear, if a bit faded. It was in Mandarin with notes and translations scrawled in his father's recognizable handwriting.

"Evidently he reads Chinese better than he lets on. Or he had someone do the translations for him. But I've had them checked and they're competent enough to get the meaning across," Himura said as Ranma read. "I found it quite by chance while researching your path from China to Nerima. He
pawned it at a curio shop shortly after you landed. Thankfully it was still there when I arrived. Seems there's not much market for defaced ancient Chinese scrolls."

Ranma's eyes widened as he read. He recognized some of the words without needing the translations. *Jusenkyo. Spring of Drowned Man.* "What is this…?"

"Approximately eighteen hundred years ago, during the time of the Three Kingdoms, a nobleman with aspirations to the… Shu throne I think it was? There was so much intrigue going on then it was hard to tell… Anyway, he had aspirations but needed a male heir. Sadly, he had only daughters. Back then, Jusenkyo was already old, and Jusendo was powerful. Few dared to travel there. But he dared and, with water from the cursed springs, an alchemist who served him created a special potion. A simple Jusenkyo curse would not suffice, for in those days there were those skilled in Chi reading who would be able to spot such things. He needed more - a complete shift of mind and body."

"He never got to test his concoction, for the noble and his entire family were assassinated a few days after the formula was completed. Something about it being unhealthy to be obviously and publically vying for someone else's throne."

"So… then this is a cure?" Ranma asked, frowning.

"Oh, it could certainly be used as such. From what I've gathered, it bypasses the whole messy issue of curses mixing. But I wouldn't recommend it for you." She took another few steps forward while he was distracted.

"Why not?" Ranma frowned. "If it's not a cure then what's it got to do with me?"

"Before I tell you… just remember everything you've gone through," Himura intoned, her eyes intent on his. "Remember how I forced you to attend school as a girl. Remember how I arranged matters so you would have a circle of female friends, so you could evolve and develop as a woman. Remember how I have looked the other way while you have breached our agreement a dozen times over. I did all of these things for your benefit, so that you would be ready for this moment."

Ranma felt a cold knot forming in the pit of his stomach. "L-look… whatever you're trying to say, whatever it is you're trying to pull… I'm not buying it, okay? After everything you've done… you're a Yakuza Princess!"

"And you're the child of a thief and a liar," Himura replied softly. "Perhaps more. Child trafficker, certainly, with as many times as he sold you. I don't expect you to believe I did the things I did out of the goodness of my heart. I just need you to believe what I tell you next to be true. This potion will not cure you, Ranma… because you have already taken it."

Ranma blinked. He realized that she was far too close for comfort. "What?" he hissed harshly.

"Look at the scroll. Look at the list of ingredients. Remember your path through Japan. The ingredients listed there grow in very specific places in Asia and Genma's path over those fourteen years covers all of that ground. Your 'training journey' was a quest to gather rare and difficult to obtain components, many of which grew in Japan… but… not all. Have your Amazon friends verify that, if you wish, I'm sure they know of most of these items." Her voice was low, intense and hard to ignore.

"No…" Ranma backed up against the door of the shed, pushing it closed. He shook his head. "No!"

"The start of this trail is in your own Family Register. On it are two Ranma Saotomes; one male and one female. Both were born at the exact same time, to the exact same woman, but in two completely different places. Two years later, your father left home with one child and your mother was left"
alone. There is no death certificate for the ‘lost sibling’. Genma already had the scroll at that point. His path took him all over Japan, gathering ingredients, until, finally, he travelled to China to gather the last few…"

"No! I'd remember!" Ranma shouted, staring at her in horror.

"Would you? Some of these ingredients are powerful hypnotics. They make the memory plastic; they help the mind adapt. Memories can be changed, reshaped or pushed away entirely," Himura pressed on. "That Korean businessman who your father sold you to? He bought a girl from Genma Saotome. I acquired documentation of that transaction from my Triad contacts."

"That's… that's just… Pops just lied to him is all!" Ranma protested desperately. "I've got a curse! Cold water cursed form, hot water real form! I'm a guy!"

"And you've never encountered anything that altered the curses or how they worked?" Himura asked sweetly. "Why would a third-rate martial artist from Japan travel all the way to China, to a legendary training ground, without knowing anything about what made it legendary? Why not take the scroll and ask him yourself?"

Ranma's eyes flicked down to the scroll in his hands, then back up to her. "This is a trick. I know it is!" he snarled.

Himura's smile showed far too many teeth. "How does the line go? 'Search your feelings, you know it to be true!' She chuckled dryly. "You'll discover the truth soon enough. When you do, come find me. We have much to discuss."

He glared at her for a moment longer then shouldered past, sprinting in the direction of the Saotome home.

Himura watched him go with a smile on her lips. Finally, she pulled a phone from her purse and brought it to her ear.

"Hello, Sanae. I have a job for you and Omi. Tell our new friends… 'Game On'.'"

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Nabiki hesitated at the front door of the Saotome residence.

"Something wrong, boss?" Daisuke asked. He, Yuka and Hiroshi were watching her expectantly.

"I was hoping Ryouga or the girls would be here," Nabiki admitted. "I… don't get along well with Nodoka Saotome."

"I don't think I've ever met her," Daisuke commented. "She anything like Ranma's Dad?"

"Ranma's Dad is just lazy, selfish and criminally neglectful," Yuka muttered. "Nodoka Saotome is crazy."

Nabiki took a deep breath then rapped smartly on the door.

She waited for three breaths. Then ten.

She knocked again. Nothing.

"Is… she not home?" Hiroshi asked, peering at the door.
"I thought I heard voices from the yard…" Yuka said with a nod toward the fence.

Nabiki frowned. *If I push, I'm going to blow any chance to resolve the Omiai. But… my gut tells me that's not going to happen anyway.* She took a breath and nodded. *When it doubt, always go with your gut.* She reached out and tried the door.

It opened without issue; unlocked.

"Boss…?" Daisuke said nervously. "Should we be…?"


She could hear voices from the living room. Nodoka Saotome for certain, and…

*No…!* Nabiki's steps quickened as she threw caution and stealth to the wind and barged into the living room.

Nodoka looked up from where she was sitting on her couch. Seated across from her was the other voice she had heard - Kodachi Kuno, dressed in a formal kimono. On the coffee table between them was a sheaf of papers - what looked very much like a contract.

"Nabiki! I didn't hear you knock," Nodoka said, the flicker of annoyance on her face quickly covered by a mask of forced pleasantry. "You know, you really shouldn't barge into other people's houses, dear…"

Nabiki's eyes narrowed. "That's a marriage contract, isn't it?" she nodded towards the sheaf of papers. For the moment, the Family Registry inconsistencies were washed aside under a wave of fresh outrage as she realized what had almost happened behind her back.

Nodoka drew in a deep breath through her nose, straightened and picked up her teacup. She took a sip and sighed. "*I had hoped to break the news to you and the other girls in a more relaxed environment once all the arrangements were out of the way…*"

"You mean after Ranma is safely married and we don't have a say anymore?" Nabiki shot back.

Nodoka levelled a cold glare at her. "You mean as opposed to the immoral arrangement you suggested to me?" She turned her gaze to Kodachi and smiled. "Ko-chan, can you believe Nabiki proposed a *group* marriage to me?!" She laughed lightly then returned her gaze to Nabiki. "$d you think I would accept your taking my son with you to China to live in some… some *hedonistic cult commune*!?! I did not wish to mention it out of respect to your father, but I can see that perhaps he and I should have a chat about the obvious emotional problems you and Akane seem to have." She set her teacup down. "In the meantime, I think it's best if you leave. I will be by the Dojo shortly to collect my son and his things. I'll see you out now."

Kodachi turned to look at Nabiki. Nabiki noticed that her usual haughty expression was absent. Instead her gaze was intense, as if trying to communicate something. "Nabiki Tendo, this is for the best. I will ensure my darling Ranma is well looked after. We can *settle this matter later.*" She put special emphasis on the last part.

Nabiki furrowed her brow. *Maybe Kodachi isn't totally taken in by this, but I can't afford to risk that. Sorry Kodachi…* She looked over at Nodoka, who had picked up her cloth-wrapped katana and was walking towards her. "$d would like one last request before I go, as Ranma's former fiancee?"

Nodoka sighed impatiently. "$t cannot promise anything, young lady, but… very well. What is it?
Ko-chan and I are very busy. I haven't time for foolish-

"Let me see your cesarean scar," Nabiki said coldly.

The sudden draining of color from Nodoka's face was all the confirmation Nabiki needed.

"It's there, isn't it," Nabiki continued softly. She took a step forward, forcing Nodoka back a pace.

"It's… You should leave now," Nodoka said, regaining some composure.

Nabiki tossed the folder she had been holding onto the coffee table, on top of the contract. "In that folder is a copy of the Saotome Family register, as well as the birth records for one 'Ranma Saotome'. Or, should I say two Ranma Saotomes? One, a boy, born to Nodoka Saotome at home in a midwife-assisted birth. The other, a girl, born at Nerima General Hospital at exactly the same time, by cesarean section. Two Ranma Saotomes on the Family Register, one male, one female." Nabiki took another step forward, forcing the older woman back further. "So… let's see that bellybutton, Mrs. Saotome. Prove me wrong. Prove me crazy."

"I… I don't have to show you anything, you disturbed child!" Nodoka glared at her but her composure had cracked. "Leave now before I call the authorities!"

"What is this…?" Kodachi asked, eyes wide as she flipped through the contents of the folder.

"They're just clever forgeries by a clever girl who is desperate and knew she was about to lose, Ko-chan!" Nodoka hurried towards her, trying to snatch the folder and its contents away.

Kodachi held them back, out of reach, staring at Nodoka like she had grown a second head. "This has to do with Ran, doesn't it? What have you done? What are you plotting?!" Her gaze narrowed into a glare.

"I… have no idea what you're talking about!" Nodoka said, laughing nervously. "My dear, you mustn't believe these silly fantasies!"

"How did you do it?" Nabiki demanded. "Jusenkyo had something to do with it, didn't it? What did you do?!"

"Why don't you tell them?"

Nodoka froze. Her eyes widened in fear and she spun.

Nabiki turned to see Ranma standing there. He was wearing a Furinkan boy's uniform and in one hand he held a scroll - a very old scroll. He appeared calm on the surface, but the familiarity Nabiki had developed with him allowed her to see the tremors that betrayed just how close to the edge he really was.

Ranma tossed the scroll onto the floor, where it unrolled. Nodoka's eyes widened further and she recoiled from it physically.

"Where… where did you get that?" she whispered in hushed horror.

"It's all true, isn't it?" Ranma said softly. "You and Pops. You've lied to me my whole life. Brainwashed me. Used magic to change what I was." His jaw trembled. "Why?!"

Nodoka glanced from Nabiki to Kodachi to Ranma. A hundred different emotions passed across her face. It was disturbing, like an animatronic that had malfunctioned. Finally, slowly, they all drained
away. The fear in her eyes faded until there was only contempt left in its place.

"It pains me, Ranma, the disrespect you show by intruding into affairs that are none of your concern." Nodoka turned to face her son, her expression cold and unforgiving.

"Not my concern?" Ranma echoed incredulously. "How can it not…"

"Must a parent account to their child for correcting a birth defect?" she said softly, though there was an undertone of menace to her words.

"Birth defect?!" Ranma yelped, his own composure slipping. "I was born a girl! You knew Pops was doing this! That's why you let him take me!"

"He didn't take 'you'!" Nodoka snarled. She took a step forward, kicking the scroll aside. Something about her demeanor made her seem taller, more menacing. "I have tolerated quite enough disobedience from you, Ranma. After all your father and I have done for you!" Making a visible effort to calm herself, she continued more softly, though the ice in her tone persisted, "Congratulations. You and your little friends have managed to uncover parts of the truth. Truths your father and I have kept hidden for your own good! Truths you are going to be sorry for knowing!" She shook her head. "I had wanted to spare you this, my son, and to let you live your life in happy ignorance. I was willing to accept you!"

Ranma narrowed his eyes. "What?! Accept me? Accept me? You and Pops changed me!"

"You will not raise your voice to me in my own house!" Nodoka roared with enough force to momentarily silence everyone else in the room. "You simply don't understand, do you? Of course you don't! You were never meant to!" She waved at him. "All of this… It's all a delusion of yours! Your father did not take you when you were two years old because you were only born two years ago!"

Ranma blinked and took a step back. "What are you talking about…?"

"Before that creature was born, I made a vow to your Grandfather. To secure his blessing to marry Genma, I vowed that I would produce a male heir to carry on the family legacy. I swore, Ranma. I swore on my honor, and I did everything right!" Her voice trembled with barely suppressed fury. "I prayed! I followed all the rules of motherhood to ensure a strong male heir… kept warm, bound my belly tightly, ate only the proper foods… and then that… that wretched red-haired thing not only usurped my son's rightful place, but she tore my womb when they sought to remove her like the parasitic tick that she was! I was robbed of my son!"

She swallowed and took a moment to regain her center, her expression becoming a mask of steely indifference. "I wanted to simply choke her in the crib. No one would have blamed me… she was such a hateful thing… but Genma pled for her life. For that, at least, you should be grateful as otherwise you wouldn't even be here! Thankfully… thankfully, some years earlier, Soun had gifted your father that scroll. I'm sure he meant it as a joke at the time, but… it offered us hope. So my sweet Genma took the changeling that had taken your place on a long journey - to bring you back."

"What do you mean… what did you…" Ranma stammered, eyes wide with horror.

"The girl who once bore your name died when your father used that potion," Nodoka said. "The potion was meant to bring you into the world, my son, the child I was meant to have. And it was to banish that terrible girl into the abyss, where she belonged. Her sacrifice was to undo the mistake of her birth… perhaps even bring her tormented soul some peace and purge her of her sins. But your father botched it, of course. Her spirit lingered. She infected you. Corrupted you. She's haunted you
with her form and the delusion that she is you. And being what you are, you were so easily influenced by her lies. Don't you see? She is trying to steal back the life that we reclaimed from her to make you!"

Ranma shook his head. "No, that doesn't make sense… What…?"

"Ranma… you're a homunculus." Nodoka said. There was a cruelty in her even tone and gentle smile. "You're not human. You have no soul. You have no memories, no feelings, no desires of your own. You're a thing of magic, made to fulfil the destiny of the Saotome clan. You only think that you're real."

"No!" Ranma shouted in horrified defiance. "I'm human! I'm a person!"

"Tch." Nodoka clucked her tongue sadly. "All of these obsessive girls surrounding you… I fear they've confused you, my son. Your father and I must also accept some of the blame. We loved you as our son. We gave you your memories. We treated you with respect and with kindness. We gave you freedom, and we allowed you to believe you were a person. I see now that wasn't what you needed from us." She took another step forward. "Go to your room and wait for your father to get home, so we can decide what we are going to do about this."

Ranma backed away. "N-no… No! I'm not doing what you tell me to anymore!"

"Obey me, Ranma," Nodoka said, her voice tight and cold as she advanced on him further. "After all that we have done for you… after all that we have sacrificed for you… how dare you refuse this simple request? We will need to discuss how best to teach you gratitude."

"Leave him alone!" Nabiki shouted. She could feel a buzzing in her head. It started as a low growl, but swelled rapidly into a high pitched wail that rattled around in her skull. It was making it hard to focus. She grimaced... too much emotion…

Ranma tripped and lost his balance, stumbled back and knocked a flower vase off the shelf behind him. The water spilled over his head, triggering the curse and, now female, Ranma fell to sprawl gracelessly on the floor.

"And there she is," Nodoka said softly as her face twisted into a sneer. "'Ranko', the little thief who isn't done stealing from me, even in death. So you retreat into the fantasy? You take on that haunted, wretched form? What makes you think that if some of your memories are false that they all aren't? What do you remember clearly before you came out of that pool? Nothing. You didn't even remember me."

Nabiki glanced over as she heard Kodachi scream and saw her wide-eyed look of shock. Of course… NOW she gets the curse! Nabiki thought, though it was a struggle to do so. She knew she needed to do something, to stop this, but the screaming in her head…

"Did you think that girl whose body you stole was some kind of victim? That she was some poor, abused waif, unloved by her cruel parents?" Nodoka growled, advancing as Ranma scrambled back, unable to get her feet under her. "She was a heartless little monster from birth! I could see it in her eyes! She was always glaring at me, with nothing but ice in her soul! She would never laugh, was always crying, always struggling and fighting me in even the smallest of things! She took from me and took, and would never give anything back until we forced her to! Is that what you wish to be?"

Nodoka put her hands on her hips and glared at the girl cowering before her. "She stole her life from me… the life that rightfully belonged to my son! And now that I've given it to you, you think that
you can repeat her crime!?” She started tugging at the wrappings of her katana. "That life of yours is stolen twice over! I demand you return it to me. If you won't accept the duty of a son of the Saotome line, then pick up your tanto and return it to the earth!"

"NO!" Ranma whimpered, scooting back. "Noo…” But her spirit was broken, her defiance replaced by the anguish of a terrified young girl. "Please…!"

Nabiki clutched her head and sank to her knees as the keening in her skull got too loud to bear. And behind that keening she could hear something else… something that sounded like… cats?

"I hope you're happy. You'll be ending your father's life as well. He, at least, has some honor. He understands duty!" she hissed. "When have you ever shown even the slightest regard for it? Maybe it's for the best that you die wearing that face. You're just like her!"

Ranma scrambled to her feet, backing through the door and into the yard, eyes wide and wild. She was hyperventilating and a soft mewling escaped her lips.

"So you are going to run away?" Nodoka sniffed scornfully. "Do you think people will ever accept you like we have? You're a thing, Ranma! People will be able to tell! They'll know. You'll know! You'll never have a normal life, male or female!" She folded her arms, katana tucked between them as she glowered. "Go on then. Run. Prove that you're no better than she was! Be the selfish little bitch she was always destined to be! But don't think that the Tendos will accept you now, knowing what you are!"

Slowly and deliberately, Nodoka turned her back on Ranma. "I hope you're happy with your choices, Ranma. I honestly do."

There was a gulping sob and a flurry of motion as Ranma disappeared over the fence. Nodoka closed her eyes and forced herself to relax, then started to methodically rewrap her katana.

"Well… that was unpleasant," Nodoka said airily. She readjusted her hair as she set the katana down against the wall. "I am sorry you had to see that, Ko-chan. Nabiki, I hope that you are happy, and I expect both of you to keep this to yourselves. This is private Saotome family business and not something to be spread about! Not that anyone would believe you, since…"

Nodoka was cut off as Nabiki slapped her hard across the face and knocked her to the floor.

The older woman stared up at the middle Tendo in shock, her mouth opening and closing, though no sound came out.

"You are very fortunate that I am not my younger sister," Nabiki snarled. Her eyes glinted with hatred. Her head had cleared the moment Ranma had run away. In her free hand she clutched the scroll and the folder of documents. "And you are very unfortunate as well. I am going to make sure you pay for this, and I am far more creative than my sister is."

Nabiki glanced at the spot where Kodachi had been huddled, but the Kuno girl was gone. Likely she'd fled during the storm of Nodoka's displeasure. Nabiki turned and walked out without another word, only pausing at the door as she heard Nodoka's voice.

"He'll never forgive you for this, you know." Nodoka's voice dripped like venom from behind her. "He would never have known if it hadn't been for your meddling. He could have lived a normal life. It is your selfishness that has ruined him, not mine."

Nabiki didn't answer. She simply opened the door and stalked out. She ignored Hiroshi, Daisuke and Yuka's demands to know what had happened as she strode past them and down the street.
Thankfully, she managed to get around the corner and out of sight before she collapsed against a nearby tree and nearly passed out.

Ukyou paused a bit in her roof hopping, came to a stop and leaned against a chimney as she felt a brief wave of vertigo.

"Qina de okay?" Shampoo asked as she landed next to her, then stumbled a bit. "Oooh… dizzy…"

"I feel it too," Akane added, coming up behind them.

The three of them exchanged a glance.

"The Link?" Ukyou asked. "Did something happen, do you think?"

"Nabiki said that when Ryouga was getting depressed she could feel it without touching him," Akane said. "But I don't see him anywhere."

"Is linked to ki," Shampoo said. "Shagua or Airen have too much. Would be one of them."

"So… given what happened last night, probably Ranchan then," Ukyou said, looking around.

"Anyone got a sense which way it came from?"

"'Dizzy' doesn't exactly have a direction. That's kind of the point," Akane muttered. She looked around carefully. "Ummm… maybe that way?"

As she gestured, something silvery nicked her arm and embedded itself in the chimney - a polished throwing dagger.

"What the hell!?" Ukyou darted back and drew her battle spatula, eyes searching the rooftops as Akane and Shampoo did the same.

Their assailants weren't hard to spot. There were six of them in colorful Chinese martial arts garb. One, whose long silver hair hung down her back in twin-tails, was idly flipping another dagger, identical to the one that had just been thrown.

"Su Tzu!" Shampoo growled, recognizing the silver-haired girl.

"[Hello 'sister',]" The Amazon identified as Su Tzu said. "[Tan Pohn sends her regards.]

"[Why did you attack us!?!]" Shampoo demanded.

"[Oh, that wasn't an attack. If it had been, your pet there would be missing her head,]" Su Tzu said. "[You've gotten lax in your training with these weak Outsiders. I'm just trying to get your attention. We need you to stay clear of the Godslayer.]

"[What? Why would I stay away from Airen?!!]" Shampoo snarled.

"[Oh, that little thing has been annulled. He's not your 'Airen' anymore. He belongs to the Joketsuzoku now. You failed to claim him too many times. Lo Shan has come to claim him for the village.]" She sighed, sounding bored. "[I've been told that, in light of your former status as Heir, I'm to extend amnesty to you should you agree to not interfere.]

"[You're planning a coup against Great Grandmother?!]" Shampoo was incredulous.
"[You've been gone a year, sister,]" Su Tzu said, giggling. "[The Council of Elders removed Khu Long from her position of authority six months ago! Provisionally, of course, but I imagine that once Lo Shan returns with the Godslayer… among others… that will become permanent.]

"[You are insane if you think we're going to sit by and let you take him!]

"You are insane if you think we're going to sit by and let you take him!"

Ukyou narrowed her eyes. "Heads up Akane, I think we're fighting."

Su Tzu's grin widened. She caught the blade. "[Perfect. I was hoping for a chance at payback after you cheated in the last match we had.]

"[Why not challenge me again, and see how much of a 'cheat' it was?]

"Why not challenge me again, and see how much of a 'cheat' it was?"

"Shampoo not abandon Airen!"

"Shampoo?!

"Shampoo?!

"You are insane if you think we're going to sit by and let you take him!

Ukyou looked around. A dozen opponents. Most of them armed. Couple of archers at least, knife throwers already for sure. "We need to run," she said, keeping her tone low and even so hopefully it wouldn't carry to the other roof.

"Shampoo not abandon Airen!"

"What are we up against? Do you think we can win?"

Shampoo swallowed, looking desperate. "Shampoo fight most of these. Beat them one-on-one, but… rivals all."

"So a dozen Amazons who are almost as good as Shampoo?"

"So a dozen Amazons who are almost as good as Shampoo?"


"Where should we meet?"

"Where should we meet?"

"No. Meet at Tendo Dojo. Airen, Pintou and Shagua more likely go there."

Things held quietly for a moment as the tension built. Ukyou narrowed her eyes, making sure she had the Amazons on her side covered.

She saw the glint of the steel before anything else and gave Akane a slight shove to get her out of the way as the throwing daggers whizzed past them, dangerously close. No more words were wasted as the three charged towards Su Tzu and the Amazons with her.

From how Su Tzu's eyes widened, it was obvious that she hadn't expected them to charge straight into her teeth. She drew back to throw, but hesitated. Ukyou also noticed that all of the Amazon's
had fixed their attention on Shampoo, not on her or on Akane.

**BIG mistake, girls,** Ukyou thought. She sped up, touching Shampoo's shoulder. At her signal, Shampoo laced her hands into a basket behind her back, and as she leapt toward the roof Su Tzu had claimed, Ukyou put her foot into Shampoo's hands and used the added thrust to boost herself higher.

Su Tzu's daggers missed, having been thrown to intersect Shampoo's expected trajectory. They whizzed over Shampoo's head as the purple-haired Amazon landed far short of the projected mark. Likewise, Ukyou went far higher than anticipated, throwing off the other projectiles as she readied a brace of minispats from her own bandolier. She flung them for effect, drawing their attention away from Shampoo and towards herself, even as it seemed that her arc of travel was going to carry her clear over them and to the far side of the roof.

Their attention was split and they had forgotten about Akane entirely.

Akane was a few paces behind. With the knife throwers and archers distracted by Ukyou, and not seeing Shampoo as a threat for a few breaths, they weren't even looking when Akane plowed full into them. Akane knocked Su Tzu aside hard, intent on something she had spotted from the other roof.

One of the Amazons wielded a Chinese Warhammer, and it had given Akane an idea. As she flipped over the startled Amazon, she grabbed the hammer and wrenched it free from her grasp.

She landed and, with a shout, raised the hammer over her head and brought it down, not on the Amazon, but on the roof - specifically the major support joist.

Ukyou winced at the cracking and groaning of wood as Akane fatally compromised the structure with that single blow. With the weight of six people plus Akane, it wasn't going to last. Akane jumped clear just as the section of roof collapsed and dropped the Amazons into the attic below.

"Good job, Akane!" Ukyou cheered. She immediately regretted drawing attention as she narrowly dodged an arrow from another rooftop. "Keep going!" She turned, batted another projectile away with her battle spatula and leapt towards another roof, sprinting as fast as she could. She plotted as twisting route as possible in order to lose her pursuers before she doubled back to the dojo. **Good luck, you two!**

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Down on the street, Young Mi watched the conflict on the roofs. She stroked the flank of her liger gently as she watched.

The three girls recovered quickly and made a break for it. **To be expected... their odds are four to one at best.** She had to admit, the instinctive teamwork that they displayed was impressive. They had obviously fought together before, and there was a flow to their coordination that was more than simply rehearsed.

*If I had confronted Xian Pu with those two at her back, I would have lost,* she realized. There was no shame in admitting that. It was important for a performer to know her limitations even as she pushed them, and those three together were beyond her, even with Samson's help.

She smiled when she saw the three shapes suddenly split up, further scattering their attackers as they began leading them on a winding, confusing chase through territory the Chinese girls barely knew.

*But they aren't together now, are they?* Her eyes followed her target, the one with lavender hair. The Amazons would run her a decent distance away, then leave her for Young Mi, as per their
agreement.

She hopped up onto Samson's back, spurring the huge liger into a run. Her hand drifted to a pouch on her belt - another gift from her mysterious benefactor.

*I feel as if I am playing a part in another's drama with this,* she thought as she rode. *No matter. Dancing on another's strings is not a new thing for me. Such strings are easily cut and if getting what I want merely requires a puppet show, then who am I to miss my cue?*

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By the time she was conscious of the fact she was running, she had no idea where she was. Perhaps on the outskirts of town - There weren't as many buildings. All she knew was that she could not stop - she dared not.

*Not a man.*

The words kept running through her head, in her mother's voice, over and over.

*Not a person.*

*A thing.*

*No soul.*

She stumbled and dropped to her knees on the grass. The student's uniform she wore was so big that even tightening the belt could not keep it from slipping and falling off.

*Can't stop…* she panted, digging her fingers into the earth. She could *feel* the press of the pit all around her, lurking just beyond the edges of her vision.

*Only boys get out of the pit.*

She struggled to her feet, intending to continue her flight, before she noticed there were other figures gathering around her.

A girl in chinese garb, with long green hair tied back in a ponytail, strode forward. "Ranma Saotome," she said. She had that self-confident smirk that was a familiar part of someone issuing a challenge. "I am Tan Pohn of Joketsuzoku. You hard to catch. But no impossible."

"Leave me alone…" Ranma growled. There was a note of a harsh yowl in her voice and her fingers curled into claws.

"No can, sorry," Tan Pohn replied. She was flanked by two more Amazons bearing polearms. "You, Ranma Saotome, honor bound to accept any challenge, yes?"

"[Tan Pohn, what are you…?]" the girl next to her asked in Mandarin.

"I challenge you," Tan Pohn said. "If I win, you renounce Xian Pu. Belong to Tan Pohn."

Ranma shuddered. The old game. Over and over and *over.* "And if *I* win… you leave me alone?"

Tan Pohn smirked. "No. Not be stupid. Not how Saotome school works, yes? Must accept *all* challenges. All terms." She chuckled. "Stupid creed, but school teachings clear. You win, you accept next challenge. Win all challenges, we take back to Jusendo, others challenge. Eventually one win and claim you. Easier just lose now. I treat well." She pulled out a curved sword and
slapped it against her palm.

"No," Ranma said softly, her body starting to shake. Her lips pulled back, showing her teeth. Her words were distorted by a low growl. "Leave… me… alone…"

Tan Pohn stopped. "Pardon?" She raised an eyebrow. "Ranma Saotome afraid, maybe? Forget own honor?" She levelled her sword at Ranma. "Not have choice! Heir to Saotome School must accept all challenges!"

"I'm… Not a Saotome…" Ranma ground out. Red was creeping into the edges of her vision now, overriding the blackness lurking there. "Leave me alone!"

Tan Pohn frowned. "Hit head, maybe?" She shrugged. "Very well. Then simply beat until Godslayer go quietly." She motioned for the others to close up around Ranma. "Maybe Godslayer not all that rumors say, hmm? Maybe…"

She never got the chance to finish. Ranma exploded forward in a surge of motion. She dropped to all fours, fingers digging into the dirt as she used her arms to add extra bursts of speed before rising up and slashing across Tan Pohn's sword with her fingers. The tempered steel blade fell apart into five clean cut pieces as Ranma darted by. Ranma was already well past the startled Amazon, leaping for the nearby trees and into the foliage before she could react or the archers could even raise their bows.

Ranma could hear them chasing her, but they couldn't keep up. Ranma had barely managed to restrain the urge to slash more than just the sword. She could feel the Neko-ken singing in her blood, calling to her and coaxing her to lash out - to draw blood and hurt back those who were hurting her. It would be so easy to just give in to it… to just let go and be a cat forever. Not to have to think painful thoughts anymore. But she knew… if she went into the pit now she would never come back out.

She landed again and stumbled as her attempt at another leap failed. Her leg muscles simply couldn't push off anymore. She didn't feel the fatigue or the pain of a thousand cuts and scrapes from the tree branches… everything was numb. Her muscles simply couldn't do what she was demanding of them anymore.

She stumbled a few more paces then dropped to her knees, unable to make her legs move any further. After a moment, she stopped trying.

What does it matter? she thought, looking up at the sky. They want Ranma Saotome. I'm not him. I'm not a person. Whether they catch me or not, it won't matter. She could feel wetness on her cheeks from drying tears, but no more were coming. The fear and despair and pain were all steadily being replaced by a growing numbness, like a burn that had finally seared away all sensation. A soft blue glow suffused the area all around her, though there didn't seem to be a source.

It all makes sense now, she thought. Why I never felt 'right' as a boy OR a girl. Why I was always afraid. Why I always had to try so hard to prove myself. I knew. She studied the sky, the clouds passing as the light gradually shifted from afternoon into evening. She must have been running for hours. That's why I could never find a cure. Why I could never stop when I started insulting Akane. Why I kept freeloding off Ukyou and Shampoo when I knew it was wrong. Why I kept messing with Ryouga. Why nothing I ever did was ever good enough for Pops. Why Mom hates me. Why I couldn't… couldn't tell any of them how I felt. I AM the curse. There IS no Ranma. Just the curse.

They'll hate me, she thought, feeling a pang before the numbness swallowed it. The aura around her pulsed and grew. They all loved someone that didn't exist - someone I was just pretending to be. They all gave up so much for him. She coughed, her breathing unsteady as she felt the thrumming,
building energy her body was struggling to contain. She already knew where this was going.

*It'll be better if I'm gone - if I just disappear,* she thought. She was so cold now. The Soul of Ice had caused the grass to freeze and become brittle in a rapidly growing circle around her, but she was certain that without it the pain of trying to hold back so much heavy ki would be unendurable. But she knew she needed a lot to do this right.

*They have each other. They were SUPPOSED to have each other,* Ranma thought. It was comforting, in a way. Another pang. *Except Ryo. But... maybe he'll find Akari again. Or... the girls will take care of him until he's okay.* She bit her lip until it bled, the coppery taste filling her mouth. *It's my fault. He was fine without me. I did this. For years and years. Their lives were fine before me, all of them, and I ruined them. That's why I have to go, before I make it worse.*

She convulsed, feeling her heart skip and struggle. It wasn't healthy to hold onto this much Ki. It would probably be enough to kill her on its own, but she wanted... she needed to do this properly - to do one thing right. *Couldn't... just slit my own belly open, huh? Gotta be flashy and selfish one last time. At least this way... it's ME doing it. Not because of the contract. Not because I'm pretending to be Ranma. This is the curse curing itself.*

"Akane..." she breathed. "Ukyou... Shampoo... Nabiki..." She wanted their names to be the last words she spoke. "Ryouga..." she added finally. *I'm sorry... I couldn't say it back. I wanted to.* She felt her last tear fall as she released all of the built up ki. All of the misery and self-hatred and guilt, *all of it,* she released and flung to the heavens. A brilliant pillar of lambent blue-white energy roared into the sky, lighting the surroundings like a second sun and throwing long shadows as she became the base of the pillar of light.

But such emotions are not meant for heaven, and the pillar slowed, the energy gathering and swelling as it lost momentum. The pillar would fall. Normally the one who performed this technique would be emptied of all the emotions that fuelled it, allowing the surge to pass through them harmlessly.

But Ranma would not relinquish that one, final regret. She held it tight in her heart, so that all of her other emotions might crush her into the earth.

She watched as the pillar swelled, and began to fall, incandescent power rushing back to earth to end her life and bury her remains in a single act. *Not bad... part of her thought with a flicker of the old pride. Ryo would be impressed.* She closed her eyes and waited, wondering if it would hurt much.

"**HISHO KORYU HA!**"

Her eyes snapped open. There was someone standing over her, his form silhouetted in red, his hands thrust skyward. A deep red light was now corrupting the blue, meeting in a blinding, twisting maelstrom a hundred feet above their heads.

"Ry... ou... ga...?" she murmured.

His feet sank into the earth on either side of her as the weight of her Shi Shi Hokodan started to bear down on him.

Ryouga grunted through gritted teeth. "Ranma! You have to get up!" he groaned as he strained against the force.

"Can't..." Ranma said, her voice soft and sad. She could smell the ozone as the two forces warred in mid air. Ryouga was slowly but steadily losing. "Please run..."

"*You know I won't do that!"* Ryouga snarled. His legs buckled as the tremendous weight bore down
on him. She could hear his joints pop as he strained.

Ranma tried to get her legs to obey but they refused. She felt weak and sick as she tried so hard to move, but everything was too heavy. "I can't… Ryouga… please… It's better if you let me go… you don't understand… you don't need me…! I'm not… I'm not who you think…!"

"I decide who and what I need," Ryouga growled. "And I know exactly who you are!" He groaned, crying out as he increased his effort, though the weight continued to hammer down on them, more and more.

Ranma squeezed her eyes shut. The force was starting to crush her down, making it hard for her to breathe. No… please… I don't want to take him with me…!

"Ranma… just… for once…" Ryouga grunted. "Let… someone… rescue… you!" With a final massive effort, he threw his arms wide. Suddenly it became apparent what he had been doing, as the wedge of ki he had formed with his own blast diverted the Shi Shi Hokodan to either side.

He dropped and covered her, pressing her flat to the ground while the world quite literally exploded around them as the ki she had released slammed into the ground in a ring and blasted outwards in a shockwave that flattened trees and tore up the landscape. Ryouga's countering blast muffled some of the roar but it was still deafening, the forces buffeting them from all sides.

It took several minutes for the rumbling to subside while Ranma struggled to breathe, smothered by Ryouga's mass on top of her. Finally he groaned and started to move. Her ears were ringing like cathedral bells and the world felt like it was tilted sideways. She gazed blearily up to see him looking down at her with concern. She could feel a dampness on her cheeks.

I thought I was out of tears? Shakily, she touched her cheek and saw her fingertips come away red. Oh… That's blood. The sense of detachment she felt was oddly disorienting and she wondered, in a disinterested way, if it was Ryouga's blood or her own.

He was trying to say something to her but she couldn't hear it over the ringing. I'm sorry, Ryo… I'm sorry I wasn't a real girl. I… wanted to be… for you… I wanted to be real…

Ryouga suddenly turned to the left, then winced as something struck him on the side. At the same time, Ranma felt a sharp sting in her neck. She reached up and pulled away the dart that had struck her.

Then, with amazing speed, everything went black.

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"[I think I'm glad she didn't decide to accept your challenge, Tan Pohn, and you should be as well,]" an Amazon with close-cropped dark hair said, scowling as she surveyed the aftermath.

The blast had obliterated the field and all of the trees around within a radius of more than a hundred meters. Save for one small area at the epicenter of the event, everything around had been devastated, the terrain cratered and broken as though a massive object had slammed into the ground with the force of a meteorite.

Tan Pohn scowled as she checked for a pulse on each of the bodies. They seemed strong, so the darts appeared to have worked. She examined the dark haired boy curiously. "[So… he deflected all of that, hmmm?]" She sat back on her haunches, rubbing her chin.

"[From what I hear, he was the Godslayer's rival,]" one of the other Amazons said.
"[Was']"

"[I think she finally accepted him as her mate. You know, the Godslayer.]

"[I thought the Godslayer was male?]

"[Haven't you been paying attention to what's been going on at all?! With the scroll and that potion?]

"[You mean…? But why would anyone want to make themselves male?]

"[I think it was her parents, actually. Messed up Outsider values.]

"[Too bad they won't get to stay together. They look kinda cute like that.]

Tan Pohn sighed in exasperation and stood. "[Will you all shut up?! We need to think about how to get them back to Lo Shan before they wake up. I don't think either of them is strong enough to handle a second dose if we're not quick enough.]" She motioned for one of the girls carrying the Outsider weapons to come over. She took the rifle from the girl and checked it like Himura's servants had shown her.

_I could simply put a second dart into each of them right now. Or at least another into the Godslayer, _Tan Pohn thought, fingering the safety on the airsoft rifle. _If the Godslayer is truly a woman, how could I compete with her? She'd be destined for leadership. If I thought Xian Pu was an obstacle…_

_There are different kinds of strength. Strength of Arms and Strength of Leadership are often very different. Many great generals and conquerors in history were hardly imposing as individual warriors…_

Tan Pohn sighed, remembering Himura's words. The 'Princess' has a point. Being the strongest leader isn't necessarily about being the strongest fighter. I'll bide my time and see what the Elder has planned. Maybe, if need be, I can make a side deal with Himura for a little… what was the term she used? 'Extra Insurance'.

"[Bind them.]
Tan Pohn said. She tossed the rifle back to the warrior. "[Find some branches or saplings to make sturdy poles. We'll…]"

There was a rustle, and something arced over the worst of the destruction to land amongst a group of the Amazons. It was a satchel that exploded and filled the air with a cloud of fine powder. Those within its boundary immediately started to cough and then quickly collapsed.

"[Ambush!]
Tan Pohn started searching the tree line beyond the perimeter of the crater. She could hear rustling and movement…

More satchels came sailing out from different directions. More than one? Or one moving very quickly? Several more of Tan Pohn's squad dropped. Whatever was in those satchels was _potent_.

"I see her!" one of the Amazons cried. In a lapse of training and judgement, she darted forward alone with her polearm, stabbing into the darkness of the tangle of broken trees.

Something shot out from that darkness, a long tendril of ribbon that wrapped the girl up and bound her. Then a figure leapt from the shadows, effortlessly yanking the Amazon off of her feet to send her tumbling into a pair of her sisters.
Tan Pohn narrowed her eyes. She reached for her sword before she remembered that the Godslayer had destroyed it. "Who you!?" she asked the intruder.

The girl appeared to be their age. She wore a green gymnastics leotard with a large red rose embroidered over the left shoulder and breast and her dark hair was tied in a ponytail off to the side. She was perched on her toes on the very tip of a broken tree bough that seemed far too slender to support her, giving her a few feet in height over the rest of them.

And then she laughed.

Tan Pohn had fought the Musk and the Phoenix tribe, hunted monsters and tackled spirits and the undead. Nothing she had ever heard before chilled her as did that laugh. A shiver ran up her spine and she took a step back in spite of herself.

The girl casually twirled another ribbon and glared down at her with eyes like dark coals. Someone fired an arrow at her but, with a flick of her wrist, the intruder batted away the projectile with the ribbon, almost as an afterthought. Her gaze never wavered.

"I am the Black Rose of Furinkan, Kodachi Kuno," she said in a voice like ice. "I have been wronged this day. I shall not suffer to be wronged further. Those two are mine by right. You will leave, or you will suffer."

"Bold words for one who is outnumbered," Tan Pohn said, recovering her composure.

As… unsettling as this girl was, and as skillful as she seemed to be, there was only one of her, against herself and a half dozen of her sisters still standing.

Kodachi raised an eyebrow. "Did you not think it odd there was a forest so far inside the limits of a city as large as this one? A concession from the Emperor for our agreement to lease much of the land that is modern-day Nerima to the government. This forest is my family's refuge and training ground… and you have trespassed and defiled it!"

"I not care about spoiled outsider's history lesson or about bloated unimportant city on tiny, unimportant island," Tan Pohn sniffed haughtily. "Not change the point you outnumbered. Let us take Godslayer and Consort and leave. Have no interest in irrelevant challenges. Not let us, and… well, at least you be buried on family land, yes?"

Kodachi laughed again. Tan Pohn wasn't able to suppress the shudder.

"Oh you poor, deluded savages," Kodachi replied disdainfully. "Did you not hear what I said? This is a training ground. Not only for the Kuno family, but for our servants. Sasuke!"

Suddenly more satchels launched from the shattered trees. Tan Pohn dodged as billowing clouds suddenly obscured everything. Thankfully, this was not the paralysis powder used before, but she immediately realized her mistake when she lost sight of Ranma and Ryouga.

"[No! Don't let them escape!]" Tan Pohn cried as she heard multiple shapes moving swiftly through the cloud. There were a few wild shots into the cloud from outside as her sisters loosed arrows and darts but, as the dust cleared, Tan Pohn knew that their quarry was already gone.

In the one untouched area in the middle of the blasted out clearing, all that remained of their quarry was a single black rose.

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Kasumi heard a thump at the front door. It made her jump, as she had been listening intently for the
phone for hours now. Not long before, she had heard some kind of rumbling in the distance, not unlike thunder, and she feared the worst.

She hurried to the front door and slid it open to see Nabiki slumped against Daisuke, who was trying to support her with help from Hiroshi and Yuka. Her sister's eyes were closed and she was twitching slightly.

"Oh my God, what happened?!" Kasumi hurried out to help them bring Nabiki in. The middle Tendo groaned as they laid her out on the living room floor.

"We don't know," Yuka said. "Something happened at the Saotome residence. Nabiki went in to confront Nodoka about some weirdness in the family register. She went inside and there was some arguing. Then Ranma showed up and there was some shouting. That was followed by some screaming, then Ranma and that nut Kodachi came flying out and took off. Nabiki stumbled out a few minutes later, holding onto this like her life depended on it." Yuka held up the scroll.

"She was kind of out of it. Said she needed to get back to the Dojo," Hiroshi continued. "We'd almost gotten here she just… kinda had a seizure and collapsed."

"There was some kinda thunderclap at the same time, way off in the forest," Daisuke said. "We think they're connected somehow."

"I'll call Dr. Tofu," Kasumi said and turned to leave, but a hand grabbed her wrist. She looked back to see Nabiki, now awake and looking up at her, though it appeared to be a struggle for her to do so.

"Doc Tofu can't help…" Nabiki said weakly. "It's the Link." She shuddered. "It's Ranma… Kasumi… what they did to him… to her…" She shuddered again.

Kasumi stopped and knelt next to her sister, taking her hand. "Tell me."

"The scroll," Nabiki managed. "It's... it's for a potion, one that uses Jusenkyo water as an ingredient, but makes the change permanent and changes memories to match. The Saotomes… Daddy gave it to them. Before any of us were born. They… they used it..." Nabiki swallowed. "Kasumi, Ranma was born a girl."

"What?" Kasumi whispered, eyes wide.

"The… the training journey… it was a sham, all of it. A trip to gather the ingredients, and to convince Ranma she was actually a boy while keeping her away from people so she never figured out she wasn't." Nabiki fought to sit up as some of her strength returned. "But… but Genma botched the potion… ended up with a male Ranma with a girl curse…" Nabiki shuddered. "God, Nodoka is insane, Kasumi. She called Ranma a 'homunculus'. A thing. They don't even see him as human." She paused to take a deep breath. "Are Akane or any of the others back? We have to find Ranma! We have to stop her before…" She winced and held her head. "Ugh… She was broadcasting despair! If we just leave her…!"

"You aren't going anywhere," Kasumi gripped her shoulder firmly. "Not so long as you can barely sit up."

Nabiki opened her mouth to protest, then closed it and sighed. "Fine… then give me my phone. I need to call Cologne."

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Cologne prided herself on being old enough to foresee most eventualities. Even when something
unexpected happened, she usually knew *something* was afoot, and almost immediately knew the course of action to take to remedy it.

So when she sensed the massive eruption of heavy ki to the north and found herself having no idea what was going on, she was understandably cross with herself. That she had to wait for a phone call from Nabiki Tendo to have an idea where to even *start* rankled her further.

*I am getting old and sloppy*, she chided herself as she made her way to the dojo. She had been content to sit back and let the children play out this fascinating dance of theirs and she had allowed that contentment to slip into complacency. On the trip over, she mentally reviewed what might have gone wrong and possible methods of damage control.

All of that went out the window as soon as she saw the scroll in Nabiki Tendo's hand.

She made a show of going over it to give weight to her assessment of its authenticity, but it wasn't needed. The miasma of the blighted thing was palpable.

"It's authentic," Cologne said heavily. "Authentic and a wretched abomination besides."

"So… the scroll makes Jusenkyo curses permanent?" Daisuke asked, leaning forward and peering at it.

Cologne scoffed and sadly shook her head. "No, son. This… this is *far* more heinous than just that." She pointed to various entries. "These herbs are powerful hypnotics. They are used in the *Xi Fa Xiang Gao* to alter the subject's memory, to delete certain details. It is notable that they establish blocks that make it painful or even impossible for the mind to access the 'forbidden' knowledge, even when presented with it anew. However, without the pressure points to place the mind in a relaxed and suggestible state to allow the memories to be easily relinquished, it would be difficult to get the effect to take hold. It would require something to make the mind willing to give up the knowledge. Coercion, seduction… *trauma.*"

"Ryouga mentioned when they were first learning how the Link worked, Ranma got hit with an overflow of emotions and almost went into the Neko Ken because something got churned up in her mind," Nabiki said. "Then… when Ryouga confessed to her last night she went into the Neko Ken again and fled." She gave Cologne a pleading look, her voice dropping into a whisper. "Please tell me that's a coincidence."

Cologne closed her eyes. "The… psychological trauma the Neko Ken would cause would work. Almost ideally so if you could link the knowledge you wish to expunge to the trauma."

"He did it on *purpose!*" Nabiki slammed her fist onto the table, trembling with rage. "Didn't read the last page' my *ass!* That's *why* he used it! He used it to make her forget she was a girl!"

"That is… outlined in the methodology of the scroll," Cologne said quietly. "The identity of the subject must be weakened so that it might align with the form chosen."

"But… why does Ranma change with water, then?" Yuka asked. "And why is it inverted from a normal curse?"

"It isn't," Cologne said. "When properly prepared and administered, the potion uses the magic of Jusenkyo, particularly the magical waters of Jusendo and their tendency to accept a template. It… causes the water to take the subject's true form as its template while the cursed form is bonded to the subject as their new true form. And then… the subject will purge the cursed water bearing their original form, purging the magic as well." Cologne traced her finger down to the mend. "Since this
section is lacking Genma's atrocious penmanship, I presume he did not have it originally and it was restored later by whomever gave it to Ranma. He would not have known. Likely Ranma vomited on herself during the purge, afflicting herself with her own original form as a curse."

"So… the potion makes them literally barf up a Jusenkyo curse?" Hiroshi asked, wide-eyed.

"Contrary to belief, the cursed pools do not actually require the victim to die. Akane Tendo is proof of that," Cologne explained. "They merely need to ingest the magical waters of Jusendo and then expel them at the point where the soul's connection to the physical form is tenuous. Near-death is sufficient. Their form is then imprinted on the water. This potion is a manipulation of that property."

"When the soul's connection is tenuous…" Nabiki said. "Nodoka called Ranma a homunculus. She said that he didn't have a soul and that the real Ranma's soul was sacrificed to make him."

Cologne snorted. "One of the reasons the potion is considered heresy among the Joketsuzoku. These herbs here are potent toxins of the spirit. In the proportions of the potion, they are not quite fatal… but enough to weaken the soul to the point of expiring, to facilitate the transfer of the imprint. I did not realize Ranma's parents were mad enough to see that as a preferable outcome."

"But… I mean… Ranma does have a soul… right?" Daisuke asked nervously.

Cologne raised an eyebrow, then glanced at Nabiki. "Well? As one who is linked irrevocably to Ranma, mind and spirit, what do you say Nabiki Tendo?"

Nabiki blinked, then seemed to relax a little, "Thank god…"

"A higher power had very little to do with this, I fear," Cologne grumbled. "I already knew Ranma's father was an idiot, but I had hoped his…" she sighed and cleared her throat, "her mother had more sense!"

There was a loud *thump* from outside in the yard. Kasumi got up and quickly opened the door. Ukyou was there, in the depression she had make during an obviously rough landing and struggling to get up. Nabiki rushed over quickly to help her. She was battered and scraped, and had several cleaner cuts that suggested close calls versus a bladed weapon of some sort. Her clothes were tattered like she had been tossed about.

"Help… Akane…!" Ukyou croaked.

There was a shout from the rooftops, and they all looked up in time to see a figure recognizable as Akane dart out of the path of a huge tornado blast.

"Is that the Hiryu Shoten Ha?" Nabiki asked, staring.

"It is," Cologne said, eyes narrowing. "But not Ranma's variant."

Two more figures hopped up onto the roof and attacked Akane, who was defending herself with what looked like a large two-handed hammer. She seemed hard pressed.

Cologne's eyes widened as she recognized the garb. "What are they doing here?!" She got that awful sense that she'd been out of the loop once more. She hopped up onto the yard wall, then up to the nearest rooftop, quickly closing in on the battle before alighting casually between the combatants once they broke apart once more.

"[E-Elder Khu Long!]") one of the girls Cologne recognized as being named Su Tzu gasped.
"Cologne!" Akane said, with an understandable note of suspicion in her voice. "Why are warriors from your village attacking us?"

"That is an excellent question, child. One I intend to ask myself," Cologne replied, sparing her a glance before she fixed her gaze on Su Tzu. "[Well? Speak!]"

Su Tzu seemed nervous. Her eyes flicked to Akane, then back to Cologne. "[With all due respect, Elder… We are operating under orders of the Council and Elder Lo Shan. She wishes these girls to be apprehended for crimes against the Joketsuzoku.]

"[Crimes. Really.]", Cologne replied, a note of menace entering her voice. "[And no one saw fit to appraise me of these crimes, or the desire of the Council to capture my pupils?]

Su Tzu swallowed. "[I… am sorry Elder, I wasn't aware. But… Lo Shan's orders were very specific!]

"[And since when do Lo Shan's orders countermand my own?]", Cologne demanded, though she already had a sneaking suspicion as to the answer.

"[Since… the Council…]", the girl swallowed nervously, "[elected to remove you from your position due to dereliction of duty.]

Cologne snorted. "[Almost three centuries of service without a break and as soon as I elect to take a vacation…]", She sighed. "[Very well, go back and tell Lo Shan I will meet with her shortly to discuss the matter. You may go.]

The fact the girl didn't budge gave Cologne an inkling to just how serious the situation was.

"[I… am sorry, Elder. But… you no longer have authority here.]", Su Tzu said, refocusing on Akane. "[We are on a War Footing now and Lo Shan's orders are to be obeyed as our War Leader. If your 'Pupils' come quietly, I can…]

Cologne doubted they saw her move. She had slowed down quite a bit in the last century or so but she was still fast enough to give the youngsters a fright. She saw the expected widening of fear in the eyes that came far too late as her staff had already hit the last of the three pressure points needed, on both her and the other Amazon with her.

"[War Footing?]" Cologne scoffed. "[With Japan? Have the Council lost their tiny minds?]

Su Tzu twitched but was unable to respond.

"[No, they haven't, this is merely a way to invoke the old covenants to allow them to do as they please!]", Cologne thumped her staff. "[So, it seems it will fall to me to remind them of why I have been on the Council for so long.]" She hopped closer to the girl and looked her in the eye. "[They have invoked the old covenants, have they? Then I invoke one of my own. Tell Lo Shan that as a Joketsuzoku Elder I invoke the Covenant of Contested Ground. I retain that right at least, no matter what they feel they may strip from me.]

Su Tzu's eyes widened in a most satisfying manner.

Cologne grinned, her leathery lips peeling back in a toothy smirk. "[Good… you know that one. Lo Shan has not neglected your education in Joketsuzoku law at least.]", She leaned closer. "[I further invoke my right to declare a Sanctuary, which I name to be the Tendo Dojo. None may harass its caretakers nor those who seek sanctuary inside upon pain of forfeiture of their lives to me. I name this caretaker to be Kasumi Tendo. Now you relay that message to your sisters and Lo Shan now, now, now, now…]"
and you will not return with fewer warriors than you left with. Am I clear?"

The girl managed a slight nod.

Cologne blurred again, tapping the pressure points to reverse the paralysis locks on each of them. They both stumbled as their limbs resumed obeying their wills.

"[Good. I will expect Lo Shan shortly. Do remind her to use the door, since she seems to be merrily reviving other follies of her youth.]" She tapped the girl on the forehead, turned, and hopped over to Akane.

"What was that all about?" Akane asked, still holding her hammer warily.

"I will explain inside the dojo, child," Cologne said. "I fear one of my peers has gone and done something very foolish, and we shall have to be very careful how we proceed or my great granddaughter and son-in… and Ranma may well pay the price."

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Shampoo awoke to a pounding headache. She opened her eyes and blinked a few times, thinking she was somewhere dark before she realized that there was something over her head obscuring her vision. A cloth bag?

She tried to move to remove it and realized her wrists were bound. In fact, the aching of her muscles quickly informed her she had been trussed up like a cornish game hen, and none-too-gently at that.

"Well… awake now, are you?"

The voice was unfamiliar. Accented but not Japanese or Chinese. It had a playful lilt that covered a scornful note… and maybe something deeper? There was a tremor to it, like someone trying to keep their voice even and calm in the presence of something enraging.

"Why Joketsuzoku attack Shampoo? Why take prisoner?" Shampoo asked. She knew this person was no Amazon but she wanted to see what information she could glean and playing dumb usually worked well for that.

"Oh you silly, pathetic, stupid girl…" the voice laughed. Shampoo's head was suddenly pulled back sharply. "Do you really think I know or care what your ridiculous sisterhood is up to?"

The pull on Shampoo's head eased, and the hood was roughly pulled away, leaving Shampoo blinking in the light. Her vision resolved on the image of a smiling face, though the smile was warped, a mask of happiness over eyes that glittered with hatred.

"Though… I must admit they do earn points from me for turning on you." The woman stood and tapped her chin. She was wearing a circus ringmaster's outfit, though cut close, with fishnet stockings and high heels, as well as a flamboyant cape and a top hat perched on the curls of her cotton candy pink hair. "Though… they were still wretched to my Darling all his life, so I honestly don't care much if they burn or not." She smirked at Shampoo once more and reach over to lift her chin with the coiled whip in her hand. "But you? Ahhh my sweetling… I have so many wondrous sufferings to visit upon you!"

"Young Mi. You mad at Shampoo for stealing Mousse away, yes?" Shampoo said. She started to work on the ropes that bound her wrists. Unfortunately, this circus girl seemed to know what she was doing when it came to knots and tying someone up. Shampoo tried to remember how she had ended up in this situation. She had been running from her Amazon sisters, and then… a flash… a
surge of overwhelming despair… she had missed a jump… then darkness. Until now.

"Oh, no, not at all!" Young Mi giggled. "I've been watching you. You're actually quite cold and dismissive of him, aren't you?" She tapped her whip against her chin. "Which is exactly how he described you, too. I'd be hard pressed to think of a way for you to more effectively convey your contempt to him."

Shampoo winced. She makes it sound like I HATE him. I… don't, do I?

"No, you've done absolutely nothing to entice him. I no longer have a quarrel with you." She sighed. "Perhaps in other circumstances we could have been friends. Unfortunately, my Darling is obsessed and I doubt there is anything you could have done to dissuade him."

"Then why!?" Shampoo demanded.

"Shhhh…" Young Mi put a finger to Shampoo's lips. "It's not always about you, sweetling. This is about me and Darling and our future together. You're just…” she waved her hand searching for the word then smiled, "a prop." She straightened and began to pace. In the dim light Shampoo could see that they were in some sort of large building, like a hangar or a warehouse. "You see… when Darling left, he hurt me. But… more than that, he cost me." She paused. "The shock of his betrayal caused my father's health to take a turn for the worse. My father had placed his faith in Darling's reassurances, that he would work with me to continue father's life's work… to keep his beloved family, his circus, alive. He was prepared to retire, to leave things in our hands. He knew that there was prejudice among our backers, and that they would not support the circus under me alone. But with Darling at my side, we could endure."

She stared off into the distance. "When Darling left… our creditors became nervous. It was all father could do to prevent them calling in our debts all at once. He was forced back into the ring. More shows. More travel. He was unable to properly treat his illness. What should have been ten more good years ended up barely being one. With father gone, our debts were called in. My family… the only family I'd known my entire life… was scattered to the wind." She sighed.

Shampoo stared. Well… that explains some of her rage, then. "So… you hate Mousse then?"

Young Mi smiled. "You'd think so, wouldn't you? But even after all of that… I believed he would come back to me. He is all I have left in the world now. He has to come back." She turned and swept her hand. "And now I understand what I need to do to achieve that. A relationship is built upon equity. Fairness. We must be on common ground. So… as he wounded me, so I must wound him. So he understands." She walked up to Shampoo and cupped her chin. "Despite it all, Darling cares about you. Losing you would go a long way toward evening the scales. Losing you would make him understand me."

Shampoo glared back defiance. She pulled at her bonds, but she couldn't get the leverage she needed to get slack. "Then do it," she growled.

"No, no, no… Not like that!" Young Mi tittered. "Two things first. One. Naturally Darling must be here to witness it." She twirled away and spread her arms wide as if addressing a large crowd.

"And second…" she looked over her shoulder at Shampo and smirked, "I'm not entirely sure where Darling's heart lies anymore. He seems to have some interest in another. Rin Ito is her name, I think?"

"You leave Rin alone!" Shampoo growled. "She not have anything to do with this!"
Young Mi laughed. "Oh, I'm quite sure she's innocent. I've watched her, too." Young Mi sighed. "Oh she dotes on him and gives him those big doe-eyes of hers… and it's all so innocent and pure that it makes me want to retch." She chuckled then shrugged. "But… Darling looks at her. You do know how significant that is, don't you? Darling tends to look through people so much. The glasses hide it, but I can tell. There are very few people he truly sees. I realized that the day when I noticed he finally was looking at me. He sees you, of course… and he sees her."

"And you want him to see only you," Shampoo said bitterly. "So… you kill Shampoo and Rin in front of Mousse. Think it make him love you?"

Young Mi shook her head. "Not quite that simple, my dear. It really depends on Darling. All I know is… he must be made to understand the loss I feel. There are obvious ways that can play out, of course," Young Mi's face seemed to soften, "and… less obvious ways. You have someone you love, yes?"

"Yes…" Shampoo admitted reluctantly.

"Then… for their sake… I hope this ends up being one of the less obvious ways."

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Nabiki watched as Cologne examined Ukyou carefully. Fortunately, neither she nor Akane had suffered major injury, but apparently it was not due to a lack of trying on the Amazons' part.

"I don't know what happened," Ukyou said. "There was this… this flash in the distance and suddenly…" She shook her head. "It was like all my worst nightmares and feelings were piled on top of me all at once. Every bad memory - every bit of doubt or despair. I felt… heavy."

"Heavy ki. Ki fueled by negative emotions," Cologne said. "From what Nabiki has revealed to me about what happened, it is safe to presume Son-in-law… Ranma had more than enough such emotions to cause this. Particularly…"

"Particularly if it was used to fuel a Perfect Shi Shi Hokodan," Akane finished for her. "But… why didn't it affect me the same way? Is my link with Ranma not as strong?" She gave Cologne a worried look.

"Tell me, child. What did you feel?" Cologne asked.

"I… well, like Ukyou said, there was a surge… and… a lot of awful feelings, but… but then I just felt angry," Akane replied. "It… it kinda felt… almost like it made me stronger." She shuddered.

"Your reliance on anger to fuel your own ki stems in part from your own pain," Cologne said softly, patting her arm. "Unlike Ukyou, you are accustomed to such emotions and, by instinct, convert them to anger. For Ukyou such an influx of heavy ki was debilitating, but for you it was like fuel thrown on a fire."

"But… isn't that… bad?" Akane asked quietly. "I remember all the warnings on the scroll for the Shi Shi Hokodan about it."

"It isn't bad, necessarily. It can be difficult, yes, but no more than any other way of being, so long as you manage it appropriately. A flame, child. And like any flame, it must be controlled lest it burn you as well. It means that as your skills develop, you will have to strive to understand your own feelings - where they come from, why you have them and what they are trying to tell you."
"I'm... not really very good at that..." Akane said in a subdued tone. "But... but if Ranma was doing this...?"

"For Ranma it is undoubtedly unnatural - a symptom of extreme emotional stress. Ranma Saotome is someone who should never be able to generate a Perfect Shi Shi Hokodan." Cologne shook her head sadly. "I... fear the worst."

"Ranma isn't dead." Akane shook her head, clenching her fist. "She can't be!"

"Even presuming she endured the release of that much heavy ki, Ranma would have been stripped of the very confidence that empowers her. Assuming the Joketsuzoku are hunting her as well..."

Cologne sighed. "We should presume that she and my Great granddaughter have been taken."

"Why are the Amazons attacking us?" Ukyou demanded. "I thought we were good with them! Didn't Ranma kill a god and save, like, their entire region for them?"

Cologne looked pained. "That is precisely why they are attacking us. Or... at the very least, attacking Ranma. A martial artist of his calibre appears once in a hundred generations. The Joketsuzoku have sought to add him to our ranks since they learned of him. It is why I accompanied my Great Granddaughter to Japan to evaluate him." She pulled out her pipe, tapped it out and then stuffed it with tobacco in an old, familiar ritual. "I have managed to keep them at bay thus far by promising that my Great Granddaughter would win him. I had thought that my report of your marital arrangement would end the matter. It seems the fools prefer to do things the hard way."

"But why?" Nabiki asked. "What's the profit for them?"

"On the surface? Racial purity. Inviting so many outsider females into the tribe is... contentious, regardless of their skill." Cologne lit her pipe and took a puff. "But, in reality? To discredit me. Apparently, while I've been gone, Lo Shan has staged a bit of a coup. If she can succeed where I have so far failed, and without the compromises I have made, well... That will cement her position as de facto ruler and destroy my influence and power forever."

"And so... that's it?" Nabiki's tone sharpened as she felt her ire rise. "Our lives are forfeit because we're inconvenient to them?"

"I am somewhat surprised that you are so shocked, Nabiki Tendo. Is this not a common attitude of those with great power and little regard for those who don't have it? You made an agreement and those with power have elected to change it."

Nabiki glowered at her. "If you think for one second that agreement between us still stands..."

Cologne held up a hand. "Peace, child. You are not the only one who has been betrayed this day. I am on your side in this, not theirs."

"Are you?" Nabiki asked. "Are you sure? Because after today I'm pretty sure I'm not letting this go with an apology and a promise to never do it again. Are you willing to stick with this all the way?"

Cologne raised an eyebrow and puffed her pipe. "Are you, child? It is easy to demand vengeance now, but a few days hence, when you hold the life of a Joketsuzoku warrior in your hands and you must opt to end it? You are right - we are well past the point of reconciliation. No, there will need to be bloodshed before my idiot kin will be ready to talk once more." She sighed. "Know that what I have done today is invoke Covenants which are tantamount to civil war. They are intended to provide structure and rules to the conflict in order to reduce needless loss of life but, make no mistake, I have little choice but to be committed."
"So now… what, we're supposed to fight to win back your position as top Amazon?" Ukyou asked. "Just so we can get them to lay off and stop trying to kill us and enslave Ranma?"

Cologne chuckled. "I would hope you all would have more ambition than that." She levelled her pipe at the Okonomiyaki Chef. "If we somehow come out of this victorious… and I fear the chances are not good… it will be by forcing the Joketsuzoku to surrender to us. That would make all of you essentially the conquerors of the Joketsuzoku. It is far easier to convince someone not to enslave you if you are in charge, yes?"

"So your plan is for us to take over the Amazons?!" Akane yelped incredulously.

"Presuming we survive. Which, currently, seems extremely unlikely," Cologne replied. "I assumed you would all prefer a fighting chance over immediately annihilation, though, so I opted to make things interesting at least. I am hoping that you impress me with what you come up with."

"So… that's it, eh? If we want out of this we have to win a war?" Nabiki said, setting her jaw. "This wasn't what I had in mind when you said you'd have a challenge for me."

"If you accomplish this, there are none who would be able to contest your position or standing. The rules and laws would, in fact, be of little import, as you would be the one setting them from that point forward," Cologne pointed out.

"What I don't understand is… what set all of this off?" Ukyou asked. "Why would Ranma be upset enough to generate that much heavy ki in the first place, and why would the Amazons elect to basically invade Nerima to get him now?"

Nabiki pulled out the scroll and set it on the table, then pulled out the folder and put it down beside it. "Because, about fifteen years ago, Nodoka and Genma Saotome set in motion something awful… and I think Himura found out about it and used it to set all this up." She quickly gave Akane and Ukyou a recap of the day's events, taking particular care to detail to the encounter with Nodoka and what she had gleaned about the plans of the Saotome family. When she was done, Ukyou and Akane were both staring at her with expressions of unfiltered horror.

Ukyou recovered first, eyes darting back and forth as she tried to process and digest what she had heard. "I can't… I can't believe… How could anyone do that to their own child?!"

"I think… I think I'm going to be sick…" Akane murmured.

Ukyou dropped her head to the table. "I can't believe I was telling Ranma stories about how much my Dad sucked."

"It isn't a competition, Ukyou," Kasumi said gently, patting her back. "Your own struggle is not invalidated because Mr. Saotome found a way to be worse."

"Ranma didn't even know," Nabiki said softly. "It's all locked up behind the Neko-ken. Or it was."

"What I still don't get is… why two Ranmas on the Family Register?" Hiroshi asked. "Why go to all the trouble of faking a second birth record and entry? Why not simply change it? They can do that, right?"

"Not before 2003," Ukyou said. "And there has to be an official diagnosis by two different psychiatrists supporting gender dysphoria and..." Ukyou trailed off. "It's a subject I know something about, okay? It's not an easy thing to get changed, trust me."

"A lot easier to convince some poor midwife who really needs the money to quietly forge a birth
record for you," Nabiki replied. "Probably not even all that uncommon, now that I think about it. Great way to make a nearly airtight fake identity, if you plan far enough ahead."

"We should call Sayuri, Riko, and Rin," Yuka said suddenly. "You said the dojo was a sanctuary now, right? Maybe we should get them here."

"Your friends are not martial artists and will be of little interest to the Joketsuzoku," Cologne said. "They are in little danger from them."

"Yes, but without us to protect them, who knows what Himura might do?" Akane said. "Besides… besides I'd rather have my friends here right now. Maybe they can help us figure out what to do."

"Sounds good to me," Yuka said, standing as she pulled out her phone and walked out into the yard to start making calls.

As the door to the back yard opened again, Nabiki caught the sounds of singing. Male voices, terribly off-key and sounding very drunk. Familiar voices.

"Akane…!" she cried as she saw her sister's eyes widen - but it was already too late. Akane had started moving and it was very clear that nothing had better get in her way. Ukyou was barely a half step behind her as the two of them raced for the front door.

"Wha…?!” Kasumi said, startled by the sudden blur of movement.

"Cologne, don't let them kill him!" Nabiki leapt to her feet to run after the pair. As much as he deserves it I can't deal with a murder case right now!

Nabiki could hear her father's drunken drawl as she rounded the corner. "Don't worry Shaotome… *hic*… It'll all… all… Akane! Howsh my baby girl…?"

She rounded the corner to the hall just in time to see Akane spin and hurl the chinese war hammer at Genma.

To the older man's credit, his instincts were good. Even highly inebriated, he had the presence of mind to duck the flying hammer. But that left him open to a flying drop kick to the gut from Ukyou that sent him stumbling backwards.

"Wh-what ish the meaning of thish!?” Soun demanded, very quickly sobering up as the two girls attacked his friend.

Genma seemed to know when someone was out to kill him. He stumbled back a few paces, then dropped into a ready stance, dodging a side kick from Akane, and then a flurry of minispatulas.

"What do you think you're doing!?" Genma roared. He parried a few more of Akane's blows, but ducking a kick from Ukyou opened him up to a savage double palm strike to the gut. He stumbled back, eyes wide as he realized the girls were out for blood. "Tendo! Help me!"

"Daddy, don't you dare!" Nabiki said sharply, startling Soun out of intervening.

Soun turned to give her a confused look, still a bit wobbly on his feet. "Nabiki, wha…?" His attention was drawn back to the battle as there was a crash when Genma impacted one of the walls.

Nabiki walked up to him and put a hand on his shoulder. "We know about the scroll, Daddy."

Soun glanced back at her, a confused look on his face. "Scroll…? What…?"
She held up the old Chinese scroll in one hand. She watched as confusion was gradually replaced with haunted recognition.

"Wait... but that..." He looked back at Genma, then the scroll. "How did you get that...?"

"You need to come inside and talk, Father," Kasumi said from just behind Nabiki.

Genma Saotome was no stranger to being attacked by outraged females. It tended to happen to him a lot, in fact. Usually it was outrage over some misunderstanding (or sometimes just an understanding. A man had to eat, after all, and sometimes food was more plentiful than the funds to purchase it). But usually he either just had to take a few lumps, or roll with the hit enough to carry him clear and the problem was solved.

Not this time. He had never seen either of them fight like this. They were going after vitals. Killing blows. They wanted him dead or maimed, and for once he couldn't think of a good reason why. He tried to grapple Akane, to get the hammer away from her until he could talk some sense into the two of them.

Akane used the hammer to counter his superior reach and weight, forcing him back. She used it to force him to choose between taking a hammer blow, or suffering her follow up. He always elected to avoid the hammer hit but her strikes were getting wearying. I never should have trained her so much!

"Akane, Ukyou, what are you doing!?" Genma shouted as adrenaline took the edge off his buzz and cleared his head.

"We know what you did," Ukyou said coldly. "Fooled my old man pretty good, didn'tcha? You'd think he'd be able to tell when it's a six year old girl pretending to be a boy."

"What are you talking about?!" Genma demanded. He got a sinking feeling in his gut when she'd said that, though.

"We found the scroll," Akane growled. "We found the hair dye, and the letters to your wife, and the birth records. We know what you did to Ranma!" She took another swing, forcing him back as the impact cracked the fence wall.

Genma's eyes widened as he felt a surge of panic. For a few feverish moments he pondered a way to spin things, to convince them it was a mistake. But he could see in their eyes they were past platitudes and pleading. He switched gears, opting to take a more aggressive stance. "I did what I did for the sake of the Saotome School and for my art. My son will understand!"

"Your 'son' just blew up a sizeable chunk of Tokyo parkland with her feelings on the matter. I really wouldn't count on that," Ukyou snarled.

Genma glanced around. Soun had vanished, as had any reasonable chance of defusing things. I'll have to dip into the forbidden techniques to get away cleanly. A little Yamasenken to show them they're out of their league and get them to back off. I'll have to be careful not to hurt Akane or Tendo will be pissed.

He dropped back, and then when Ukyou threw another volley of minispats he responded with the Kijin-Gun Dai Ranbu, the vacuum blades, and knocked the projectiles aside. He focused his attacks on Ukyou, striking her in the chest with the Geimon Tessen Shi strike to send her flying back as he made for the gate then stopped and turned back to glare at them. With his path to freedom clear,
"That's the Yamassenken!" Akane said, kneeling next to Ukyou as she coughed and tried to recover her breath. "I thought you swore never to use those techniques again?!

"I swear a lot of things, Akane. But pragmatism wins out every time. It's called 'Anything Goes' for a reason." He grinned. "Not so eager to knock me around now that i'm serious, are you? Afraid of getting hurt, maybe? A lot of the techniques of the Yamassenken are deadly, after all. A true martial artist isn't afraid to die for his art, but then… Well, I suppose that doesn't apply to you two, does it?"

Akane's eyes narrowed. Ukyou stood next to her, but Akane held up a hand to keep her back.

"This is mine," Akane said softly. She gripped the handle of her hammer more tightly.

Ukyou raised an eyebrow. "Akane, this probably isn't the time to get fancy. You haven't been able to get the advanced stuff you were working on with Ryouga to work."

"I know," Akane said. "I don't need it for him."

"That's a bold statement, girl," Genma said with a chuckle. "Think that hammer will make the difference? Weapons are a crutch!"

"That's where the Tendo and Saotome schools disagree," Akane said, shouldering the hammer and taking a stance.

"And how will you beat me without the techniques of the Umisenken?" Genma asked, though the girl's confidence and calm gaze were starting to worry him.

"I don't need them," Akane said. "Just what Ranma and Ryouga taught me."

"I'll end this quickly," Genma thought. He narrowed his eyes, then nodded imperceptibly. "If that's the way you want it... Kinshi Kinbaku Sho!" his hand snapped out, flinging a rope towards Akane which wrapped around her in the blink of an eye.

Unfortunately, Akane was ready. He realized his mistake the instant she started to charge into the rope. Shit! She saw this fighting that Kurumi girl! She knows to charge in to keep the rope slack! He pulled back frantically, but she was moving far too fast for him to compensate and the rope fell slack around her as she reared back and swung. He tried to dodge, but the rope had now coiled around his own feet, and avoiding getting tangled made him slow, allowing her to clip him in the side.

He rolled with the hit as best he could, but he had heard the crunch and felt the flare of pain that indicated at least a fractured rib. He tasted blood in his mouth and spit it to the side as he rolled to his feet. He swept his hands forward, no longer concerned about hurting Akane as he sent a vacuum blade directly at her, hoping to cut the head off her war hammer.

Akane smashed the hammer into the asphalt, sending a spray of debris into the air, then darted forward into Genma's attack. However, she passed through unharmed, and Genma realized she had used the chunks of asphalt she had smashed into the air to steal the vacuum of Genma's technique, blunting the attack.

She doesn't know the Umisenken, but she understands the theory behind its counters to the Yamassenken, Genma realized, backing up a step. He ducked down to avoid a sweeping strike and darted forward, intent on tackling Akane and taking her to the ground.

Akane dropped the hammer, letting it dig into the asphalt as she swung around the handle to abruptly
change her trajectory. She used the handle like a pole to spin across to his left side and strike his already injured ribs with a reverse side-kick.

He managed to grab ahold of her ankle and use his weight to pivot and spin her around, tossing her away from him. She used the shaft of the hammer to catch herself and drop lightly to her feet a few feet away.

Genma clenched his fist and prepared to use the Dokuja Tanketsu Sho. Sorry Tendo, but I have to put her down! He knew the heart-rending strike could be fatal and would almost certainly hurt Akane, but he needed to put her down quickly. He darted towards her, hand outstretched in a strike to the center of her chest. Akane was already moving herself, hammer raised for an overhead blow.

A small form hopped between them and, with an extended finger of each hand, stopped both the descending war hammer and his hand.

"Much as I am enjoying seeing how Akane has progressed and seeing her do so by injuring you, you fat, pathetic excuse for a panda, Nabiki does not yet believe your life should be forfeit - despite your crimes," Cologne said, glaring up at him.

Genma hopped back, eyes wide. There was no way he could take on the old ghoul! He pulled out a star cloth and wrapped it around himself, masking his presence from them as he hastily prepared to withdraw.

"He's gone! That coward!" Akane snarled.

"Listen to me, Genma Saotome," Cologne called out, looking right in his direction. "I will allow you to withdraw from this but once. If you stay and answer for your wrongs, if you give the ones you have wronged the answers they need to find closure… I will be merciful. But if you run away now… when next your are confronted you will not be allowed to retreat and it will cost you everything. Choose wisely."

Genma ducked his head and ran as fast as the ache in his side allowed. As if I'd trust that crazy old woman! he thought as he ran. I need to find the boy FAST if I'm going to find a way to fix this!

"The scroll was a gift from the Master," Soun said, staring at the unfurled parchment. "He made it quite clear that he expected a male heir to the Anything Goes School. I… believe he intended it as a joke… he said he found it in an old trunk."

"Funny joke," Nabiki said coldly.

"You have to believe me when I say I never thought it would be used!" Soun said, tears rolling down his cheeks. "I… I agreed to take it at first, but when I heard Nodoka was certain she was having a boy… I thought it'd be a funny joke! Nabiki, you and Kasumi had already been born, and we already knew Akane was a girl. It was… it was my way of letting him know I was okay with his family name carrying on the schools. I never… I never meant… I was sure they had a boy!"

"So sure that you never once contacted them after that, for sixteen years?" Nabiki asked. "Even though you had an arrangement for your children to marry?"

"I... lost track. You know how it is! Things were busy around here, with you girls and then… and then your mother..." he trailed off.

"And then Genma Saotome walks back into your life, dragging his teenage son with him. Except…
"It isn't a son," Nabiki said, glaring at him. "But it's not that bad! A little hot water fixes that right up! You took the news of the curse like a champ, Daddy."

"Nabiki, please!" Soun cried. "I would never lie about something so…"

"Father," Kasumi said softly, cutting him off. Her voice was quiet, but there was a hard edge to it Nabiki had never heard before.

"Ka-Kasumi?" Soun turned his attention to her.

"We never told you what the scroll did, Father," Kasumi said softly. "You already knew. You and Mr. Saotome translated it together, didn't you?"

"I… well… I mean I knew the gist of it…" Soun stammered.

"Then you knew what the curses were. You knew what Jusenkyo was," Kasumi continued. "Mr. Saotome took you aside to talk while Ranma sparred with Akane and then took his first bath here, and we learned of the curses. You had to have known by then."

"It… I… thought it was a coincidence…" Soun whimpered. "I didn't even remember the scroll until…!"

"Stop," Kasumi said and shook her head. "What would mother say?"

"Did Mom know about the scroll?" Nabiki asked. "If you didn't foist it off on the Saotomes, was it going to be one of us? Kasumi? Me? Akane, maybe?"

"The truth, father," Kasumi said.

Soun deflated. His tears were gone now. "The… the Master was adamant that he wanted a male heir. He left it up to us to decide who would use the scroll if none were produced naturally. I already knew that Genma and Nodoka were hoping for a boy, so I gave the scroll to them, hoping it would never be an issue. I… thought it wasn't." He closed his eyes. "Saotome and I drifted apart… we stopped talking shortly after his boy… his child was born. I never realized why until he showed up here sixteen years later and I heard the name Jusenkyo. He folded his hands on the table. "You have to understand… by then I thought it was already too late. The damage had been done and… and the best thing for all concerned would be to simply accept the situation as it was… accept the boy as he was. Especially with young Akane's… tendencies…"

"Oh no no no, do not make this about Akane!" Nabiki growled.

Soun winced. "I… what was I supposed to do? No one would have believed me. I would have just alienated my oldest friend, and for what? I had no scroll, no proof. And there was the matter of the inheritance… No, nevermind, that's not important."

Nabiki raised an eyebrow. "Oh?" She folded her arms and sat back. "No, no, do go on, Daddy. Please."

"He means the fact that the Tendo Dojo is not his," Kasumi replied when Soun remained silent.

"Kasumi!? H-how do you know about that?!" Soun asked, eyes widening.

"I found mother's will when cleaning one day," Kasumi said. She turned her attention to Nabiki. "Mother owned the dojo. When she died, rather than ceding it to father, she placed it in a trust for us - to be passed to me on my 21st birthday, or to one of my sisters should they be married first."
Kasumi raised her teacup to take a sip. "That's why you were always so anxious to have Ranma and Akane wed right away, wasn't it?"

"Kasumi was supposed to inherit the dojo?!!" Nabiki blinked and glared at her father. "And you were trying to cheat her out of it?!!"

"I just felt the dojo should pass to the one who would make use of it to carry on the school!" Soun insisted. "Akane and Ranma would have been able to use it to make a living while doing just that! I just thought it best to settle the matter quietly so there would be no hurt feelings!"

"And I agreed, which is why I didn't say anything," Kasumi replied, glaring at him. "But you did so much damage to those two in trying to force them together when they weren't ready. Were you so afraid that I wouldn't hand the dojo over to them if they took their time to come together naturally?"

"All of this for the Anything Goes School of Martial Arts, huh?" Nabiki scoffed.

"Carrying on the school's traditions is more important than you can possibly…" Soun started, but Nabiki slammed her hand onto the table.

"What traditions?! Panty thievery? Lechery? We know who the Grand Master is, Daddy!" Nabiki stared daggers at him. "Do you realize what you've done for that legacy? To Ranma? To us?!!" Nabiki crossed her arms. "That's why Mom put the dojo into a trust, isn't it? She was trying to keep you from doing something dumb with it."

Soun turned to Kasumi. "Kasumi, please! Talk some sense into your sister!"

"How many years…?" Kasumi mused softly, seeming to ignore him as she ran her finger around the rim of her teacup in contemplation.

"Kasumi…?" Soun asked.

Kasumi took a deep breath, a sad smile crossing her face. "How many years have I been Mother's replacement, Father? I've kept your house, raised your children, taken care of every detail so that you would never miss her. All because I believed I was doing the right thing and supporting my family - supporting the 'Tendo Legacy'." She sighed. "I think you should leave for a while, Father."

"L-leave?" Soun said. "W-what do you mean, Kasumi?"

"Go on a training journey for a few weeks." Kasumi said. "Or months. I can have your things packed by nightfall and you can leave in the morning."

"Kasumi! How can you kick your own father out in the…!?!?" Soun wailed.

"Father, it is best if you are not here for the near future," Kasumi said tightly, giving Soun a look that caused his mouth to snap shut. Kasumi put down her teacup and Nabiki could see that her hand was trembling. "I don't want to hate you for what you've done, Father. For what you've made me an accessory to. I think I can forgive you if you give me enough time, and I want to. But, right now, this family is facing a crisis and the crimes that you and the Saotomes have committed against Ranma have pushed her to the breaking point. I need this house to be the safe place I promised her - and it can't be that with you in it. I'm sorry. Please… just go."

Soun set his jaw. "Kasumi… You may be in line to inherit this dojo in a few months, but until then I am still head of this household, and…"
Nabiki reached over and grabbed his head, forcing him to look at her. "Let me phrase this differently for you then, Daddy. We… Akane, Ukyou, myself, everyone… are going to be doing everything we can to bring Ranma home. And when we do, we are going to tell Ranma everything. Not that it matters because Nodoka already told Ranma that you gave them the scroll. Ranma will be coming here and she knows what you did. And if you are still here when she comes home… nobody in this household… no one… is going to lift a finger to stop her, no matter what she decides to do with you."

The color drained from Soun's face. "P-perhaps a good long training journey wouldn't be such a bad thing for me after all…"

"Perhaps," Nabiki replied archly and sat back down.

Soun glanced to her, then to Kasumi. He opened his mouth, closed it again, then stared at the table for a long moment as if the patterns in the wood grain could give him answers. Finally, in a quiet voice he said, "I'll… I'll go pack." He stood and shuffled off to his room.

Nabiki waited until he was gone then scooted over next to Kasumi. She could see that her older sister was struggling to hold herself together.

"Thank you, sis," Nabiki said, putting her arms around her.

"It's… it's for the best… isn't it?" Kasumi asked, somewhat shakily.

Nabiki swallowed. "With everything that's happening right now, I can't deal with Daddy and his role in all of this. I think… getting him out of all this craziness means we can deal with him without all this other madness cluttering it up." Nabiki sighed. "Assuming, of course, we do get through this."

"Do you hate him?" Kasumi asked softly.

Nabiki looked up to make sure her father was out of earshot, then considered. "I'm… angry right now. Angry at too many people for too many reasons. Maybe… ask me again when that's over with."

"Do you hate me?" Kasumi asked again, staring into her teacup.

Nabiki shook her head and hugged her sister tighter. "Never."

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The trek back to Kuno Manor was a more tiring hike than Kodachi had anticipated. It was also worrisome, as her burden had not so much as stirred since they began their trip. She hefted the redhead on her back a bit more securely and continued, hopping from rooftop to rooftop.

Finally she stopped to rest and survey the area. Another figure landed on the rooftop next to her.

"Whoever they are, they do not seem to be giving pursuit," Tatewaki said, glancing about. He had Ryouga slung over his shoulders and was trying not breathe too heavily and mask his fatigue - likely as a matter of pride.

"Rest assured, they are out there, even if we don't see them," Kodachi replied, eyes narrowing.

"Let us hope they remain wary until we get home," Tatewaki said. "We could call for the limo…"

"I'd rather not stay in one place long enough to wait for it," Kodachi answered. She didn't mention
the fact that the exertion was helping her avoid dwelling on the morning's events or what she had seen happen with the girl she was currently carrying.

"A shame. I was hoping you could use the time to explain to me what, exactly, happened this morning, and the reasons for your frantic call-to-arms of nearly the entire Kuno family staff," Tatewaki said.

Kodachi winced. "If you are regretting answering my call, brother dear…"

She felt his hand on her shoulder and glanced at him in surprise.

"I offered my help unconditionally, did I not? My sword is yours, as promised, regardless of the circumstances Dachi. I merely would like to know who I am fighting and why."

"I wish I could tell you, brother. Aside from their being foreigners and apparently Chinese, I know no more about these assailants than do you, nor do I know what their interest is in… these two." Kodachi sighed. "As for the rest of what I have to tell… let us get home. I wish to tend to these two before telling you a tale which may convince you that I am as mad as people say I am."

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Yuka sat back down at the living room table. Kasumi was tending to Ukyou and Akane's injuries from their scuffle with Genma, Nabiki was fruitlessly scrolling through contacts on her phone and Hiroshi and Daisuke were quietly picking at some fruit Kasumi had set out.

"Sayuri and Riko are on their way over," she said. "I wasn't able to get through to Rin. I left a message, but I had to keep it low-key to avoid freaking out her parents. I didn't get anything from her mobile. She must have it turned off."

"She's probably out with her family," Hiroshi replied. "Movie night or something."

"People do stuff with their families?" Daisuke asked, frowning.

"Yeah, when you're wholesome and functional and stuff I suppose," Hiroshi answered.

"Huh… must be nice. My parents are working all the time."

"Should… should we be having our families come out too? Are they at risk?" Yuka asked nervously.

She felt a touch on her shoulder and turned to see Cologne there. She had to resist the urge to recoil from the wizened visage.

"Do not fret, child. You and your families are of little concern to Lo Shan or Himura and their goals. They are in no more danger than anyone else in this neighborhood." She smiled in what Yuka presumed was supposed to be a reassuring way and patted her arm gently.

"Which is to say, a lot of danger," Daisuke muttered.

"So why are we calling everyone in then?" Yuka asked.

Daisuke leaned forward and lowered his voice. "Look at 'em, Yuka. Ranma's run off and she may be dead… but even if she's not… well, things are pretty screwed up with that whole birth record thing. Shampoo is missing. Ryouga is nowhere to be found. They're kicking their Dad out of the house. Every adult they know has betrayed them… err, present company excluded of course," he
nodded nervously towards Cologne.

Cologne chuckled dryly. "No offense taken, sonny. There are times I sincerely regret growing up myself. I don't recommend it."

"Uhh… yeah… anyway… we're moral support," He popped a grape in his mouth.

"I'd feel better if it didn't seem like half of this was our fault," Hiroshi said, propping his head up on his fist.

"To be fair, Ranma found out the truth on his own when he got a hold of that scroll," Daisuke said. "At best we just provided supporting evidence.

"Her own," Yuka corrected them stiffly.

"Hey, last I heard Ranma was pretty flexible about pronouns," Daisuke shot back. "It's not like Ranma's suddenly a different person just 'cuz we found all this stuff out, so I don't think we should be changing the rules."

Yuka frowned. "What are the rules?"

"Last form we see him in determines the pronoun, unless otherwise indicated," Hiroshi said, reaching for an apple. "Basic Jusenkyo etiquette."

"Well, actually…" Daisuke said thoughtfully. "Is it? Ranma's the only one with a gender changing curse, right?"

"There was that Prince Herb guy…" Hiroshi reminded him.

"Oh yeah… but he had his own pronoun rule, according to Ranma," Daisuke replied.

"Oh? What pronoun are we supposed to use for this Prince Herb?" Yuka asked.

"'Bitch'," Hiroshi and Daisuke replied in unison.

"Works for either gender with him," Daisuke added.

Nabiki snorted and looked up from her phone. "There is no way that either of you would ever have the balls to call Herb 'Bitch'."

"Not to his face, no," Daisuke said.

"But his face is in China," Hiroshi added.

"But Bitch's face is in China," Daisuke corrected.

Nabiki chuckled and shook her head. She looked thoughtful for a moment then got up and walked over to join Akane and Ukyou, kneeling next to them to take Akane's hand.

"See?" Daisuke said, casually fistbumping Hiroshi. "Tutu Detectives and Moral Support to the rescue again." He paused, gave Yuka a searching look, then extended his fist to her across the table. Hiroshi added his own in offer to her.

Yuka regarded the proffered fists skeptically. "I… Don't have to wear a tutu, do I?"

"We've considered adding a branch specializing in bow ties, if you're interested," Hiroshi said with a
Kodachi would never describe Kuno Manor as 'welcoming', but no one could deny it was Kuno territory and arriving at the front gates was a relief. For the last half of the trip she had been seeing movement out of the corners of her eyes as their shadows had grown bolder, despite the best efforts of Sasuke and the other retainers.

At the gates one of the butlers and two maids were present with the pair of stretchers she had requested. With a grateful sigh, Kodachi lay her burden down on the gurney. Next to her, Tatewaki laid down his own and the maids set about wheeling them into the manor while Kodachi walked between them and looked the over. Her medical training was informal, but Kodachi had realized at an early age that it was in her best interests to educate herself in the symptomatology of overdose and poison.

The two of them were still unresponsive. Their breathing was shallower than she liked, but not labored. Their color was somewhat paler than she was happy with and their skin was clammy and cold. Whatever they dosed them with, those idiots very nearly stopped their hearts! She grit her teeth but forced herself to remain calm; Righteous anger would wait until she had a suitable target upon which to vent it.

"Take them to the old infirmary. Have the nurse… Kikue? Yes, have Kikue monitor their blood pressures and take samples if it's not too low. I'll be trying to determine what they used on them." She rattled the darts she had pulled out of their necks in her hand. "They should be monitored until they wake up. I want to be notified the instant they do."

"Yes, ma'am," the maids said smartly as they passed through the double doors into the mansion.

"Will you be needing the bath, mum?" the butler said. He had a stout English accent that Kodachi strongly suspected was an affectation, as the man was as Japanese as she was. He insisted that he had picked it up while at University in Wales.

"In a few hours. I want to get started on this first, before the compounds decay," Kodachi said. She was already pondering how best to determine what she was dealing with. She had a few ideas about what might cause such an effect.

"I have rarely seen you so focused, sister," Tatewaki said. She realized he had fallen into step next to her. "Might I offer some assistance?"

She raised an eyebrow. "You've hardly displayed any interest in chemistry before, brother dear."

He inclined his head in acknowledgement. "That is true, but I was thinking, perhaps, that you might like to talk."

Kodachi's walk slowed. She glanced down at the two darts in her hand. "Brother… Tachi… Do you… have you ever seen anything that would cause you to believe in magic?"

Tatewaki chuckled. "I believe that I have been known to spout off about sorcerers and foul dark magicks in the past. If you fear that I still cling to such superstitions…"

She shook her head. "Brother… I saw something today… something that I struggle to comprehend. But I saw it clearly, and in the presence of two others who also saw it. What's more, they treated the
event as though it were no new thing to them… That nothing were out of the ordinary. I… worry
that my own sanity is not as solid as I once believed," She took a breath. "I am… reluctant to tell
you, for fear… you will think me mad."

Tatewaki blinked then folded his arms. "I am hardly one to lay such judgements, Dachi. But… I
promise to keep an open mind. I know how the mind can play tricks, and I know something of
madness. And to mine eyes, you have been saner of late than I have ever seen you."

"Which is why I am loathe to change that opinion of me. I… appreciate your faith in me. I miss the
days when it was not such a rare gift." She took a deep breath. "Nabiki Tendo confronted Nodoka
while she and I were finalizing the details of the marriage contract today."

"There was an altercation?" Tatewaki asked.

"Yes, but not between Nabiki and me." Kodachi found herself fidgeting and held her hands stiffly at
her sides to mask her impatience - determined not to play the part of the flustered child in this. "I had
thought initially that she had come to contest the marriage, but it quickly became clear she had some
other purpose… some anomaly with regards to my Darling Ranma's birth. The way she carried on I
would have deemed her mad, but…" She shook her head. "You are correct. I have seen madness,
and Nabiki Tendo was as clear as day. She produced copies of birth records for two Ranma
Saotomes. One male, one female."

"That is hardly a shock," Tatewaki frowned, "We already know this to be fact. We are well
acquainted with both Ranma and his sister Ran."

Kodachi shook her head. "No… Ran claimed to be the illegitimate daughter of Genma Saotome, but
these documents clearly showed both children being born to the same mother, at the same date and
time… in different places."

Tatewaki frowned and rubbed his chin. "One was false? Do you suspect the male sibling to be the
illegitimate one, then? With documentation falsified to give him primacy over his unwanted sister?"

"For a moment I did. Then… Ranma himself arrived and joined the conflict. He himself bore a
scroll… and the conversation turned towards something done to him when he was a child, and his
mother…" She paused to choose her words with care. "I had thought our mother could spit venom,
but the things she said to him… She implied that he was in some way manufactured to replace
his sister. And then… Then he stumbled and dumped a vase of water on himself, and… changed."

"Changed? Changed how?" Tatewaki asked. "His behaviour?"

"No! Physically!" Kodachi looked up imploringly. "Dear Brother, this is why I fear you will think
me mad - but I swear to you that from the moment he arrived at his mother's home to just now as the
maid wheeled them off, I have not taken my eyes off of Ranma Saotome. He became his sister."

Tatewaki's brow furrowed. "Like… as in makeup washed away? Ran was impersonating Ranma?"

Kodachi shook her head. "Brother, Ran is nearly a head shorter than Ranma. Her build is utterly
different. Her voice is different! This was not hair dye and artfully padded clothing!" She shuddered.
"And… and both of them… Nodoka and Nabiki… they accepted it without question… as though
this was routine. Ranma's mother disapproved of him changing. She claimed he was possessed by
the spirit of his deceased sister!"

"A… spirit?" Tatewaki shook his head. "This… I wish to believe you, sister, but this… all of this is
the stuff of fairy tales and myth."
"I know! I know..." Kodachi sighed. "I had hoped that one or both of them would awaken so they might explain things to me." She closed her eyes. "They mentioned a place called 'Jusenkyo'. Perhaps... ask the librarian if he might search the archives, see if we can find some veracity to all of this? Some... explanation that is not that I have lost my mind?"

Tatewaki glanced down the hall. "I... felt something beyond natural about that girl... No, no, I mustn't confuse my own addled ramblings with this." He shook his head to clear it.

"We could simply see...? You said water appeared to be the trigger."

"I would not want to risk it in their state. I don't know what it would do with the paralysis toxin still in their systems," Kodachi said.

"Then better we research what we can and do that one thing for which our family has never been terribly renowned... we wait," Tatewaki finished grimly.

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"So... explain that to me one more time... slowly," Sayuri said, eyes wide.

Nabiki took a deep breath. "Ranma was born a girl. When she was born, her parents lost their minds and decided to fake birth records for a boy and to raise her as a boy. But more than that, they decided to use a scroll that our father gifted them before Ranma was born that described a method to permanently change someone's gender, including altering their mind. Genma took Ranma when she was two years old and, for 14 years, convinced her she was a boy, possibly using mind control drugs and neko-ken induced psychological trauma to reinforce it. Then, when they got to Jusenkyo and he was able to complete the potion, he messed something up and Ranma ended up half and half, but inverted from a regular curse. Ranma found out today - and, because Nodoka Saotome is an evil bitch, Ranma snapped and ran off. Then there was a big explosion on the outskirts of Nerima that we think was a Perfect Shi Shi Hokodan, but we can't check - because for some reason the Amazons are here in force and trying to kill us. Now Shampoo, Ryouga and Ranma are all missing and we're waiting for whoever is leading the Amazons to come parlay because we're apparently in the midst of a civil war."

Sayuri nodded all the way through, then was silent for a while after Nabiki finished.

"Nope," Sayuri said finally.

"'Nope'?” Nabiki repeated, confused.

"Nope." Sayuri shook her head. "I've officially exceeded my threshold for this. This is obviously a dream and any minute Dad will wake me up for breakfast. I'll be going to a normal, ordinary, boring school with normal, ordinary, boring people where nothing at all exciting ever happens and this was just a dream that got out of hand because I did a stupid, like eat a lamb curry pizza or something."

"Do... do you want me to pinch you?" Riko, sitting next to her, asked nervously.

"No," Sayuri said then buried her face in her hands. "This is insane, Nabiki. I'm not the only one who thinks that, right? Please tell me I'm not the only sane girl in the room right now."

"I think you might just be, Sayuri," Nabiki said sadly. "I'm in way over my head. I keep thinking I'm getting on top of it and then..." She looked down. "I'm... still processing all of this."

"But Ranma... Ranma is all right, isn't she?" Riko asked hopefully.
Nabiki remained silent.

"Doesn't Ranma have a cell phone for exactly this reason?" Sayuri asked.

"I've been calling it pretty much continually every half hour. Ranma either has it turned off, the battery is dead, or..." Nabiki shrugged eloquently. "It's probably just turned off."

"Now that you mention it, I don't think anyone's actually told her that you have to charge those things..." Riko added sheepishly.

"So... what do we do now? Do we just go to school tomorrow like everything is normal?" Sayuri demanded.

"Unless you can think of something better? Yeah," Nabiki said. "Us non martial artists, anyway. Cologne is pretty sure the Amazons have no interest in us and it's the best first place to start gathering info to try and figure out what's going on."

"She's 'pretty sure'?" Sayuri said skeptically. "You'll forgive me if that doesn't fill me with confidence. You know Himura is behind all of this somehow, right?"

"Of course I know!" Nabiki shot back testily. "But I can't prove any direct connection, nor do I have any indication that her making a deal with the Joketsuzoku would breach the terms of our competition. I don't know anything right now." She took a deep breath. "If you're not on board, that's fine, you can stay at the dojo until this blows over, or head back home."

"I think we should all probably calm down," Riko said, glancing between the two of them.

Sayuri took a second to compose herself. "We're on board, Nabiki," she said finally. "Ranma is my friend too. And, more than that, I'm her Team Captain. Even if that doesn't mean much when she's leaping tall buildings and being indestructible, it still means I have a responsibility, even if I am scared. So... don't worry about me. I just want to know that there aren't any other surprises you aren't telling us about - like Ryouga is an alien, or the Kuno family is growing a crop of sentient carnivorous tomatoes to try and take over the world or that we're all actually nothing more than a simulation running on someone's desktop PC or something."

"Well... for most of those I'm as in the dark as you are. But I can say with some certainty that Ryouga's not an alien," Nabiki said, the ghost of a smile passing across her lips. "Although he might have a bit of demon in his ancestry..."

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Outsider civilization was an odd thing. On the surface, it seemed a mighty thing - all towering edifices of steel and concrete and lights that ensures no corner of their realm ever knew darkness so the brilliance of their cities dulled the very presence of the stars themselves.

And yet, individually, they were pathetic - weak, subservient and out of shape; content to go about meaningless lives like drones in a hive, unaware or uncaring of the movement of history around them and contributing little to nothing to it. New construction sprang up even as forgotten corners rotted and decayed.

This land is overdue for a good Mongol horde invasion, Lo Shan thought as she looked out the window of the penthouse suite their benefactor had so generously provided them.

"Honored Elder."

"One of the warriors she had retained as a personal retainer walked up and knelt. "The Outsider Himura wishes to speak with you. She seems agitated."
"[I imagine she is,]" Lo Shan said and sighed. "[Send the girl in.]

The warrior nodded and stepped out. Lo Shan remained at the window until she heard the snappy footsteps of the girl's heeled shoes.

"I expect you are upset?" Lo Shan said. She turned to see Himura standing there. The girl's posture was rigid, her eyes hard and her expression unreadable.

Ah. The look of a youngster who has just been 'betrayed' by a foolish adult, Lo Shan thought with some amusement. She had to admit that Himura did interest her. The girl had potential as a contact, but she found herself a bit disappointed that she apparently had expected Lo Shan to jump quietly through her hoops.

"'Disappointed' would be a better word," Himura said. Her tone was measured and careful.

"It is normal for children to be disappointed by their elders until such time as they grow and learn why things are the way they are," Lo Shan replied. "To your credit, I had expected screaming and carrying on."

"We had an agreement," Himura replied, not rising to Lo Shan's bait.

"We did." Lo Shan began to walk around her, hands folded behind her back. "And… I have altered it, as circumstances have demanded." She sighed heavily. "You feel betrayed, of course. But I do not do this in bad faith. You are young and naive and, while your schemes might seem perfect and ideal to you at your tender age, you must understand the real world…"

"With all due respect, honored Elder, before I deign to be lectured about the 'real world' of modern Japan by the leader of a small village in the Chinese hinterlands, perhaps you should ask for an update from your subordinates on the successes of the day," Himura said tightly.

Lo Shan stopped. She frowned at the girl. Part of her wanted to deal with the disrespect she had shown harshly and quickly, to ensure the girl did not think it wise to speak out of turn with her in the future, but what she said gave her enough pause to follow that advice. She walked to the door and signaled her retainer.

"[A-actually, honored Elder, Tan Pohn and Su Tzu are… waiting to speak with you,]" the retainer said nervously.

"[And why did you not tell me this sooner?]" Lo Shan asked, feeling her ire rise.

"[They… opted to allow the Outsider girl to speak with you first.]"

Idiots! Lo Shan turned back and glared at Himura. The girl's face was still inscrutable, but Lo Shan realized that Himura was intentionally making her look foolish. She wondered if the girl understood the dangerous game she was so casually playing. "[Send them in!]"

As soon as she saw them, Lo Shan knew they had failed. Both were dirty and their clothes were ragged. Tan Pohn was missing her sword and Su Tzu looked like she had a house collapse on her. Both were hesitant, with eyes downcast.

"[Well…?]" Lo Shan asked. "[Where is the Godslayer?]"

"[Escaped,]" Tan Pohn said. "[We are tracking…]"

"[Tracking was not your task!]" Lo Shan cut her off sharply. She turned to Su Tzu. "[And you? You
outnumbered Xian Pu and the Outsiders. *What happened!?*

"[We… lost track of Xian Pu,]" Su Tzu said. "[Before we could apprehend the other two… Elder Cologne intervened on their behalf.]

"[Tch,]" Lo Shan snorted. "[You informed her she had no authority, yes? Does she intend to defy the wishes of the Council even now?]

"[S-she… she has invoked the Covenant of Contested Ground, honored Elder,]" Su Tzu said.

Lo Shan winced. "[This was why you were to secure her Great Granddaughter *before* she became aware of our activities!]" she ground out tightly.

She made at least a token effort to contain her irritation then, with two quick palm strikes, flung the two young warriors across the room, sending them crashing into the lavish decorations adorning the walls.

"*[Idiots! Do you have *any* idea how much your failure has jeopardized our position here!?!]*" She stalked up to Tan Pohn and grabbed the girl by the throat as she lay on the floor, coughing and trying to convinced bruised lungs to draw air. "*[I should kill you for this failure and spare you the punishment the council will place upon you.]*"

"Spare her," Himura's voice cut through her rage.

Lo Shan turned to glare at the outsider girl. "*Do* not presume to…!"

"Spare her or I withdraw all support for you and your warriors effective immediately," Himura continued. Her eyes were still that same cold, inscrutable ice.

Lo Shan dropped Tan Pohn and turned to stalk over to Himura. "Do you believe that because I have suffered a setback you may now dictate terms to me, *little girl*?"

Himura raised her chin and looked Lo Shan in the eyes. "No, honored Elder," she said softly. "I believe I have been able to dictate terms to you since the moment you set foot in Japan. I merely think you may now be ready to *listen.*"

Lo Shan's eyes widened. She reached out and casually took hold of the girl's chin. "Tell me… do you understand what I could do to you with the simple pressure of my thumb, child?"

There was no accompanying fear in the girl's eyes. Just dead emptiness. The mask she wore was gone. "Quite a lot I imagine," Himura said, her voice somewhat strained as she felt the tingle of the pressure point Lo Shan was brushing. "Tell me, Elder… what do you imagine would happen after?"

"We would complete our mission and return to China," Lo Shan said. "With or without your support."

The corner of Himura's mouth tugged up in a grin. "*Do you? Really?*"

Lo Shan's jaw tightened. She did not like the gleam that had entered the girl's eyes.

"You are in the heart of a foreign land, far from the support of your own and in territory claimed by forces you know well enough not to anger. You plan to kill or maim your only contact and ally in this territory, complete your mission without support despite already having failed once, and then somehow return home with no transport?" Himura's tone was quietly mocking.
"I don't need to kill you, child," Lo Shan said.

"Perhaps hold me ransom, then? See how benevolent my Grandfather is? Or perhaps you wish to see if there is some torment you can visit upon me that my father had not already dreamed up by the time I was twelve?" Himura reached up and pulled Lo Shan's hand away. "Choose carefully, honored Elder. Do you swallow your pride or do you spark a war with the Yakuza?"

Lo Shan set her jaw, grinding her teeth. "You are on unsteady ground and you are not so clever as you believe, girl," she spat as she stepped back.

Himura raised an eyebrow. "I was not the one who got impatient. You agreed to wait. If you had done so I could have delivered a willing Ranma to you."

"I still don't believe you can deliver on that promise," Lo Shan scoffed.

"Well, you had best hope you're wrong, because that is now your singular hope." Himura straightened her shirt. "I am disappointed because, although I anticipated you doing this, I had hoped for more trust. It would have made all of this far easier." She walked over to the window and looked out. "As it stands, Ranma is now in the custody of House Kuno, which even I dare not cross. Khu Long has made the Tendo Dojo neutral territory and… I believe has begun the process of challenging the legitimacy of your current administration? And now that she has the scroll, she is aware of what has been done and likely will quickly derive your own scheme from that knowledge."

"How did Khu Long get the scroll!?" Lo Shan demanded.

"Because I gave it to her," Himura said casually. "Or, more accurately, I gave it to Ranma, who left it for Nabiki, who I imagine is in the process of giving it to her."

Lo Shan was next to Himura in a heartbeat. She gripped her upper arm and forced her to turn to face her. She was rewarded with a momentary flicker of uncertainty in Himura's eyes.

"Why? Why!? Why would you do such a foolish thing!? Why would you do such a treacherous thing!? You may have undone all our plans!"

Himura's eyes narrowed. "Your plans are as of little concern to me as mine were to you a moment ago, honored Elder," she said. The quiet, dead tone had returned to her voice. "I allowed Ranma to have the scroll because it was always my intent for her to have it, and for Khu Long to verify its authenticity. Because it was necessary for Ranma to know and believe the truth of what her parents had done to her beyond any shadow of a doubt." She sighed. "Also… you may wish to release my arm. Paivio is patient, but he may mistake your intentions."

Lo Shan frowned then saw, in the corner of her eye, a faint glint from the rooftop of the building across from hers. She realized that her own anger had blinded her to the sense of danger she was now feeling. A gunman who had a clear field of fire.

"I am not allowed by the rules of my Grandfather's test to use such methods against Nabiki Tendo… but her contest and mine was never one of violence in the first place. But you are not Nabiki Tendo. I have made sure that I am prepared at all times in dealing with you," Himura said quietly.

Lo shan released Himura's arm and glared at her. "Do not presume your toys are so fearsome to me, child."

"It is said that to train an archer to use the longbow, it is best to start teaching his father before he is born," Himura said quietly. "For a martial artist such as yourself, generations of breeding and decades of training. For a gunman who can shoot with basic competency? A few hours every week
after work in the video arcade. You are in a land where quantity has a quality of its own, honored Elder."

"Is that a threat?" Lo Shan asked tightly.

"Merely information to consider," Himura replied. "Which I recommend you do consider before making your next move. I will be proceeding with my own plans regardless. My offer to you and yours stands unchanged, but I require commitment this time."

"Which means you wish for us to be your underlings," Lo Shan said angrily.

"If it helps you to adhere to your role in the plan, then yes," Himura replied coldly. "We have passed the point where I require your assistance, Elder. My grandfather's challenge is moot now. I am willing to assist you in accomplishing your goals, but only because doing so facilitates my own. And if there is a repeat of today, where that ceases to be true, then our relationship will be terminated and I will make sure my Grandfather is aware of your unwelcome presence."

"And what evidence do I have that your plans will end better than this?" Lo Shan said.

Himura shrugged. "Faith, I suppose." A smirk slowly crossed her face. "That… and I have Xian Pu."

"What," Lo Shan said.

"Oh, does that interest you? The Granddaughter of your political rival?" Himura asked. "One of my assets picked her up after your warriors failed to secure her. She is safe and available for you to use as a bargaining chip if you wish. She's most certainly not going anywhere, and if you need proof I could arrange for an ear or a finger be provided to you to present to Khu Long? Or is that too gauche for your sensibilities?" Himura folded her hands behind her back. The artificial mask of cheerful pleasantry had returned as it became clear, even to Lo Shan, that Himura had the upper hand.

"No… no harm to her. Not yet," Lo Shan grated. Her jaw twitched and finally, she forced herself to bow. "I… apologize for my haste. My warriors are at your disposal. For now."

"Excellent. For the present we'll have to wait a bit until Ranma pokes her head out of Castle Kuno." Himura tapped her chin thoughtfully. "It would be best if you could get your warriors to back off for now and negotiate a cease-fire with Khu Long, perhaps."

"You honestly expect the mansion of a pair of rich children to be able to keep us out?" Lo Shan asked. "Why not simply send either of these two. I'd like to have them work with me. As a… gesture of trust and cooperation."

Lo Shan narrowed her eyes. "And if your estimation is wrong and we succeed?"

Himura shrugged. "Then Ranma is yours to do with as you will, so long as I am allowed to credit our partnership for it to my Grandfather."

Lo Shan sniffed. Her pride had been pricked and so she intended to see to the matter personally. "Very well. Take them then. They have failed in their tasks. Being errand girls for an outsider seems as fitting a punishment as any."

Tan Pohn and Su Tzu both winced visibly.
Himura inclined her head. "I appreciate it. I shall wait to hear of your success with Castle Kuno, then?"

"You will not wait long," Lo Shan replied.

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Thanks for sticking with me so far. Whew!

Those curious about the letter Ranma wrote? It will be shown in its entirety later on.

I know many of you don't like Himura as a character. I want you to know I appreciate all the feedback you've given me, and I will try and use it in future writings. But Himura's plans always had a very tight arc mapped out that haven't allowed me much wiggle room in this story. So… again, thank you for sticking with this story with all of its flaws. I hope to make the eventual resolution worthwhile.

But we've got a ways to go yet.
Breaking Your Toys

(11 years ago)

"No! Please, Daddy! I don't want to do it again! I can't learn it! I can't!" she cried out, struggling against the ropes. She could hear the cats in the pit, yowling. They smelled the fish strapped to her. Some were already jumping up and trying to get at her. She could see their glowing yellow eyes and the glint of the light off their claws as they leapt and swiped. She knew the burn and itch and pain that would come once she was lowered into the pit and they began to scratch and fight to get at the food.

"You've been lying to me, boy," Genma said. His voice was heavy and slow. He sounded tired. "When that girl in town asked if you were a boy, I heard the hesitation. You know how important this is."

"Please! I'm sorry! I-I got confused!" Ranma begged.

Genma sighed and gripped Ranma's chin, forcing her to face him. "Why do you lie to me, boy? You know a girl can't grow up to carry on the Saotome school of Anything Goes Martial Arts! Girls are only good for flower arranging and… and tea ceremonies! Is that what you want?!"

Ranma didn't actually know what flower arranging or tea ceremonies were but she knew she had to avoid them at all costs. "No! No I don't!"

"I don't believe you," he said gruffly. "You've been slacking on the hair dye, you've been playing with girls… It was that Ukyou girl, wasn't it? What did she tell you? Tell me or it'll be worse, boy!"

"What… B-but… Ucchan is a boy…" Ranma said, momentarily confused. "A-and you told me to forget…"

"I know what I told you!" Genma snarled. "Listen to what I am telling you now, boy, or I'll put you in the pit right this instant! What did you and Ukyou get up to?"

"H-he…" Ranma sniffed. "He wanted to make an Okonomiyaki sauce… a special one… H-he said I could try it in ten years when it was ready, i-if I promised…" She trailed off, not wanting to betray that secret oath.

"Promise what, boy!? Out with it!" Genma jerked the rope a few times for emphasis.

"I promised to take care of him for the rest of his life if the sauce was good!" Ranma blurted out, tears streaming down her cheeks.

Genma's expression hardened. "That sounds like something a wife would do, Ranma. Is that what you were telling him? That you wanted to be his wife?!!"

"No! I just… I… I just wanted to try th-the sauce, and-and-and…" she hiccuped. "I-I-I-I spilled it! B-but I tried to fix it and-and-and…"

"So you were making sauce now?!" Genma growled.

Ranma snapped her mouth shut and whimpered.

Genma's eyes narrowed. "You haven't taken your pills either, have you? Have you?!"
"Th-they make me dizzy! It… it makes it hard to concentrate…” Ranma whimpered.

Genma turned away and stormed back over to the tent, pulled out his pack and rummaged around inside it. He pulled out a small, cloth bag and picked out two round, homemade tablets. He walked back over to her and grasped her jaw roughly, squeezing until she was forced to open her mouth. He shoved the pills so far down her throat that she nearly gagged, but after a bit of struggle she managed to swallow them.

"There. Now listen to me, and listen well, boy," Genma said, holding her head as he looked her in the eyes. "You are going into that pit, and you are going to learn that technique, or you are going to be left to die in there, am I clear?"

She whimpered softly.

"Only men come out of that pit. Little girls die in there. If you're a little girl, even a little bit, you are going to die, do you understand me?" Genma said, his voice was grave, stern and serious.

She whimpered and nodded.

"Good," Genma said. "You might not understand this now, but you will when you're older, Ranma. I'm doing this for your own good. One day you'll thank me for this." He released her and then walked over to the tree where the other end of the rope was tied. He undid it and started lowering her down as she sniffled.

She could hear the cats' yowls getting louder. She knew he was wrong. She had seen it. The cats sometimes found a way out. Not all of them, but when they did, they ran far away and wouldn't let Genma catch them again.

She yelped in pain as the first cat latched onto her leg, clawing and straining as it tried to get at the food, then kicking off with its mouthful. She knew that was going to continue for hours until they got it all, then they would start biting and scratching trying to get more. Maybe, if she was a cat, they would leave her alone. Maybe, if she was a cat, she could run away and not go into the pit again. Boys came out of the pit but Genma always found an excuse to put her back.

Her vision blurred as the medicine started to kick in. It didn't dull the pain, but it made it hard to react. Hard to think. Cats probably didn't have to take the pills.

Maybe she'd try being a cat next time…

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Ranma woke up to a few terrifying moments of sleep paralysis. Her breath hitched in her throat until she managed to remember how drawing a breath worked and she gasped in a deep lungful of air. She curled onto her side and started to cough, fighting to beat back the surge of asphyxia induced panic.

When the spasms finally passed, she took a moment to look around. Her mind wasn't totally awake yet, so she was a bit confused to find that her arms weren't covered in scratches and bites as they usually were when she got out of the pit.

No… not the pit… I was somewhere else… she thought as the fog of the dream slipped away. She tried to cling to it as a sickly dread started to seep in around it, one that made the dream about the pit of starving cats seem preferable. At least with the cats she knew how to get out. She closed her eyes and shuddered. I don't want to remember! I don't WANT to remember! I DON'T WANT TO REMEMBER!
"You're a THING, Ranma! People will be able to tell! They'll KNOW. YOU'LL know! You'll never lead a normal life, male OR female!

"Nnnnh!" she whimpered, clutching her hands to her temples. Please let it have been a dream! Please tell me that it was only a dream! PLEASE! Just let me be in the pit again! I'll do better this time, I swear!

"Ranma? Ranma, you're awake!"

Her eyes snapped open. The voice was familiar. Male. Not her father's, but familiar, even comforting? She uncurled just enough to roll over a bit and peek. "R-ryo?"

Ryouga was sitting on a cot across from her. He had bandages on his hands and around his temples. His shirt had been replaced with an ill-fitting but clean plain white T-shirt. He stood up and reached for her. "Ranma!"

Before she knew what she was doing, she shrank back from him. The movement was an instinctive one - she didn't want him to touch her. She didn't want him to see. "H-hey, Ryo…" she said nervously.

He scowled. "Don't 'Hey Ryo' me! Ranma, what the hell is going on!? You nearly killed yourself yesterday!"

That's right… Ranma thought miserably. I screwed that up, too. I got him hurt… almost got him killed. "I-I'm sorry… I'm sorry, okay!?!" she said, perhaps a little more sharply than she intended. "You shouldn't have been there… You… you should have let me die."

"I should have let… Ranma, what the hell are you talking about?!" He stepped forward and reached for her again.

And again, she scooted back until her back was literally against the wall. "Don't touch me!"

Ryouga took a step back, his eyes wide.

"Y-you… you shouldn't touch me…" Ranma shook her head. Her brain felt like it was on fire as she struggled to process everything that had happened - everything that had changed. "I'm not… I'm not real."

Ryouga frowned. "Ranma, if this is about not being a real girl again…"

"No! I'm not real! I'm not real!" she shouted at him. She squeezed her eyes shut as she started to hyperventilate again, the old panic rising. "Please… Just… don't touch me. I don't want you to hate me."

Ryouga glanced around the room as if he expected to see someone, but they were alone. It was a small room, something like a nurse's office, but it was otherwise empty at the moment. He moved carefully, slowly, as though he was trying not to startle a frightened animal, and sat down on the bed. "Take it easy, Ranma. What… what happened? I can feel it coming off you in waves, even at this range."

Ranma opened her eyes to look at him and swallowed. I just want it to go away. I just want it to go away! She trembled with the certainty that he was going to start hating her too. "I'm not a person, Ryouga. T-two years ago at Jusenkyo… my Dad… he made me. He made me outta magic - to replace the real Ranma Saotome."
"What?" Ryouga looked confused.

Ranma took a shaky breath. "The real Ranma… she was born a girl. And… and… Mom and Pop… they didn’t want her. They wanted a boy… so… so that was what the training journey was all about. The whole trip was to get the ingredients for this potion or spell or whatever. And then… and then…” She squeezed her eyes shut as a flash of memory bubbled up from the darkness. She remembered being held down, struggling vainly as something hot and acrid-tasting was poured down her throat - something that burned and kept burning as it started to eat her from the inside. "They made her drink it, and… it killed her, so that the Nannichuan curse could inhabit her body or something… Me."

"Ranma…” Ryouga’s eyes were wide with horror.

"B-but Pop cocked it up… like he does everything… and… and some small part of her got trapped. Now I’ve got some of her memories, but they’re all mixed up and she’s stuck being my curse and…” She shuddered. "I shouldn’t even exist."

"You're not real…?" Ryouga asked.

"Mom… Mom called me a 'homunculus'," Ranma said softly. "I guess that… that's like a zombie or… or a shinigami or something, right?" She curled into a ball. "All my memories are fakes that they programmed into me. That's why I can't remember stuff, or why I get the details wrong when I do remember, and… and why I don't know how regular human stuff works. Cuz I'm not. Human I guess. I'm not even really feeling what I think I feel. You shoulda… it would have been easier if you had just…!"

"Ranma…"

Ranma laughed bitterly. "You always wanted to get revenge on me, right? For the Jusenkyo curse? Well, good for you because that's all I am! It ain't even murder! Plus… plus I fooled you, right? I made you think I cared! I made you fall in love with a thing. I made you think I l-l-lov… loved you back. S-so… Go for it, man! Take your time with it!"

"Ranma!"

She started, then looked up at him with wide eyes. He had his hand outstretched.

"Take my hand," Ryouga said. His voice was stern. Was he angry? Did she want him to be angry? She had said some awful things… she wanted him to be angry, right?

"N-no…” she retreated from his hand. Please just let it end before he sees… I don't want him to touch me and see there's nothing there!

"Ranma, take my hand," Ryouga repeated.

"There's nothing there, Ryouga!" she shouted. Tears were running down her cheeks. "There never was! It was never real, okay? None of it! Why do you have ta see it for yourself? Why…"

"Take. My. Hand."

She swallowed. Hesitantly, she extended her hand towards his. She expected him to snatch her hand, pull her off the bed - use it to hurt her. That’d be all right. Physical pain she could deal with right now. She stretched a bit more. Maybe it would even be a relief…

He leaned over and took her hand, firmly but not roughly, and held it. She whimpered as the Link
blazed to life. She tried to jerk her hand back, but he wasn't letting go. She could see his concern, his worry and that mass of red warmth, the name of which terrified her more than anything else at the moment.

"L-let go…" she whimpered. "I don't want to see what's in your head right now!"

"Listen to me," Ryouga said without budging. "This is the Link. Our Link. The original Link. This is the Link that I made with you - without any trickery or science or drugs. I can only do that once in my life, Ranma. Only once. And I did it before you went to Jusenkyo."

"S-so?!" she demanded.

"I didn't make the Link with a homunculus, or a zombie, or a thing. I made the Link with Ranma Saotome." He scooted a bit closer. "Do you understand what I'm saying? I made this link with you. Only you. And I've followed this link for the last three years of my life and it's always done what it's supposed to do; It's led me to Ranma Saotome."

Ranma's eyes widened as realization hit. "I… I'm…"

"You are Ranma Saotome, No matter what your parents or some scroll might say." He took her hand between his and squeezed. "Ranma, your parents have lied to you for your entire life. This is just more of the same - more of what they were doing to you back in middle school."

"I'm…" She looked at her hand, clasped in his, then back up at him. He was telling her the truth - the absolute truth. With the link, he could not lie. She started to shake as waves of emotion started to war within her; fury and despair, confusion and hopelessness, fear and loneliness. Her vision blurred as the tears started to come more forcefully now, rapidly overwhelming what little remained of her control. She began to shudder and sob under the full impact of the lies that ran under everything she had ever known or believed.

Gently, Ryouga pulled her towards him and this time she didn't resist. She started bawling like she hadn't… in fact, she had no memory of ever crying like this, though she had dreamt of it. She felt his arms go around her and for the first time in her life she just let go and wept.

She wasn't sure how long they stayed that way. It felt like ages. She would try and wrestle back control, to stem the surges of emotion, only to have a fresh surge inundate her. It was as though she was trying to purge seventeen years worth of misery all in one go.

By the time her sobbing eased, it was more from sheer exhaustion than having reached any sort of bottom to it all. Her head throbbed with a skull-splitting migraine, her eyes burned and her cheeks stung. Every muscle ached from exhaustion and fatigue. Ryouga's shirt was soaked with tears and snot and she realized that her nose was running and she must be an awful mess.

"Here." Ryouga handed her a strip of cloth - one of his bandannas. She took it gratefully blew her nose and did her best to clean herself up. She trembled, feeling unsteady, like she was teetering on the brink of another crying jag. She felt a little bit like she had when she'd been sick, and had only stopped vomiting because there was simply nothing left to bring up.

She felt simultaneously guilty for clinging to him the way she was, and desperate for him to stay. She was certain that his reassuring presence through the Link was the only thing keeping her sane and she shivered at the thought of being alone in the vast, empty echo chamber of her own mind.

"Why?" she found herself asking softly, even though she didn't really understand herself what the question truly was.
"Why what?" he asked gently.

"I…" she trailed off, "Just… why? Why would my parents… why any of it?" She shook her head. "I don't… why didn't they want me? Why go through all of this? Was… was I really so horrible?"

"No." Ryoga said. His arms tightened around her and she felt a flare of anger in him, but it was not directed at her. "No one… no one could ever deserve this, and you least of all. You're the person who catches everyone else when they fall. Never you."

"Then… why?" she mumbled.

"Because they're broken people."

Ranma and Ryoga looked toward the door for the source of the voice. Kodachi Kuno stood in the doorway, leaning against the doorframe as if she had been watching for a while.

Ranma felt Ryoga's arms slacken around her, as though preparing to move away, but she wasn't ready to face the world without him yet. She whimpered a bit and clung to him tightly while she peered at Kodachi.

"If I had to hazard a guess, anyway. I'm afraid I don't know your parents well enough to properly judge. But… as a broken person myself, I found something very familiar in your mother's gaze," Kodachi continued. "Hello Ran… or should I say Ranma Saotome?" Her voice dropped slightly, a dangerous note entering it. "Or perhaps you would prefer 'My Darling Ranma'?"

Ranma squeezed her eyes shut. She felt Ryoga turn her away slightly, protectively.

"What do you want, Kodachi?" he grated.

"Not a fight, if that's what you're fearing," Kodachi replied. "Not so long as I get the truth, anyway. I believe, after what my brother and I had to go through to get you away from those foreigners, I am entitled to that much at least."

"And if you don't like the truth?" Ryoga asked. "What then?"

Kodachi's eyes narrowed. "Given the events of yesterday, I think it is fair to say that I am guaranteed not to like the truth, Ryoga Hibiki. I have been lied to and had my emotions toyed with for a very long time by all of you, yourself included. What happens next is my decision, and nothing is on the table until after I am given the truth I am owed!" She started pacing. "Shall I start off? The boy I knew as Ranma Saotome, whom I was engaged to marry, is also, somehow, his own sister, Ran, to whom I have poured out my heart as a friend and confidante. This duality is apparently common knowledge, yet it has been kept from me. I also understand that there is some question as to which identity is even valid, though given your obvious affection for and protectiveness of her - as well as the nature of the confrontation with Nodoka yesterday - I begin to suspect which. Now… Have I or have I not been lied to about the boy I loved for the entirety of our relationship?"

Ranma twitched, feeling a sharp stab of guilt. My fault… my fault…

"She didn't know," Ryoga said. "Her parents brainwashed her for her entire life to believe that she was male, even before they transformed her physically."

"And how do you know?" Kodachi asked archly. "Nabiki Tendo I can believe having verified this independently, but you hardly seem the detective sort."

Ryouga too a deep breath. "I knew her in Middle School. Before any of you ever met her."
Kodachi's expression darkened. "So you knew this whole time?"

"No! I… she was attending as a boy!" Ryouga said. "It was an all boy's school. It's just…" He reached into his pocket and pulled out a folded piece of old, yellowed paper. "She wrote me a note before she left for China. I only just found it yesterday, but…” he looked down at Ranma, "Is… is it okay if I show her?"

"I… don't know," Ranma said softly. "I don't even remember what I wrote… Just that I wrote it." She glanced at it, then looked away. She didn't want to know.

Ryouga paused, then reluctantly passed it to the Kuno girl. "This is… sensitive stuff, Kodachi. I'd appreciate if…"

"You seek discretion?" Kodachi asked archly as she plucked it from his grasp. "I think I am safe in saying there has been far too little of that all around. Rest assured I will…" She trailed off as she started to read. Her eyes widened and she looked back at Ranma, then back at the letter. She finally shot a questioning look at Ryouga.

"There are… other factors. I don't know if you'll believe me about them, but I'll tell you. For now though, please trust me when I say that the letter you are holding makes everything else make sense," Ryouga said before reclaiming the document and tucking it away.

Kodachi's rancor seemed to have drained away after having read the letter. She hesitated, then sat down on the cot across from them and folded her hands in her lap.

"The first time my mother tried to poison me, I was eight," she said. "It might well have been the accident she claimed it was that first time but, at the very least, it's where she got the idea. I remember… being unable to breathe… retching and struggling and pleading as the world went dark. She took me to the hospital herself… an ambulance would have been too embarrassing, I suppose. According to my father, she stormed into the emergency and demanded I be attended at once and that she be allowed to be present for all of it. Then she insisted on staying overnight at the hospital until I awoke and managing the nurses responsible for my care personally. It was all very motherly and selfless and impressive… at least until the third of fourth time it happened. Munchausen by Proxy her psychologist called it."

Kodachi took a deep breath. "It took them a while to catch her. She would encourage my interest in chemistry and botany, buying me all sorts of exotic, poisonous plants and toxic chemicals that no child should have access to, just so there would always be an excuse - always some reason that it would be my fault and not hers. She used to joke about how I would poison myself just to get her attention, as if what was happening were no more serious than the cute antics of a disturbed child."

She snorted. "I was already making my own antidotes by the age of ten. I remember how it used to frustrate her to watch me eat the 'special' meals she would make for me, then fail to get sick. Tatewaki never saw any of it, of course. It wasn't until her desperation to get me ill enough for another one of her beloved hospital circuses caused her to slip up and was caught. She nearly killed me. Her marriage to father was already a loveless one, but that was the nail in the coffin. Tachi… I don't think he's ever forgiven me. He had been mother's favorite while he bore the brunt of father's madness."

She looked up at them. "I believe you. I recognize that look in your eyes… Ran?" She tried out the name, but the implication was the decision would be left to Ranma.

"I… think… that name makes more sense right now," Ranma said quietly. "I don't… really know who I am anymore. But… I'm not the Ranma Saotome I'm supposed to be."
It felt like Ryouga wanted to protest that, but he kept quiet.

"So... tell me the tale, then? If you can," Kodachi said gently. "I already know... I've seen the magic with my own eyes, and I heard what was said at your mother's home, but... Tell me your tale. In your own words. Was my Darling Ranma ever real?"

"I... I thought he was," Ranma said softly. "You have to believe me, I really thought I was him. That... that I was a man amongst men, that I was..." she trailed off...

"It started to fade, didn't it?" Kodachi asked. "That certainty of your place."

"Everything used to be so clear and simple." Ranma said. "But I... I knew something was wrong. I knew I wasn't what I was supposed to be. I thought... I thought..." She drew a shuddering breath. "When... when I wasn't sure... or when he thought I wasn't sure... that's when Pops would put me in the pit."

"The 'pit'?" Kodachi echoed. "Like... solitary confinement?"

"No," Ryouga said tightly. "A literal pit. Full of starving, feral cats. Genma thought of it as training. To learn the Neko-ken."

"I've heard of this - the source of your fear of cats, yes?" Kodachi asked. "My brother attempted once to exploit it."

"The only ones who got out of the pit and stayed out of it were the cats. The ones that survived," Ranma said in a haunted voice. "H-he... would tie me up and... wrap me in fish sausages, or raw meat, or... or something the cats would like. He said that only men came out of the pit, but... but he would always put me back in, no matter how hard I tried to be a man. But the cats could escape, and he'd leave them alone, find different cats. So... I... I became a cat." Ranma shuddered. "I... I don't want to remember that anymore, please..."

"No... of course..." Kodachi said. "So... your... change was recent?"

"It's a curse, from a place called Jusenkyo," Ryouga said. "It's a legendary training ground with hundreds of pools interspersed with bamboo poles. For every pool there is a 'very tragic story' of some animal or person that drowned in it. If you fall into that pool, you take the form of whatever drowned there. Hot water changes you back... but only until you get splashed with cold water again."

"But... cold water turns you female," Kodachi objected, immediately seeing the wrinkle.

"There was... a potion," Ranma said. She closed her eyes as another flash of memory washed over her - feeling the change, but it was slow and very painful. Joints popped, bone cracked and shifted. "It was... it was supposed to make the change permanent - to make me male mentally and physically. It was... s-supposed to kill who I was, I guess, and replace her with what they wanted. But Pops screwed it up, of course. In the end, it just inverted the curse."

"That was the scroll, wasn't it?" Kodachi said. "Where did you get that?"

"Himura gave it to me," Ranma said. But... I recognize the handwriting. Pops had scrawled notes all over it." She felt a sudden surge of uncertainty. Could it have been a fake? But... then why would Mom...?"

"I don't doubt its veracity. But why would Himura, of all people, have it?" Kodachi asked.
"Pops pawned it when we got back to Japan. She said she found it when she was looking into me," Ranma replied.

"And she just happened to deliver it to you on the day our Omiai was to be decided, and on that same day, a group of foreigners decided to try and capture you?" Kodachi scoffed. "I imagine the New Money thinks that passes for clever, doesn't she?"

"'New Money'?" Ryouga asked, confused.

"Her family are peasants, all of them. Her grandfather made his money by cornering the market on cancer treatments. Barely three generations of wealth and power and it shows. That lot always mistakes money for nobility." Kodachi tossed her head in a scornful gesture. "Father, with his western sensibilities, got along well with them, but they're hardly more than merchants with delusions of grandeur."

"But… why would she do all that?" Ranma asked.

"If I had to guess? To make sure things were are bad as possible so that it would be more amusing for her," Kodachi replied. "She has always been fascinated with the concept of breaking people. You would have presented a challenge."

"Nabiki," Ranma said suddenly. "I need to call Nabiki." She started to pull away from Ryouga. "I need a phone! If Himura sent the Amazons after me, then they'll be after Nabiki too!"

"Relax," Kodachi said. "You shouldn't be up and about yet. I will have a servant bring a telephone for you." She sighed. "If it makes you feel any better - though I don't believe it will - what must be the majority of these 'Amazons' have been surrounding Kuno Manor since we brought you home last night. I imagine that you remain their priority."

"They're outside? Why haven't they attacked yet?" Ryouga asked nervously.

"They… had a few encounters with our security measures. You remember those, yes?" Kodachi smirked. "We've improved them since your last time through them. I suspect they are scouting, looking for weaknesses and waiting for further instructions."

"So… we're trapped here," Ryouga said.

"I would think there are worse things when in a conflict against a superior foe than to be safe and secure in a well-fortified, supplied and defended castle, but then my dear brother is more the tactician than I," Kodachi said airily.

A butler entered the room with a tray bearing a rather expensive looking smartphone, which Kodachi plucked from it and waved him off.

"But… wait… You never even sent for the phone. How did he know to…?" Ryouga asked, dumbfounded.

The butler turned and bowed slightly. "We are very good at our jobs, sir," he said before he continued on his way out of the room.

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On the first ring of the phone, Nabiki awoke with a gasp, going from a deep and dreamless slumber to a panicked flailing in a scant fraction of a second. She immediately became entangled in her blanket, struggling and thrashing to free herself before whomever it was gave up.
She needn't have panicked. She heard the click and Kasumi saying 'Hello?' before the third ring.

Nabiki sighed and flopped back on the futon as her moment of panic passed. She set about untangling herself, wincing as she sat up. Her back, used to her soft mattress, was protesting. She had elected to camp out in the living room in case a call came in or Ranma returned home.

*It's not like it would be that simple anyway,* she thought as she freed her feet from the duvet. *It's NEVER that easy.*

"Nabiki!" Kasumi called from the hallway. "It's Ranma! On the phone!"

Nabiki's frantic flailing resumed as she scrambled to her feet, slipped and almost fell before she stumbled into the hall and all but snatched the receiver from Kasumi's hands. "Ranma!"

"Hi Nabiki..." Ranma's voice was uncharacteristically meek and subdued. "I'm sorry..."

"No, no, no, God no, don't apologize! You aren't the one who should be apologizing," Nabiki sagged against the wall, cradling the handset to her ear as she was overcome with a sense of relief. "I'm just... you're okay. That's all that matters. After that explosion, I was afraid..."

"I... I really am sorry," Ranma continued. "I... after what Mom said... All of it... finding out I was born a girl, Mom telling me that I'm not a person..."

"Ranma, please... you can't listen to all that nonsense!" Nabiki started. "You are not a homunculus!"

"I-It's okay, Nabiki. Really. Ryoga found me," Ranma said, sounding embarrassed. "He... he reminded me about the Link. I was just being an overly dramatic idiot. I'm sorry..."

"No... no you weren't," Nabiki said. She bit her lower lip and tried to keep her voice from wavering. "That was more than enough to push anyone over the edge, Ranma. Are you okay now? Where are you? Is Ryoga with you? Is he okay?"

"Me'n Ryo are at the Kuno Estate. Apparently a bunch o' psycho Amazons showed up and tranqued us both, but Kodachi and Tatewaki got us out. All those crazy traps they got here seem to be holding 'em off - for now."

Tranquilizers. *That's probably why she sounds so tired. I hope,* Nabiki thought. "I never thought I'd say this, but... Thank God for Kodachi Kuno. Is she okay? I can't imagine she's happy with what happened."

"She's... taking it pretty well, all things considered. She believes me, anyway. Turns out she... uhh... she knows something about crazy parents." Ranma made a sound that was like an attempt at a laugh that didn't quite work. "Is everyone else okay?"

Nabiki thought quickly. "First put Ryoga on. I want to talk to him."

"Huh? Oh... sure..." Nabiki winced at how disheartened Ranma sounded. She didn't want to think about what was going through the redhead's mind at the moment.

There was a shuffle and another voice came on the line. "Nabiki?" Ryoga's tone came through, by contrast, sounding clear and strong.

Nabiki took a deep breath. "First off, before I say anything else, Ryoga, are you the only one who can hear this? You're not on speakerphone or anything?"
"Uh... yeah," Ryōga said.

"Good."
Nabiki took a deep breath. "What kind of shape is Ranma in? Honest opinion. Describe it to me like you're talking about property damage."

There was a pause. "Wrecked," Ryōga finally said. "Massive crater, blasted landscape, flattened trees... probably some stuff on fire..."

Yeah, that's what I figured. "All right... and in your opinion is she in any shape to fend off a bunch of Amazons who want to drug her, brainwash her and drag her off to China?"

"No... not for a while, anyway," Ryōga replied. That answer was immediate and sure.

Nabiki closed her eyes. We're on our own, then. Better not worry them with news about Shampoo. "Okay. That's what I figured. Keep Ranma there for now and keep her safe. Even if she wants to come back here - at least until Cologne gives the all clear."

"Cologne's on our side?"

"Yeah. We're in the middle of some kind of Amazon civil war and Ranma is apparently the prize. We just need to lay low until Cologne can arrange a parlay."

"Don't let Ranma pull some stupid self-sacrifice over this. If she turns herself over to the Amazons, it won't fix it."

"Yeah, don't worry I won't," Ryōga said. "Nabiki? Are YOU okay?"

Nabiki took a deep breath in an attempt to get control of herself. "Yeah... I mean, I'm not a combatant or anything. The Amazons won't bother with me and the terms of the contest with Himura forbid her from going after me that way."


Nabiki closed her eyes. I'm fine. I'm fine. Just say I'm fine. Just... She grit her teeth as she felt her composure start to crack. "I'm..."

"Nabiki... It's okay to not be okay," Ryōga said softly.

The breath Nabiki had taken to assert all was well escaped in a sound that was a cross between a laugh and a sob. "You're trying to play therapist for me now, Hibiki?" she said, sniffling a bit as the tears she had been trying to hold back started to roll.

"My turn to be pushy, I guess," he said. "I know it's not the sort of thing you'd want to discuss within earshot of a 'disaster area'..."

Nabiki giggled a little between the snifflies. "Oh, slick, Ryōga. I am so gonna tell her you called her that when this is all over." She hiccuped and started to slide down the wall, curling around the handset. Everything that had happened over the past few days was starting to crash in on her, along with the notion that it might not have happened if she hadn't gotten the nifty idea in her head to start fixing everyone's lives. "I'm... not okay. Everything has fallen apart and I don't know what happened. The Amazons took Shampoo prisoner, Daddy's an accessory to a plot to brainwash and re-gender my fiance, I've got a Yakuza Princess gunning for everything I care about... and everything I've done to try and fix things has only made it that much worse. I've got to do something to fix it but all I can do is sit on the hall floor blubbering into the phone because I don't know what to do..." She pulled her knees up to her chest. "I wish that when I had that urge to grab Ranma and a couple of plane tickets and just run away that I had just done it."
"I'm not so sure," Ryouga replied after a few minutes. "Running away isn't your style. Besides... I think a lot of people are a lot happier that you DID tough it out. Not just because they're after Ranma, either. Let's face it... I was a mess before all of this. I don't think I'd choose to go back to how things were before. Maybe I'm just being selfish, but... I'm happy you tried to fix my life, Nabiki."

Nabiki sniffed again, but a bit of a smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. "Thank you. I... needed to hear that."

"I... sorta needed to say it. I wanted to since... Y'know, Saturday night," Ryouga replied, sounding suddenly shy. "I'm... just not real good with thinking of what I really want to say until a couple of days later."

Was it only Saturday? Nabiki chuckled a little, a more genuine sound. "I think you got it just right this time." She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "Promise me that, when we clear things up, you'll come home. Home here, I mean. I want... we need to talk things out. All of us. I want you and Ranma here."

"I promise, Nabiki," Ryouga said solemnly. "Ranma wants to talk to you again."

"Wait... before you go, let me give you my cell number. Keep in touch, okay? I'm serious. Call every day." Nabiki rattled off the number, repeating it a couple of times as she heard him scratching it down. "Okay, now put her on," Nabiki said. "but don't go far."

"Are you okay, Nabiki?" Ranma's voice came over the line again.

"I'm better now," Nabiki replied. "I... things have kinda rattled me."

"It's just... you asked for Ryouga kinda quick..."

Nabiki winced. "I... needed to know what the situation was from someone who... wasn't coming from a place of having their entire worldview inverted," Nabiki said tentatively.

"It's okay. This... kinda changes things between us, doesn't it?" Ranma said softly. "I can understand it being weird for you..."

"Wha...? No! Ranma...!" Nabiki yelped, her eyes going wide.

"I'm not... who you thought I was when you fell in love with me. I'm not who I thought I was. I... don't know WHO I am right now," Ranma continued. "I... I don't think... I can be that boy on the beach for you anymore..."

"Ranma, we talked about this. I told you that even if you got stuck as a girl nothing was going to change, remember?" Nabiki said, trying to swallow the lump in her throat.

"But... I'd be a guy stuck as a girl then. This is... different. This isn't just a gender thing... It doesn't even matter if I'm a homunculus or not, 'Ranma Saotome' doesn't really exist. The engagements are all a sham... there's not gonna be any school to inherit..." Ranma said. "I... don't even know how much of what I think or feel is real."

The upswing in spirits Nabiki had felt thanks to her conversation with Ryouga immediately crashed back down again. "Ranma..."

Ranma's tone was uncharacteristically quiet. "This whole time I've... I've been struggling with this feeling that... You guys didn't really need me - not as much as you think you do, and that... I'm in the
way. Not cuz' of anything you guys said or did... you've all worked so hard, but... Even before this started I've had the feeling that... I don't really belong. Even when I did... It didn't last. I-I know you're gonna say different, but..."

"You're damn right I'm going to say different!" Nabiki nearly yelled into the handset. She took a second, forcing herself to calm down. "Ranma... Don't. Don't decide anything while you're feeling this way. Just... please... promise me that you'll come home? So we can talk about it?"

"I... Yeah... Okay. I'm sorry... for all of this." Ranma's voice was distressingly quiet, as though she was far away. The mental image of Ranma receding from her was impossible for Nabiki to shake. "I... I'm gonna take some time to think. Take care of Akane, Ukyou and Shampoo for me. I love you."

"I love you, too," Nabiki replied, choking up again. It sounded entirely too much like a final farewell. There was a click as the call ended and Nabiki let the handset fall from her nerveless fingers as she curled up in a tight ball and cried.

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Sayuri looked back at the Tendo Dojo and sighed, adjusting the straps on her schoolbag as she slung it over her shoulder.

"This sucks," Yuka said next to her.

After consulting with Cologne, it was decided it was safe enough for herself, Yuka, Riko, Daisuke and Hiroshi to go to school as the Amazons wouldn't see them as legitimate targets. Akane and Ukyou were kept behind to train, and Nabiki...

Sayuri scuffed her shoe on the ground sadly. "This is what Himura does. She finds someone's weak spot and then she hammers at it until they break. I guess with Nabiki and Ranma it was a two-for-one."

"This feels like our fault," Hiroshi said, walking next to Riko.

"The way Himura timed giving the scroll to Ranma, I think you guys finding things out when you did was coincidence," Riko reassured him.

"No... I think Hiroshi is right," Daisuke said glumly. "Himura's plan was for Ranma to find out by herself. I don't think Himura counted on us figuring it out. We were there. We had a chance to defuse things. But instead, we ended up waiting outside."

"But... what could we have done?" Yuka asked.

"Maybe just said Ranma's Mom was wrong about her," Riko said quietly. "Maybe just be there to say 'It doesn't matter to us what she says about you'... you know?"

They were all silent a moment as they walked, lost in thought.

"Hey guys!" They all looked up to see the familiar form of the diminutive striker jogging to join them.

"Hey, my sister told me you guys left a message to come over to the Tendo Dojo last night. I'm so sorry! It was movie night," Rin said, pausing to catch her breath. "So... what's up?"

Sayuri glanced at the group, then back at Rin. She walked over and put an arm around Rin's
shoulders. "It's kind of a long story. We'll talk on the way."

"Wait… Senpai is a girl!?" Rin said, eyes wide.

"No… no, no no," Yuka clapped a hand on Rin's shoulder. "Rin, that's not the part you get to be shocked about!"

"Why not?" Rin asked, blinking innocently.

"You're the one who was first to say 'Senpai is a girl!'" Yuka retorted hotly.

"Well, yes… But, that was Senpai being a girl. Not senpai being a girl!" Rin said.

"My head hurts…" Yuka whimpered, rubbing her temples.

"I mean… I know senpai is a girl. I'm shocked senpai was born a girl," Rin clarified. "I mean… don’t people usually know what they're born as?"

"Ranma's father dosed her with these mind control drugs pretty much her whole life," Sayuri said softly.

"Not to mention the Neko-ken," Daisuke added. "Nothing like some extreme psychological trauma to make a young mind malleable."

"Then the Jusenkyo potion they used changes memories to fit the form," Hiroshi finished.

"B-but… but why?" Rin asked. "Did… did they think Senpai would be happier as a boy?"

"Well, Ranma's Mom called him a 'homunculus', so… no, probably not. I don't think Ranma's happiness was on the table," Yuka said. "Ranma was supposed to carry on the name, be awesome at martial arts, and make lots of babies to give to his Mom to raise while he supported them with prize money from tournaments or proceeds from teaching. Apparently Ranma screwed up this grand design by being born the wrong gender, so Nodoka, in her own words, 'Corrected the birth defect'."

Rin's eyes were wide. "But… why…?"

"Because they thought doing all of that would get them what they wanted," Sayuri said.

Rin stared at the sidewalk. She shook her head, then slumped. She looked so dejected that Sayuri put an arm around her shoulders.

"Dad used to tell me that a parent's job is to make sure their kids miss their childhood when they grow up. It was his little joke, I think. But… he also used to say that he worried a lot of people didn't agree with him. He got sad whenever he saw some of the parents yelling at their kids at track meets and stuff." Rin stared straight ahead. "I thought Mr. Saotome was like that when he yelled at Ranma and made fun of him. I-I didn't really think he could be worse…"

"Heads up," Yuka said, nodding towards the school gate.

Himura was standing there, along with Umeko, Mineko and another girl with long dark hair. They were greeting students cordially and handing out flyers.

"Umm…" Riko said nervously.
"Not like there's another gate," Sayuri replied and strode up purposefully. She hoped Himura would just ignore her, but she was already fairly certain that wasn't going to happen.

"Ah! Ms. Kamei!" Himura said brightly. "How wonderful to see you this morning! I was actually hoping to catch you and your team before you arrived. I have some wonderful news!"

"What are you up to, Ms. Tanaka?" Sayuri asked, folding her arms.

Himura feigned shock. "Why… I'm not sure what you mean! Here!" She handed Sayuri a flyer.

Sayuri glanced at it and her eyes widened.

"I wanted to better try and support your team. Even though we're rivals, we're both representing Furinkan, after all, and I wanted to try and raise your profile a little more. So I got the Principal's permission… well, acting Principal, since Headmaster Kuno is still indisposed, to make your next game a mandatory assembly! The entire school will be there! Isn't that wonderful?"

Sayuri crumpled the flyer slightly in her hand. "She's expecting us to fold without Ranma!" She forced herself to relax and return the faux pleasant smile. "Of course. I'm sure the team will be ecstatic to be able to play for such a large crowd." Sayuri jammed the flyer into her bag and moved to step past.

Himura sidestepped slightly to stop her. "I noticed Ranma isn't with you," she said, still smiling. "Or your 'manager', Nabiki Tendo. Or… well, a lot of your 'special' friends. Not even Akane. Isn't that odd?"

Sayuri's smile was gone. "Himura, don't push me," she growled.

"Or?" Umeko asked, stepping up beside Himura and cracking her knuckles. "No martial artist bodyguards today, Sayuri-chan. You might want to modulate your tone."

"Feel free to throw the first punch, Umeko," Yuka said, coming up beside Sayuri.

"Not talking to the mascot," Umeko replied, eyes still on Sayuri. "You had a good thing, Sayuri. You were already on the team. You just didn't take criticism well, so you left. Heck, we were happy to let it go with that, you know? But then you had to go and get cute. Publicly embarrass Himura. Start slandering her behind her back. She never did anything to deserve that and you know it."

"Do I?" Sayuri replied coldly. "You and I went to very different practise sessions then."

"Yeah, we did," Umeko said. "I went to practise where I was a team player. I didn't go to the ones where everyone was out for themselves."

"Now, now, Umeko. I think that's enough," Himura said, patting Umeko on the shoulder. "We should let my co-captain get to class. I'm sure she wants to focus on her schoolwork now that… well… You know how priorities change."

"I'm not going anywhere, Himura, and neither is my team," Sayuri said.

"Oh, perish the thought!" Himura replied. "I'm looking forward to your game on Wednesday. Though it's a shame Ranma doesn't seem to share your dedication." Himura shrugged. "I suppose I can smooth things over with the office in regards to the attendance rules, but I really can't keep covering for her. Please do let her know that for me?"

Sayuri clenched her jaw. "I'll be sure to pass that on."
Himura beamed. "Wonderful! Now, is there anything else?"

Rin walked up next to Sayuri, cocking her head. "Konatsu?"

Sayuri glanced at Rin, then followed her gaze to the dark haired girl standing near the back of Himura's gaggle. She was wearing a Furinkan uniform and had her hair tied back in a ponytail. Sayuri's eyes widened as she recognized the waitress. "What…?!"

"Oh! Yes, didn't I mention?" Himura said, motioning for Konatsu to step forward. Mineko came with her, standing protectively next to the ninja. "While you've all been busy with Ranma's family drama, I've been helping Konatsu here with her application to Furinkan. She's very keen to improve herself and her education. Which was a bit of a challenge with her former responsibilities at Ucchan's. Oh, if you could let Ms. Kuonji know Konatsu's resignation has been tendered, I'd appreciate it…"

"What the hell, Konatsu?" Yuka asked, incensed. "Why are you hanging around with Himura?!
She's the one screwing with Ranma and your Ukyou!"

"Konatsu is under no obligation to explain herself…" Himura began.

"Ms. Tanaka, please. Allow me," Konatsu said, stepping forward. "You want an explanation, Ms. Toshima?"

Yuka folded her arms. "I think we all deserve one! We've been busting our asses supporting Ranma in this. Ukyou has been relying on you. The least you could have done is to have told her if you weren't on board!"

Konatsu bowed deeply. "In that you are correct. I apologize deeply. I did not intend deception but leaving my assigned duties was taken out of my hands when I collapsed a few days ago from malnourishment and exhaustion."

Yuka's eyes widened. "Wait… what?"

Konatsu straightened. Her eyes were hard. "Is that surprising to you? You were aware of how little Ms. Kuonji paid me, correct? And how many hours I was relied upon to make up so that she could pursue her own education, as well as her… romantic entanglements? Did any of you even notice I was missing?"

"I… well…" Yuka stammered.

"Ukyou told us that sometimes you would disappear for a day or two," Sayuri said. "She said she trusted you to let her know if anything was wrong."

Konatsu's eyebrow twitched. "Is that so? I… do not wish to speak ill of Ms. Kuonji in mixed company and behind her back. Let me leave it that… things were not as well as she might have thought. Perhaps I could believe that was simply a matter of ignorance and not willful malice, but… I could not remain in that situation any longer. Mineko and Ms. Tanaka have helped me see that I need to attend to my own needs and my own life… and I cannot do that while facilitating Ms. Kuonji's."

"Then go talk to Ukyou, at least!" Yuka said hotly. "She's at the Tendo Dojo right now! She's had a really bad time lately, and…"

"I won't allow that," Mineko said suddenly, stepping forward. "Ukyou has taken advantage of Konatsu almost since she met her! There's no way Konatsu is going to go alone onto Ukyou's home turf so she can twist the truth and confuse her again!"
Himura held up a hand. "I would be happy to provide a neutral space for Konatsu and Ms. Kuonji to
discuss their relationship problems here at the school… provided Ms. Kuonji can be bothered
to attend… But I think it's best for all concerned that any meetings be supervised." She smirked. "It
would be so unfortunate to have to involve the authorities regarding domestic abuse. I believe we can
resolve this amicably without resorting to such measures."

"Domestic… you can't be serious?!" Yuka yelped.

"Ukyou kept Konatsu as a slave!" Mineko shouted. "She kept her poor and ignorant, and all of
you watched her treat Konatsu like a servant and you did nothing!"

"Mineko! This is neither the time nor the place for this discussion!" Himura said sharply. She sighed
and turned back to Sayuri. "I apologize, Ms. Kamei. Sincerely. Despite our own differences, this is a
matter that is not your responsibility to answer for. I would simply ask… as a favor… to pass the
offer for a meeting on to Ms. Kuonji." She motioned to the others of her group. "Come, we should
escort Konatsu to her first new class. It's been a while since she's been in school, so I'm sure she
needs all the moral support she can get." She turned to walk as the others began filtering through the
gate and looked back at Sayuri. "I'd reconsider the people you associate with, Ms. Kamei. The
wrong sort can warp your perception of reality and your place in it." She then continued walking
towards the school.

"I can't believe Himura got to Konatsu of all people," Yuka said, shaking her head. "I figured
Konatsu was pretty solidly loyal to Ukyou."

"I dunno… They do kinda have a point…" Riko said sheepishly. "I mean… Ukyou paid Konatsu
practically nothing…"

Sayuri was about to comment when she noticed Rin was shaking slightly. The girl was staring at
Konatsu's retreating form.

"What's wrong, Rin?" Sayuri asked.

"Probably just rattled at the betrayal," Yuka muttered. "Rin was always pretty close to Konatsu."

Rin shook her head. "No… no, they changed her."

Sayuri sighed and took Rin by the shoulders and turned her to look her her. "Rin… I know it's hard
to accept… Sometimes people make wrong choices, and while I'd like to blame Himura for talking
Konatsu into it… I mean, I can see the point. Ukyou was being pretty callous about Konatsu's
feelings with everything that's gone on between her and Ranma, or her and Akane… or her
and Shampoo. I mean, if I had feelings for someone and they kept bringing people home like that… I
know it's not that simple, but still…"

Rin's eyes narrowed. "Did Himura talk Konatsu into narrower shoulders?"

Sayuri blinked. "What…?"

"I'm not stupid, Sayuri! I know people change!" Rin pulled away. "I mean they changed her! She's
half an inch shorter. Her shoulders are narrower. Her center of gravity is different. They changed her
like Senpai changes!"

Sayuri's eyes widened. "They… they gave her a Jusenkyo curse?"

"Well… Konatsu was born a male, right?" Riko said. "I mean, if Himura has access to water
from Jusenkyo… for someone like Konatsu…"
Rin shook her head. "Konatsu wouldn't have betrayed Ukyou for that! If Konatsu had wanted a curse she's had a whole year to try and get one for herself! Something is different! Something is wrong! They changed her!" She clenched her fists in frustration. "It's… body language! Something changed, I just can't explain what. There aren't words for it!"

"Guys…" Yuka said softly, a haunted look crossing her features. "Himura is the one who gave the scroll for that potion to Ranma, right? The one that Ranma's parents used to try and change her and brainwash her? If Himura has Jusenkyo water…"

Sayuri felt the blood drain from her face as she realized what Yuka was implying. "Oh… God… no…"

"Things just got worse, didn't they?" Yuka asked.

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Ryouga was still feeling a bit 'off' from whatever they had used to tranquilize him, but bedrest had never suited him well and restlessness, combined with his stomach's near constant reminders that it hadn't been fed since lunch the previous day, eventually coaxed him into asking Kodachi to let himself and Ranma have breakfast.

After that phone call, he figured any sort of distraction would be a good thing for Ranma. He was still mad at himself for not doing something more to divert the conversation from those darker paths… not that he had any idea what he could have done. But he was sure there must have been something.

I gotta try and keep calm and level, he told himself as they walked. They had dressed in light pajamas with fluffy bathrobes overtop. Ranma was still holding onto his arm, like he was a lifeline… and from what he could sense through the Link he was. She was stewing in a perpetual vortex of awful sticky black emotions that seemed to be constrained by little more than sheer exhaustion. Ryouga recognized it - the autopilot that kicked in when you were somewhere dark - that kept you walking and breathing and going through the motions when you were in that space where you didn't really have the motivation to live, yet lacked the will to die.

Right now, he could sense that the Link was pretty much the only thing keeping her from spiralling further down. As much as he wanted to confront her about what happened with Nabiki, he knew the line was fragile, and could snap under the strain of strong emotions. He figured it was best to be calm and reassuring as best he could, even though he also knew it wasn't something he had ever been any good at in the past.

He glanced down at her, studying her curiously. So… she was a girl all along, and neither of us knew it? he thought. It was a bizarre concept but, in retrospect, there were so many little things that made much more sense in that context.

Kodachi led them into the dining hall. Ryouga was surprised to find Tatewaki standing there and slightly more surprised when he moved to block them going further.

"Brother?" Kodachi asked, confused.

"I beg forgiveness, Dachi. But I needs must verify things with mine own eyes if I am to be certain of our involvement in these matters." He stepped forward and levelled his gaze at Ranma. "Ranma Saotome."

Ranma snorted in brief, bitter amusement. "Not anymore. Whatcha want, sword-boy?"
Tatewaki frowned. "Show me?"

Ranma blinked. "Show you what?"

"Show me the change," Tatewaki said. "Show me how you become a man, the change my sister said she witnessed."

Ranma shrank back a bit, half hiding behind Ryouga. "W-what?!"

Tatewaki sighed. "I… am sorry, but I must insist. Mine own grasp of reality is but newly rewoven, and I fear it is fragile and prone to fraying. And now you and my sister ask me to believe in the existence of magic… of true, transformative magic of a profound sort that reason states must be impossible. For the sake of my sanity, and to ensure my ability to protect my sister, I must have this proof."

Ranma swallowed. "I… I can't…" She gripped her robe closed over her chest.

Ryouga could feel her starting to panic through the Link. He stepped a little to the side to shield her. "There has to be something else you can ask for," Ryouga stated.

Tatewaki frowned. "I was led to believe this was a simple process triggered by water?" He turned to the table and held up a glass. "And if true, you must have done it dozens of times for my memories of both the Pig-tailed girl and Ranma Saotome to make sense. Please… I do not make this request lightly, but…"

"I can't!" Ranma shouted. "Don't you understand?! I remember now! I… I remember…" She shuddered. "I remember how it felt. When Pops gave me the potion. I remember feeling my bones crack… feeling my muscles and tendons tear as everything pulled and bent the wrong ways. I remember how much it hurt… how wrong it felt! I…" She squeezed her eyes shut, tears rolling down her cheeks. "Please, Kuno-senpai…"

"I'll do it," Ryouga said quickly and snatched the glass of water from Tatewaki.

"Wait… I would not force her if this is a matter of such distress!" Tatewaki said, reaching for the glass. "I'm not," Ryouga replied. "She's not the only one with a curse." And with that he dumped the glass over his own head.

The change in perspective was always disorienting, as suddenly the world expanded to ten times its normal size and he found himself entangled in a pile of clothing. He struggled his way free, shook himself off and looked up defiantly at Tatewaki, grunting. There. Happy now, Kuno? You should have seen this happen enough times to have figured it out LONG before now! Now leave her alone! Tatewaki stared, dumbstruck. Slowly he lowered himself to one knee, reached out and poked gently at the piglet. Ryouga resisted the urge to snap at his finger.

"How is this possible?" Tatewaki said softly. "The floor beneath you is solid marble. There are neither trapdoors nor places for trickery; I have made certain of that. There is no place for Ryouga to have gone. Are you… are you truly him?"

Ryouga grunted and nodded.

Tatewaki blinked. "You retain your faculties?! But… how? The cognition of a man could never reside inside such a tiny brain…" He tapped Ryouga's skull lightly, and this time Ryouga did snap at
"Forgive me, I meant no offence. It is merely biological fact," Tatewaki said, withdrawing his hand quickly.

Ryouga felt someone pick him up. He turned his head to see Ranma holding him, cradling him against her chest.

"It's magic, Senpai," Ranma said quietly. "That's kind of the point. I think you're supposed to be aware. It's a curse after all… and if you fell in a pool and there wasn't anyone around with hot water to reverse it, you could be trapped for the rest of your life as an animal." Out of habit, she started to scratch behind his ears, which caused a flush of heat to Ryouga's cheeks when it occurred to him how casually affectionate she was being without even realizing it.

"I… see," Tatewaki said, still looking a bit gobsmacked. "And… your parents inflicted such a curse upon you in order to produce a male heir?"

"It wasn't just a curse. It was a potion made from the cursed water," Ranma said. "It was supposed to make the change permanent… brainwash me to make me think I was always that way. Pops… got it wrong. I think it almost killed me, which is probably the only reason he didn't try it again."

"Perhaps, brother dear, we should save further questions until both our guests are fit to speak?" Kodachi stepped forward, glaring at her sibling. "And perhaps we can later discuss your own lack of faith in my account of things, hmm?" She glanced at Ryouga then frowned. "Wait… isn't that…?"

"Akane's pet pig, P-chan," Ranma said, chuckling weakly. Ryouga whimpered and tried to hide his face, burrowing down into Ranma's arms in embarrassment.

"I see. I was not aware they had that sort of… relationship," Kodachi said. "You said hot water reverses the curse? How hot?"

"It doesn't have to be too hot. Anything more than ten or fifteen degrees above body temperature is usually good enough," Ranma replied. "And they didn't, really. Not any more than Senpai and I had anything more than a misunderstanding." She glanced at Tatewaki, who's cheeks colored a little as he looked away. Ryouga felt a slight surge of jealous possessiveness. "Akane had always wanted a pet, and Ryouga didn't want to disappoint her with the truth."

Kodachi turned back to the table as Ranma set Ryouga back into the pile of clothes. He wriggled back into them and waited until the hot water hit his head. He felt a moment of satisfaction as he stood up, fully clothed, and saw Tatewaki's look of astonishment.

"When you have a Jusenkyo curse, you get good at that," he said, smirking at Tatewaki.

"There are others with these curses?!!" Tatewaki said, aghast.

"A few. Shampoo and Mousse," Ranma said. "My father. Occasionally there are others that show up; people who have been to Jusenkyo."

"This… is…" Tatewaki sat down heavily in a chair. "I… hope that you may forgive me. I am already laboring to rebuild my understanding of reality and this… this deals it something of a blow."

"I kinda know what that's like…" Ranma said softly. Ryouga reflexively stepped closer and took her hand. She didn't protest but squeezed his hand in return.

"I imagine you do," Tatewaki acknowledged. "I apologize for my insistence… and I hope you will
forgive me if I say I do not envy you. Either of you. Such a burden on one's sense of self seems… unthinkable." He closed his eyes, collected himself and straightened. "My sister was correct in her decisions regarding this matter, I see that now. I offer you the full support of the Kuno family, and whatever aid we might be able to render."

"You wouldn't be able to get someone named Himura Tanaka off my back, would you?" Ranma asked hopefully.

"Trust me, I had already been looking into that matter long before this," Kodachi said, smoothly taking her seat next to her brother. She motioned for them to sit. "Himura's grandfather is powerful… well connected… and a good friend of Father's."

"More to the point, their family is more influential than ours. Especially with regards to their connections to powerful politicians and the Yakuza," Tatewaki continued. "I suspect that befriending Nobu Tanaka was a scheme of my Father's from his saner days to protect and secure our own influence in Nerima."

Ryouga felt a surge of anger at that. "So… that would be a 'no'," he said flatly. "Even the great Kuno clan is too afraid to stand up to her."

"Do not mistake caution for cowardice, Hibiki!" Kodachi retorted sharply. "To bull in blindly and confront them would accomplish nothing but the destruction of our family and all we hold dear… which is currently all that is protecting you."

"My sister is right, though I… sympathize with your sentiments. I am finding myself chafing at having to deal with some of my father's commitments," Tatewaki added. He had a small, orange pill bottle in his hand and was rubbing his thumb over it, something that struck Ryouga as a new nervous habit for Kuno. "We will support you. But… We must be careful and measured in our responses for them to be effective. You must understand there is more than one path to the top of the mountain."

"So what do we do?" Ryouga asked, frustrated. "Hide out here for the rest of our lives?"

"Much as it is… out of character for me to suggest it… I think patience is called for. At least until we know what these 'Amazons' intend to do next," Kodachi said. "Though I assure you, it rankles me as sorely as it does you."

Servants began to enter the room pushing trolleys laden with food. Ryouga's stomach growled to remind him just how hungry he actually was. All right... worry about the big picture later. Breakfast now. That's what Ranma would do, right?

He glanced over at her but she was just staring listlessly at the dishes as they were laid out. He leaned over and nudged her with his elbow.

"Come on. You've got to be starving after all that you've been through," he said, giving her a concerned look.

"You'd think..." she said softly. She poked at the omelette on her plate with her chopsticks.

He scowled. "Ranma..."

"It's fine," she said, giving him a wan smile. "I don't need much. Been overeating a lot lately anyway, right?" She chuckled weakly. "A girl... has to watch her figure after all..."

Ryouga frowned, but wasn't able to ignore the rumblings of his own stomach any longer. Guiltily, he dug into the meal, shooting glances at her every so often. She picked at her food, but he didn't see
her eating any of it, which only heightened his worry. By the time he was finished, his own greedily
devoured breakfast was sitting like lead in his stomach.

Ranma's lack of appetite did not go unnoticed by the Kunos, either.

"If your appetite returns, any of our servants will be happy to fetch you something to eat whenever
you wish," Kodachi said. "Perhaps a hot bath will make you feel better?"

Ranma shuddered and shook her head. "No… no hot water please." She glanced at Ryouga
sheepishly. "Unless… I don't suppose you've been carrying around that waterproof soap all this
time?"

Ryouga shook his head sadly. "Sorry…"

Kodachi cocked her head. "Waterproof soap?"

"'Jusenkyo Springs Beauty Bath Bar,'" Ranma said, chuckling dryly. "It keeps hot or cold water
from changing you for a couple of days. The Amazons developed it for Jusenkyo sufferers, but
apparently they sell it as some kinda exotic health and beauty soap now. Not exactly something you
get at the corner store."

Kodachi frowned, as if trying to remember something. She pushed her chair back and stood up.
"Come with me. I might have something for you in the supply closet."

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The Kuno concept of a 'supply closet' was somewhat closer to what most would call a storeroom, an
entire chamber dedicated to nothing but bathing and beauty supplies; Bathrobes, towels, soaps,
shampoos and lotions - beauty products of all descriptions. Ryouga honestly doubted most salons
were as well stocked.

"I detest stagnation. I have Genevieve occasionally bring home interesting finds from the various
import beauty stores. Maintaining appearances is important, after all. Though I test each product
carefully before using it… you would be astounded at what some charlatans pass off as 'skin care'
these days… and there is a bit of a backlog. But I think I remember Genevieve bringing back
something with that name…" She started searching through the shelves, filled with bars of soap of
many different kinds. The mix of scents from the various soaps and lotions was almost
overpowering. "Pfagh! So many are just common soaps overloaded with cheap perfume… Aha!"
She reached up to pull out a small box and opened it to reveal a number of bars in plastic containers,
al of which bore a familiar symbol. "Might these be what you're looking for?"

"Yes!" Ranma yelped and darted forward to snatch one up. Her expression the closest to joy Ryouga
had seen for days. She hesitated. "Is… is this okay? I mean… Nabiki told me how expensive these
things are…"

Kodachi rolled her eyes. "'Expensive' is relative, my dear Ran. These are but a pittance. I will have
Genevieve order a flat of them for you." She glanced at Ryouga. "Feel free to take one yourself, if
you wish? I imagine your curse must be inconvenient as well."

Ryouga needed no further prompting, and picked up one of the plastic cases. "At one point I had
hoped this was a cure for the curse." he said with a sigh. "But it's only a temporary fix."

"A treatment, perhaps?" Kodachi suggested.

"It's hard enough to get when you do have the money to afford it," Ryouga replied glumly.
Kodachi considered him a moment, then glanced at Ran. "Consider it a gift, then. A gesture of House Kuno's commitment to aiding you both." She closed the box and put it back on the shelf, then hesitated. "I… forgive me for being so bold, but… the last time you were both here, you implied… rather strongly… that there was a relationship between you. Given the circumstances you can understand if I am left somewhat uncertain… what your relationship with each other might be?"

Ryouga swallowed, feeling a sudden rise of panic. What do I even say to that?! he thought as he realized he had no idea what answer was correct or even safe. He had confessed his feelings to Ranma… they had even kissed… but since then her entire world had been blown apart. And there remained the fact that she had run away in tears afterwards...

"It's…" Ryouga said weakly. "We…" He glanced at Ranma, hoping to gain insight into an answer.

The redhead's eyes were on the ground, her shoulders slumped. Her unbound hair had fallen across her face slightly.

She doesn't know either. Of course she doesn't. She hardly even knows who she IS anymore! Ryouga thought. Okay… okay… make a stand, then. But what do I say that isn't presumptuous?

"I'm…" Ryouga said weakly.

"He's my boyfriend," Ranma said suddenly.

Ryouga stopped short and stared at Ranma. She had raised her head and there was a flicker of something defiant in her eye, something more like the old Ranma he knew. To his further shock, she took his hand and gripped it firmly.

"I see…" Kodachi said softly. "And… Akane Tendo? Nabiki? The others?"

The look of pain that passed over Ranma's face was profound. She clenched her fists and looked away. "They… they all fell in love with a boy, the same as you. But that boy doesn't actually exist, does he? So… s-so…" She closed her eyes tightly and it was apparent that she was struggling not to cry. "They… they'll all be better off without me."

Kodachi raised an eyebrow. "Truly? Even Akane?"

Ranma winced. She leaned against Ryouga's side and Ryouga got the sense she was struggling. He moved slightly to put himself between her and Kodachi.

"It's complicated," Ryouga said. "All of it."

Kodachi frowned. "For her to truly consider you her boyfriend, your relationship would have had to have begun before this revelation, would it not?"

"Yeah? So?" Ryouga said defensively. "Like I said, it's complicated."

Kodachi's expression darkened. "Then you and I will need to have words sooner rather than later, Hibiki." Her expression softened and she glanced back at Ranma. "You know the way back to the room you stayed in last time? The staff has stocked the bathing area with everything else you should need." She glared at Ryouga. "And I trust that you will behave yourselves?"

"Yeah… yeah, we're fine, thank you," Ranma said. She tugged on Ryouga's arm and he got the sense that she wanted to get away from Kodachi for the moment.

Not that he was objecting. That look had made him shudder. He wasn't sure what he did to earn that
He let Ranma lead him into the hall. He realized, to his pleasure, that he actually knew the way. In fact, he seemed to have a pretty good idea of the layout of this part of the castle now. But he didn't say anything for the moment. He got the feeling that wasn't the reason Ranma was holding his hand.

They walked in silence until they reached the room. It was unchanged since their last visit, right down to the spare pajamas the servants had laid out for them. There was, as well, another set of clothes for each of them that appeared to be about the right size.

"You should go first," Ryousa said, motioning towards the bathroom with his free hand.

Ranma seemed to lean a bit more heavily against him. He felt a spike of… fear? Apprehension?

"We… could just go together," she said.

It wasn't a suggestive invitation. It felt more like it was… fearful. Not a fear of anything in particular; just of being alone.

That being said, it was a step he was entirely sure he wasn't quite ready to take yet. He swallowed. Hard. "I… uhh… I'm pretty sure that's… not really appropriate…"

She scowled at him. "Why not? It's not like you haven't seen me naked before. Heck, we've shared the furo plenty! Even while I was a girl sometimes!"

"Yeah, but… I was preoccupied at the time, and it wasn't like it was intentional!" Ryousa protested. "Usually that was just to get hot water to change back! A-and besides, we were rivals back then! I was trying to beat the crap out of you, not… not…!"

"Not sleep with me?" Ranma asked softly.

"I didn't say that!" Ryousa finished desperately. "Besides, you were the one who called me her 'boyfriend'! I mean, even if that was just to throw off Kodachi…!"

"It wasn't!" Ranma said hotly. She released his hand and turned to glare at him. "Why are you getting all bent out of shape about this!? You kissed me, remember? I thought this was what you wanted!"

There was fire in her eyes but he could also detect a slight tremor in her lower lip. He remembered the sense of fear, the worry about being alone. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath to steady himself. "It is." he said finally. "But… Not like this. Not because you're afraid of being alone."

"Why not?!" Ranma demanded. "Isn't… isn't that why you've wanted a girlfriend so badly all this time?!! Isn't that why people get together in the first place?! I just wanted…" She trailed off, and then spun and stomped towards the bathroom. "Forget it! Nevermind! It's not perfect, I get it! Sorry I brought it up!"

"Wait, Ranma…!" Ryousa tried to follow after her, but she slammed the door in his face.

He sighed, turned to lean against the door and slid slowly down to the floor. He dropped his face into his hands. Hibiki, you are a complete and total moron, he thought glumly.

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Ranma intentionally made sure the water was a cold as possible as she doused herself and lathered
up with the soap. She checked several times to be sure she was holding the right soap, and she made certain that every inch of her body got thoroughly lathered and scrubbed. She was shivering and chilled to the bone by the time she finally rinsed herself off.

She hugged herself for warmth and gazed apprehensively at the furo. The water was so warm it was steaming. It looked so inviting - just what the aches and bruises all over her cried for, but…

Another flash of memory washed over her. Agony. Bones cracking… shattering and slowly reforming, muscles tearing and rebinding, pain wracking every inch of her as her body was forcibly reshaped, as though the hands of some giant were smashing her and reworking her like clay.

She closed her eyes and hugged herself tighter.

She swallowed. "C'mon, Saotome… just a little hot water… you've used the soap before. G-gotta… gotta test it…"

She took a deep breath then stepped impulsively forward and into the water.

She held her breath, braced for that tingling sensation that signalled the change. But there was nothing. She froze like that for a few more minutes before cautiously climbing the rest of the way into the tub and sinking down into the hot water.

She sighed in relief and closed her eyes. Thank God… I didn't want to have to give up hot baths… she thought as she back against the side of the tub and started to relax. She repressed another shudder as the notion of changing again flitted through her mind and brought with it the memory, but she was able to tamp that down.

With the immediate crisis past, though, darker thoughts crept back into the forefront. She opened her eyes again, blinking as her vision was obstructed by a lock of her hair. She reached up to brush it away, but instead stopped, grasped it and examined it. For the longest time she had wondered if the curse was responsible for the change in her hair color. A Japanese girl with naturally red hair, much less the intense shade of crimson she had, was basically impossible.

How do I know any of this is really any more 'me' than my male side? she thought, looking down at herself. She felt… uncomfortable. It wasn't the old sense of wrongness that she used to have. That came from knowing what her proper form was. This was an odd sense of disconnection… as though she wore someone else's body entirely.

She shuddered again and sank deeper into the water. She crossed her arms and dug her nails into the flesh of her upper arms - the dull sting helped to keep her anchored.

"Ryouga?" she called out hopefully.

There was a brief pause. "Yeah?" a voice drifted in from the other side of the door.

This is stupid. I'M stupid. I don't know what I'm doing! "Could you… Could you just come in here?"

"What?!" Ryouga squeaked. She heard him clear his throat and try again. "Uhh… Yeah. Just… I'll close my eyes, okay?"

She felt a smile tug at the corner of her mouth. He's cute. I think I see why Nabiki tries to get him flustered all the time. It's… it's okay for me to think that now, isn't it? I'm a girl, right? "It's okay, Ryo. Nothing you haven't seen before. Besides, I'm in the bath." Still, she unconsciously crossed an arm over her chest.
The door clicked open and Ryouga came into the room, being careful not to look in her direction. He pulled a stool over and set it next to the tub, then sat down to face the wall. "O-okay. I'm here. You okay?"

She scooted over, closer to his side of the tub. "Yeah. I just… needed someone to talk to, okay? I kinda… feel like my brain is on fire right now."

He placed his forearm on the edge of the tub, though he still wouldn't look at her. She guessed it was probably an attempt to subtly offer the support of the Link though it was naturally as unsubtle as anything else he did. But it was at least perceptive.

She rested her hand on top of his and sighed. After a minute, she got tired of looking at the side of his head. "Oi… You can look at me, you know. I'm not going to flash you or anything."

"Uhh… right… Yeah…" With visible effort, he turned his head. His eyes were closed, but he did manage to crack one open. "Urk…"

"Need a tissue?" Ranma asked, smiling in spite of herself.

"No… I think…" He swallowed. He pinched his nose experimentally. "I think my tolerance has gotten higher over the last couple weeks."

Ranma almost went back on her word and flashed him, just as a matter of pride, but she suppressed the urge. She didn't want to drive him off or reduce him to a gibbering idiot. She wanted him there. "Good. I'll… try and avoid letting that pick my pride."

A look of terror flickered across Ryouga's face. "Please don't," he croaked in a low, pleading tone.

"I guess it's not really fair…" Ranma said softly. "I mean… I don't even know if this is what I would really look like, y'know? Even if… even assuming this is really me… I really doubt the red hair or the figure are what I'd have if I had… y'know… grown up regularly."

"What do you mean?" Ryouga asked, frowning in confusion.

"Look at Herb, for instance. From what I've seen, everyone who takes a dunk in a spring comes out… y'know, pretty. I know it was Nannichuan I got dosed with, but… everything got reversed, right? Mousse is pretty handsome as far as duck's go. Shampoo is like one of those pedigree show cats, and you ended up as the most adorable piglet… so… Just saying there's probably some magical 'enhancements' going on…" She felt a slight blush rise to her cheeks as she spoke, though she didn't know why.

Ryouga frowned, then leaned over and lightly ran a finger along her cheek.

She blinked and stared at him, unsure how to respond, or even what he was doing.

"Freckles," Ryouga said. "You had those in middle school. I remember them because I thought they were dirt smudges since you didn't wash your face properly, and you got all indignant." He straightened. "I… uhh… don't know about the other stuff, but… I can see how you look like your Mom… your Mom's hair is kinda coppery too…. Isn't that why your Dad made you use the hair dye? To cover up the red hair? So… I'm pretty sure this is you Ranma. Is it that hard to believe that you're just attractive all on your own?"

"I…" Ranma considered. "I used to take it for granted, actually. I'm just… questioning all sorts of assumptions lately. I'm kinda… struggling to figure out what's real." She squeezed his hand a bit, needing the reassurance of his presence. At least I know HE'S real - all the stuff that happened in
"I guess that makes sense..." Ryouga said, his words slow, tentative, as though he were choosing them with some care. "But... I think it may be that you're going overboard with some of it."

Ranma blinked at him. "What do you mean?"

"I mean don't you think you're being way too hard on Nabiki and the rest of the girls?" Ryouga put his hand over hers as if he was afraid she'd pull away.

Ranma looked away, but she didn't try to move her hand. "I'm... not what they fell in love with. Why would they feel anything but betrayed?" she murmured.

"I didn't feel betrayed," Ryouga said reassuringly.

Ranma felt the heat rise to her cheeks again and ducked her head. "Th-that's because you fell in love with me as a girl already, jackass!"

"Wrong," Ryouga said, leaning over and poking her forehead. "I fell in love with you. And yeah, that means I'm saying I fell in love with someone I thought was a guy. And that was weird for me, you know? But I dealt with it because I realized I cared about a person. And whatever your parents did seventeen years ago or fifteen years ago, or two years ago or whatever, you're still that person. And I know the girls feel the same way because we're all linked and it's obvious whenever they look at you." He leaned back against the side of the tub and shrugged. "I think you oughta give 'em more credit."

Ranma folded her arms on the side of the tub and rested her chin on them to consider that. 

"He's right. Why am I still debating this? I KNOW he's right... isn't he? Why can't I believe it? "I guess... I don't understand why though."

"Why what?"

"Why would they love me, if... if I'm not the thing they thought I was? If I'm not the boy they got engaged to; the male outsider who defeated 'em; the boy for whom their parent traded a yattai? I mean... I can't really marry any of 'em now, can I?"

"Actually, I dunno what the law is on same sex couples any more. The last time I read a newspaper it was in Spanish," He frowned. "Not sure if I was in Spain or Mexico, though. Or how I might have gotten there. I thought it was just really unseasonably warm in Honshu."

Ranma had to snicker despite the darkness of her mood. She glanced at him suspiciously. "Are you serious, or are you just making that up to make me feel better?"

"I'll let you know if we're ever in Honshu. Or Spain," Ryouga winked. "But... the point is... none of that is why they love you. Why we love you. It wasn't because of Amazon laws or joining the schools or regaining their honor... they were more than willing to throw all that away for you."

"It's... still kinda weird to hear you say that to me," Ranma said softly. "That you love me, I mean."

"Still kinda weird for me, too," Ryouga replied. "Probably not as much, though, what with all of the stuff going on." He squeezed her hand. "I do, though... I know I used that word a lot before I really knew what it meant, but... I do now, and I mean it."

"I know. It's just..." Ranma trailed off, looking away again. She felt a surge of shame.
"It's okay if you can't say it back. It's okay if you don't feel that way, or you're not sure," Ryouga said gently. "I can wait for you to figure it out. You've got much bigger problems at the moment. And I'm not going anywhere regardless, so don't worry."

"That's not it!" Ranma said. "I… It's not fair to you. And… And I don't even know why I can't say it. I… still feel like I'm forgetting something. Something important."

"Forget about me for the moment. What about Nabiki, Akane, Shampoo and Ukyou?" Ryouga said. "Are you just going to leave things as they are after that phone call?"

"I dunno how to face them yet," Ranma said miserably. "Especially since my parents might be there. Or Mr. Tendo… Oh, God, he was in on it…!" She shuddered under a wave of anger and grief that caused her vision to blur with tears. Impatiently, she scrubbed at her eyes with the heel of her hand. "Damnit, I'm sick of crying already. Why won't it stop?"

"Hey, hey, stop that…" Ryouga said. He scooped up a washcloth, carefully soaked it in the warm water, took hold of her chin and started to gently wash her face. "You're gonna end up with an eyelash in your eye or something if you keep rubbing them like that."

Normally Ranma would have strenuously protested such treatment, but she found herself submitting meekly. A small part of her noted it felt kind of nice to let someone else care for her like this, like it was something that had been missing. It was kinda like this when Ucchan did my makeup, too.

"You… don't gotta take care of me like a little kid, y'know," Ranma mumbled in a weak protest. Ryouga paused and arched an eyebrow. "Yeah… yeah, I do," he replied gruffly. "Someone has to… because you don't know when to ask for help. You were always like that… even back in Middle School."

Memories... of warm meals… simple things, like noodles… idle banter… warm baths and, most of all, a sense safety drifted through her mind. It occured to Ranma that she was letting him fuss because it was familiar. It seemed fair is all. He pulled the cloth away. "How's that? Better?"

She blinked. She knew she was blushing but, for the moment, she was okay with that. "Y-yeah. How bad does it look? I must be a real mess, right?"

Ryouga looked her over carefully. "No, you're fine. You're… you're..." He trailed off as their gazes locked and the moment stretched out. He shook his head suddenly and broke the spell, but Ranma noticed that his face had moved considerably closer to hers own. "Uhhh… I should… I… should do the thing… Let you finish up! Yeah… I'll… I'm gonna go do that… elsewhere. Y'know, just outside. In the other room I mean."

He got up awkwardly and headed for the door.

"Ryouga?" Ranma said. He stopped and turned back to look at her.

She smiled. "Thank you. I feel… better now."

"Aheh…" He rubbed the back of his head nervously. "Y-yeah. Anytime."

"You're actually not too bad at this 'boyfriend' thing," Ranma added.
Ryouga stammered but couldn't manage anything like coherent speech. He bumped into the door as
he tried to walk through before he'd opened it, then finally managed to put together the right order of
operations to open the door, step out, and close it behind him.

Nabiki had her knees pulled up, her arms folded across them and her forehead resting on her arms as
she tried desperately to think of some way to make things better.

Ukyou was in the kitchen washing dishes. Nabiki was pretty sure they were the same dishes she had
just washed, and that every inch of the kitchen had been scrubbed at least twice now, but it was the
place Ukyou felt most comfortable. Kasumi had gone out to do the shopping, once Cologne had
reassured her that she was safe from any Amazon reprisals, and Akane had gone to the dojo to break
bricks. It'd almost seem normal if it weren't for the angry sobs Nabiki could occasionally hear amid
the sounds of shattering cinder blocks.

She had told them about the phone call, of course. They deserved to know that Ranma was alive and
reasonably safe, even if her mental state was far from comforting.

She wants to run away. And I can't blame her. Everybody wants their piece and some of them are
starting to get violent now that she's can't meet everyone's unreasonable demands anymore. And all
I've done is anchor her here, in the worst place in the world for her to be! She groaned softly and
clenched her fists.

"Giving up already, child?" Cologne's familiar rasp cut into Nabiki's ruminations. Nabiki raised her
head and glared at the Joketsuzoku elder.

"That's hardly a fair accusation, don't you think?" Nabiki growled. "Or do you always expect your
protege to be able to take on both the Yakuza and the best warriors of the Amazons after a couple of
weeks of training in the dodging and catching of dishes?"

"You think this one of my tests, then?" Cologne raised an eyebrow. "Do you truly imagine that I am
even capable of such machiavellian cruelty?"

"No, tempting at it is," Nabiki's glare remained unabated. "But I do hold you responsible! Those
aren't Yakuza keeping me holed up in my own home and away from my fiance when she needs me
the most!"

Cologne sighed. "I agree that I bear the burden of responsibility in this for my sister's actions, and I
accept that. But assigning blame, however cathartic, is not going to correct the situation!" She
thumped her staff on the ground. "I am willing to aid you however I can, Nabiki Tendo, but I must
know you have the wherewithal to see this through to the end!"

"Why is this on me, huh?!" Nabiki all but shouted. "These are your people who are working for
Himura! This is all some martial arts idiocy mixed up with some criminal underworld idiocy of
which I never wanted any part, and have done my dead level best to avoid, so why is it suddenly
on me?!!"

"This is your world, Nabiki Tendo," Cologne replied. "For all my centuries of experience, I do not
know or understand it like you do. For all your insistence of having nothing to do with any of this,
you are the only one who has a foot in both worlds. You are the only one who has enough
understanding of it to see the big picture. The burden is unfair, I grant you. But... there is no one
else. Not Shampoo, not Ranma, not even myself."
"What… all by my lonesome?" Nabiki muttered. "Just… whip up some Nabiki version of the *Hiryu Shoten Ha* and make all the bad guys go away?"

Cologne walked over next to her and patted her arm. "No, child. Not alone. I am still here to help, as are the others. As will Ranma, when the shock of her discovery has faded. And there are others you have acquired on your own. I believe you have all the pieces you require to be victorious. You merely need to play them wisely."

"You've got far more confidence in my abilities than I do," Nabiki groused. "And I have a lot of confidence in my abilities. Too much, it turns out. All of this started because I thought I could 'fix' Ranma Saotome's life."

"And do you honestly think you have not made progress? Or that you would encounter no setbacks or resistance?" Cologne chuckled. "That is overconfidence indeed! Destiny is loathe to change, Nabiki Tendo, yet you have dragged it kicking and screaming thus far, seemingly without effort. But it will not submit without a fight. You should have expected a final conflict before you gained mastery over it."

"You make it sound like I'm slaying some sort of monster," Nabiki said skeptically.

"Aren't you?" Cologne settled down next to her, easing herself down stiffly. As spry as the old woman was, it was easy to forget that she was ancient, but for that brief moment she dropped her guard and Nabiki could see how much the years weighed on her. "I sought to defy destiny once myself. I had been raised my entire life to fulfill my mother's wishes - to become a great warrior and to lead our people. I trod the well-worn path of destiny without question."

"Until I met Happi, that is."

"Let me guess; You fell in love and were tempted to run away with him?" Nabiki asked.

"Heavens no, child!" Cologne chuckled. "Oh, I was infatuated with him to a degree, to be sure. He was different - bold, brash and capable. He was clumsy, but unafraid to make mistakes. He'd pick himself up, dust himself off and try again in pursuit of what he wanted. He was hardly different from what he is now, but he was unlike anyone I had ever met. But he was also a lecherous idiot who sought only to sate his baser desires and would never see me as more than an object of those desires… much as I might have wished it to be different." She sighed. "Yet… he did plant the seeds of rebellion - the notion that there was an outside world; places full of people and adventures. He made me realize that there was more to life than our little village in our small corner of China, and that these places might be worth exploring."

"You wanted to run away. See the world," Nabiki said, finding herself struggling to attribute such a rebellious notion to the conservative elder.

"I did run away," Cologne replied as she lit her pipe and took a puff. "For a time. I had naively assumed that my mother would allow me to simply walk away from it all, and that she would respect my decision. I was wrong. She pursued me and dragged me back home, three times, in fact, before I managed to get away cleanly. Each time she would remind me of my duty and of the people who would come to depend on me - of my destiny. I was having none of it, of course."

Cologne sighed. "And then I found out very quickly that the world outside of Jusendo cared nothing for a girl who knew nothing of its ways. I could defend myself, of course; but I was hardly the only martial artist wandering China, and I was arguably the most naive. Within days I found myself destitute, swindled out of my few meagre possessions with naught but a handful of coins and the tattered clothes on my back. I found myself stumbling through a rainstorm… freezing rain, the sort that soaks through you straight to the bone. And I was left staring at a tea shop, wondering if I should
spend the last of my coin on something so frivolous as a cup of tea, if only to get some sort of respite from the cold and wet."

"A tea shop, huh?" Nabiki said softly.

"Yes. And an odd one at that. All manner of whirly things and chimes outside, and a name that made no sense to me. In the middle of nowhere by the road. Odder still was the man inside who ran the place. He wore women's clothes and too much makeup, but made no attempt to disguise what he was. He never took my coin. He merely asked to guess my preferred type of tea." Cologne chuckled. "I didn't even know I had a preference until then. But it was a quiet place to think. I don't know how long I spent there, but by the time I stepped outside, I discovered my Mother had caught up to me. She gave me an ultimatum: return home with her willingly, to face punishment for my obstinacy, or challenge her for my freedom then and there."

"You fought her and lost?" Nabiki asked.

Cologne shook her head. "No. I bowed my head and meekly accepted defeat. My mother had not needed to lay a hand on me. The outside world had done so more than enough. To her credit, she did not raise a hand against me and accepted me back, pleased that I had 'learned my lesson'. Oh there was token punishment... chores and training... but she did not wish to drive me away again, thinking it was some onerousness of home life that had caused me to flee. If only!" Cologne snorted. "It was no oppressive authority which had crushed me. I gave up because I was faced with the possibility that I might fail."

Cologne blew a smoke ring, silent for a moment. "After that, when I left the village, it was only in duly sanctioned capacities... but it was not the same. I had forever tethered myself to home and to my destiny. All of it was in service to that." She fixed Nabiki with a stern look. "You are now that girl, standing in the rain in threadbare clothes with barely a coin to her name, stripped of her arrogance and pride and discovering that her dream is not what she once thought. I see much of myself... as I was in that moment at least... in you, Nabiki Tendo. I foresaw this day coming, but what comes next?" She took another puff. "Well... I am curious to peer down that path not taken. But the choice to take it remains always with you."

"So... give up on my hopes and dreams, or win a fight way out of my weight class?" Nabiki scowled. "That's a hell of a choice."

"Life is often not fair in the choices it provides. Yet it is a challenge that Ranma has risen to meet time and again, is it not? But this arena is far more complex. Ranma is a warrior... one without peer, I dare to say. But this contest is one of generals and rulers," Cologne replied gravely. "I will not lie, Nabiki Tendo. If you wish to be assured of saving something, it would be best to surrender now."

"And give up on Ranma?!" Nabiki shot her a horrified look.

"On Ranma, on my Great-Granddaughter and quite likely the Hibiki boy as well. I suspect that if you appear sufficiently cowed, however, both Himura and Lo Shan will be satisfied with that. You would likely need to leave Nerima and start over... but you and your sisters would be able to resume more normal lives." Cologne gave her a searching look. "But if you seek to hold onto more than that, you will lose everything... unless you have the cunning and will to see this through to the end." She hopped to her feet and started hobbling away. "If you want the prudent course of action? Give up now."

Nabiki remained silent for a few moments until, slowly, her clenched fists relaxed.

Cologne sighed. "You have some time to decide, child. I can give you that much at least. For now
we must wait for Lo Shan to make the next move. Take that time to consider."

Lo Shan had to admit the Kuno Manor was impressive, at least in its size. It was built on the base of an Edo period castle and, despite the 'softening' that had been wrought by modern conveniences and sensibilities, she could see that it was still a bastion of war at its core. Though she preferred mobility and left fortresses of stone and steel to emperors and kings, it was at least a sign that this land had not always been pudgey, soft and weak.

*I suppose Himura thought such defences would be enough to stymie us. Smug child,* Lo Shan thought, though the instincts that had kept her alive for so long warned her that it was more than that. She lowered her spyglass and turned to the warrior next to her. "How many defenders inside?"

"[It is difficult to tell,]" the woman said. "[They conceal their movements and either walk in amongst the staff or pose as staff themselves to get from place to place within the castle. They are aware of us, but have made no moves on our positions.]

"[Of course not. A castle like that would be stocked for *months*. They know we can hardly lay siege for any period of time without drawing the attention of the local authorities. What of access points? There must be dozens in such an old structure.]

The warrior seemed nervous. "[You… would think. I have sent scouting teams to explore drainage lines, the foundations, the inside of the courtyard. There… have been injuries,]"

"[Injuries?]" Lo Shan frowned.

"[The grounds are *heavily* laced with booby traps. Most appear to be nonlethal, but are of maniacal design. Encounters so far have resulted in our teams being ejected violently from the castle. Those teams that *have* managed to make it onto the grounds were forced to retreat, reporting… some manner of beast.]

"[Some manner of beast…]" Lo Shan parroted. "[Not even a description? Have the women who fled in so cowardly a manner that they failed to even see the eyes of their enemy report to me after the Godslayer is ours. I can see that many of you are in dire need of *retraining.*]"

The warrior swallowed nervously. "[Yes, Honored Elder.]"

"[Call your scouts back. If the surreptitious routes are impassable, then we will simply go over the wall and deal with what resistance they might raise. Make sure to have some of those dart guns that Himura provided.]" She sighed and folded her arms. *Only a few days in this hedonistic land and already my warriors grow soft. You made a grievous error in coming here, Khu Long. Perhaps you will still see reason once this is done.*

The trees around them rustled as a half dozen Amazon warriors who were already present readied themselves. Lo Shan smiled to herself. *This will hardly be an evening’s worth of entertainment.*

Ranma winced as her fist hit the post at the wrong angle. She felt the shock of pain through her wrist and up along her arm and into the shoulder, and instinctively hopped back, shaking her hand. She was in the Kuno mansion’s dojo (One of them, anyway), wearing a borrowed white training gi. She had been trying to do some basic punching exercises on a rope-wrapped post, but she was finding her body refusing to obey her.
"You seem to be having some trouble, Ran," Tatewaki commented. He was sitting lotus style on the floor of the kendo dojo, eyes closed. He had been in silent meditation since she had come in and she hadn't realized he was aware of her presence until he spoke.

"I'm just a little off balance," Ranma said, massaging her wrist. She decided to try for a kick instead and spun for what she intended to be a strong roundhouse to the side of the rope-wrapped post.

Instead, her foot slipped on the polished floor and she spun gracelessly, tumbled and would have hit her head if someone hadn't caught her.

She looked up, eyes wide, to find herself staring into Tatewaki Kuno's face. Suddenly she had a horrible flashback. The sense of having no control, of slipping, careening, someone catching her, then stale breath and lips forcibly pressed to hers…

"L-lemme go!" She squirmed, struggling to free herself from his grasp. "Lemme go!"

Tatewaki released her immediately and held his hands up as he stepped back. "Please, accept my apologies! I did not mean any offense, I merely… you were falling and I reacted without thinking…!"

Ranma dropped to her knees, feeling the tears threatening to well up again. That feeling of helplessness was back - vulnerability. The fear - knowing that someone could do whatever they wanted and she wouldn't be able to stop them. She pulled the front of her borrowed gi tightly closed as she tried to get her breathing under control. "It's… it's… it's okay…"

Tatewaki regarded her, then knelt a respectful distance away. "I did something to you. Didn't I?" he asked in a hushed tone.

Ranma glanced up at him and was taken aback by the look of horror and disgust on his face. His hands on his knees were shaking and she watched as he reached into his pocket and withdrew the small orange bottle. His eyes were lowered, hooded in the shadow of his bangs.

Ranma closed her eyes and took a steadying breath. "No. Not you," she said, glad that at least this time she could say that. "Someone named Mikado Sanzenin. He grabbed me at the skating rink when Akane was trying to teach me how to skate and…" She swallowed. "I didn't expect my first kiss to go to an ice skating letcher I had never met before."

Tatewaki seemed to tremble and relax, slumping in relief. "I… am sorry. I should not find such a thing reassuring, but…" he took a deep breath, "I know I have been guilty of much."

Ranma smiled weakly. "Actually, you were just kind of into overly enthusiastic hugs. You got over excited, sure, but… Sanzenin…" She shuddered. "He made me feel… unclean."

"Ah," Tatewaki sighed. "I had feared… I had what I thought was a memory when you mentioned a kiss, but…" he chuckled, "I believe I was… some sort of samurai in it, and you were… Juliet?"

Ranma cocked her head. "Oh, no, that actually happened."

Tatewaki's eyes widened. "What…?"

"It was a stage play of Romeo and Juliet. Or it was supposed to be. Akane was playing Juliet, and somehow it got screwed up into a competition for who got to be Romeo." Ranma sat down on the floor cross-legged. "All for a trip to see 'China'… which turned out to be some sorta famous actor, not the place."
Tatewaki frowned. "But… you were Juliet. And…"

Ranma rubbed the back of her head sheepishly. "Yeah, that… well… I've got a bit of a problem with being over-competitive… and I put on the costume to distract Happosai, who was being a pest, and then Akane was acting like she was okay with kissing you 'cuz it was the scene and Juliet was s'posed to kiss Romeo, and we started fighting and… I guess it just made more sense in my head, that I'd rather kiss you myself than let you kiss her."

"We… kissed?" Tatewaki said, looking dumbfounded.

"Oh, no, it didn't count," Ranma said, blushing. "We… we used tape…" She pantomimed putting a piece of tape across her own lips. "You know… It sounds even weaker now than it did then…" She sighed. "But… I mean, I kissed you. So… you didn't do anything wrong."

"I… see…" Tatewaki said, seemingly a bit confused. He frowned. "There was a date sometime later… with a wish-granting sword?"

"Yeah, that happened too. I thought I could use it to cure myself," Ranma said ruefully. "Guess it's probably a good thing that didn't work out, huh?"

"And… a very fat bird on my head that gave me super powers?"

"Ahh… oh yeah! The Phoenix! That was a major pain…"

Tatewaki rubbed his eyes. "You'll forgive me, but… I am beginning to wonder if I am either overly medicated, or not taking enough. How much of what I thought was merely madness was real?"

Ranma scooted over and patted his shoulder companionably. "I kinda know how you feel, Senpai." She rubbed her wrist again and sighed. "Mebbe more than I'd really like."

"You are having trouble with your art," Tatewaki observed, seemingly eager to change the subject. "You are having difficulty moving?"

"It's like… you know how you've got a word on the tip of your tongue, but you just can't think of it, and it's driving you crazy? It's like that, but… but with the Art." She clenched her fist. "I grew up living and breathing the Art. I shouldn't even have to think about it. But…" Her fist relaxed. "I can't seem to move right. I keep… second-guessing myself, I guess. I can't even get through a basic kata without screwing up the order of the moves."

"You are unable to find your focus?" Tatewaki asked.

Ranma shook her head. "It's not that. I mean… I useta do this stuff like it was as natural as breathing. I didn't have to think unless it was something really challenging. But… After yesterday? After the last few weeks and all that's happened in that time?" She twitched. "All of it was Pops… drilling it into me over and over and over… punishing me if I got it wrong. Drugging me too, apparently. And that was before… before Jusenkyo. The Art used to make me feel safe… and now all it does is remind me of all of that. Each time I do a move in a kata, I get this… flash of memory, of what he used to do when I got it wrong. And I hesitate and I do get it wrong, and then I panic, and…" She closed her eyes and forced herself to take a calming breath. "All of my Martial Arts are based on the Anything Goes style. All of my techniques, even the stuff I've learned from others builds on it. It's a huge part of who I am." She looked at her hand. "But… but if everything my parents was doing was wrong… If everything I learned was wrong…"

Tatewaki listened to her and considered. He closed his eyes in thought. After a moment he opened them again. "My father used to take me and my sister out for ice cream."
Ranma blinked and cocked her head. "Uhh… okay?"

Tatewaki held up a finger. "Allow me to finish and, hopefully, this will make sense. My father used to take me and my sister out for ice cream. She was likely too young to remember, but I did. It was a reward at the end of the week. This was when he was... saner, though he still had his problems. He spent all week working, and this was one of the few times we had with him. He had taken an interest in my fascination with the philosophy of Miyamoto Musashi, and he and I would play a little game, where we would argue the philosophical implications of ice cream toppings, myself drawing on Musashi’s writings, whilst he would draw from his beloved Hawaiian culture. It was nonsensical and silly, but it often led into deeper discussions and I find to this day that much of my personal philosophy can be traced back to those 'ice cream arguments' we had. Of all of my memories of him, these are the fondest, and the ones from which I draw much wisdom."

Kuno’s expression darkened. "But he also neglected his family, indulged in his madness, refused proper treatment, and actively blocked mine. He became a tyrannical monster who terrorized the students who were his charges, with little regard for safety or sanity. He tormented me with his obsessions and ignored my mother's abuse of my sister, and, in the end, he simply left." He folded his hands. "So… the conundrum; Do I overlook all of his transgressions because of a few fleeting happy memories and useful lessons, or do I stand my ground and thusly discard major foundational elements of my own beliefs because, regardless of how wise they have proven, they originated from a flawed source?"

Ranma considered. "Well… I guess it'd make sense to keep the stuff that works, even if the one who taught it to you was lousy, right? I mean… I can see that making sense. I learned tricks from the old letch all the time, and he's basically the worst human being I've ever met."

"That's the most reasonable course, naturally," Tatewaki agreed. "But if it were that easy, I'd not be here meditating half the day. After all, this 'old letch' you learned from… you knew he was untrustworthy when you began your lessons, correct? Regardless of what you learned, there were no false pretenses. What you learned was carefully weighed against what you knew about him." He looked up at the evening sky, visible over the compound wall. "It's the betrayal that poisons it, I think. You accept a lesson because you trust the source… you incorporate it… then discover the source is untrustworthy."

"So… what do you do?" Ranma asked.

"I'm still working on that," Tatewaki admitted. He gave her a smile. "If you should happen upon an answer before I do, be sure to let me know, would you?"

Ranma smiled in spite of herself. "You know… I didn't think that would actually make me feel better..."

"There is comfort in knowing your experience is shared by another, no matter how painful or maddening," Tatewaki replied, slowly rising to his feet. He walked over to the wall and selected two shinai from the rack. "Perhaps a different approach to your problem. Your training was primarily in unarmed kempo, correct?"

"Yeah. Occasionally some staff fighting, but Pops mostly felt weapons were a crutch," Ranma replied.

"Then might I suggest I start training you in Kendo?" Tatewaki asked. "If you are willing, of course." He held out one of the training swords. "It would be a style that you have had no training in, so you would not be fighting old reflexes. A stopgap to maintain your form until you have resolved our mutual conundrum?"
Ranma stared at the offered sword, then slowly got to her feet, walked over and took it from him. It felt… odd in her hand. Too light, for one, oddly balanced to her inexperienced grasp. He was right in that there was nothing overly familiar about it. Ranma had always shared Genma's distaste for weapons, eschewing them unless in the midst of a battle that required improvisation, or as a modified form of weight training. There was a sense of almost being forbidden.

She tightened her grip on it. "Yeah…" She swung the sword experimentally. "Definitely not my style… so you're right, it's perfect. Uhh… If you're willing, Senpai. I dunno how good a student I'll be at this."

"And I cannot promise to be a great instructor. I have been distressingly lax in my duties as Kendo Club Captain in recent years," Tatewaki replied. "But perhaps this can be a learning opportunity for us both? As well as a chance to learn more about you than the tragedies of your past and your choice of hair styles."

Ranma nodded then hesitated. "Uhhh… No offense Senpai, but… I should probably run this past my b… past Ryo first. To… uhh… avoid any misconceptions."

Tatewaki's eyebrows shot up and he held up his hands. "I promise you, I mean nothing untoward!"

"I know, I know, it's just… I have a history of a lot of misunderstandings with the people who… y'know… like me. They see me doing something totally innocent, but walk in after I trip and accidentally grope someone or something, or vice versa… And Nabiki…" Ranma stopped, wincing as she felt a stab of pain from that. "A-and Nabiki always told me that if I communicated better I could avoid a lot of it. So… I gotta tell Ryouga what I'm doing first."

Tatewaki shouldered the shinai and nodded. "Fair enough. Where is your erstwhile suitor, anyway? He has been quite protective of you since coming here. I admit to some surprise that he has allowed you to be out of his sight for so long a time."

"He… uhh… kind of fell asleep waiting for me to get out of the bath," Ranma said. "I didn't wanna wake him. He's had a bit of a rough month because of me."

"I suspect this 'rough month' is a shared experience between you," Tatewaki replied. A smile crossed his face. "Well then, best you go fetch him. I could use a good sparring partner and, as unorthodox as his fighting style is, I do recall him being a formidable swordsman… even if he did insist on using an umbrella. A sparring partner would be as welcome as a chance to freshen my skills as an instructor!"

Before Ranma could reply there was an explosion on the far side of the compound.

"Wha…?!" Ranma stared as a cloud of dust rose from the base of the wall.

Tatewaki merely narrowed his eyes. "Sasuke."

The Ninja was beside him, kneeling, though he had been nowhere to be seen a moment before. "Yes, Master Kuno."

"It seems our foreign visitors are no longer content merely to probe our defenses. What is our status?" Tatewaki said, his eyes on the cloud of dust rising from the perimeter as he walked over to the wall of the dojo and swapped the shinai for his more traditional bokken.

"Mistress Kodachi was investigating what seemed like an attempt to penetrate our security at the south wall, along with much of the staff," Sasuke replied. "We hadn't seen any other movement and presumed they had concentrated their forces."
"A feint, then, to draw off the defenders and allow a team to infiltrate." He switched his gaze to the large artificial river running through the compound which led to a pond with a small footbridge arching over it. "Tell me, has my sister's reptilian monstrosity been fed yet today?"

"No, Master Kuno," Sasuke replied.

"Good," Tatewaki smiled grimly. "Bring me the bell she uses to summon him for feedings and be quick. I suspect we are short of time." He turned to face what appeared to be an open and empty garden.

"Y-yes, Master Kuno, but shouldn't I go alert Mistress…?" Sasuke began.

Three knives erupted from the bushes. Tatewaki deflected the two aimed for Sasuke, then stopped the third targeted for his face, the sharp steel blade biting and sticking into the polished wood of his bokken.

"We do not have time. Go. Quickly!" Tatewaki replied.

The Ninja was already gone.

Ranma stepped back. She considered dropping into a fighting stance or fleeing and stumbled as her legs tried to do both. She leaned heavily against the wall and cursed.

"Stay back. You are their objective," Tatewaki said, eyes on the foliage as he moved to interpose himself between Ranma and the invaders. "And you are in no condition to defend yourself."

"I'm…!" Ranma started to protest, then trailed off. I almost said 'I'm a martial artist too!', just like Akane… Except… She clenched her fist. He's right. I can't! It's just like when I was tripping over myself trying to play volleyball…

"My name is Tatewaki Kuno, Scion of the Kuno Family. I know not the land from whence you hail, but here it is customary to introduce oneself when entering the home of another. Particularly uninvited as you are," Tatewaki called out.

After a moment of silence, a single figure emerged from the brush. She was middle aged, her raven black hair shot through with silver and tied back into a severe ponytail. Her face was lined with age and bore many scars, making her appear even older than she likely was. She wore green Chinese-style robes, trimmed with gold.

"I am Lo Shan," she called out. Her dark eyes fixed on Tatewaki, then shifted to Ranma. She snorted. "Ranma Saotome, slayer of gods, the warrior who humbled the Prince of the Musk tribe, undefeated in countless battles… cowering behind his inferior. Pathetic. How truly male of you."

"She is not your concern at the moment," Tatewaki said sharply, before Ranma could even respond. "This is my home you have invaded, and you will answer to me for the transgression."

"You are irrelevant, boy," Lo Shan said. "I have come for Ranma Saotome, regardless of this pathetic display. You may stand aside or you may die. The choice is yours."

"I'm not male!" Ranma shouted. "Did Himura tell you that? I can't imagine a cursed girl is of much use to the Amazons!"

Lo Shan raised an eyebrow. "Feh. You were raised male. The specifics of your curse are of little consequence. Your will mate with a strong Amazon bloodline and produce a fierce next generation. Khu Long's failure will be addressed and this matter will be put behind us. That is all that concerns
"Yeah? And I've already agreed to marry Shampoo, so what's the problem!?" Ranma retorted.

Lo Shan smirked. "That bloodline is no longer considered viable and Xian Pu has been adjudged to be a failure and a disgrace. We will select another. Perhaps several. You should consider yourself honored." She started to walk forward. "Now cease your resistance. I do not wish to cause you permanent harm, but any damage you suffer that does not affect your ability to sire children is also of no consequence, so do not…"

She trailed off as Kuno stepped to block her path, bokken levelled.

Lo Shan chuckled. "This must be a joke, yes? Outsider humor perhaps?" She sighed and snapped her fingers. "Very well. My patience wears thin, but I suppose my warriors deserve a little entertainment."

A half dozen Amazons emerged from various points of cover around the compound, each garbed in colorful Chinese martial arts gear, some carrying curved swords or spears.

"[Xiao Rin?]" Lo Shan said to one warrior with pale blue hair. "[Make an example of him.]"

Xiao Rin smirked. She looked Tatewaki over. "[A male who thinks he can fight, hmm?]" She levelled her sword at him. "[With a stick no less. This will be interesting… but short.]"

Tatewaki shifted his glance to Xiao Rin as Lo Shan stepped back. "I would have your name, if we are to fight."

"Name is for warriors. You boy with stick. Live thirty seconds, maybe take pity and give," Xiao Rin replied. She seemed amused by his stance as she slipped into one of her own. She flexed her legs, watching for his reaction but he kept his stance neutral and did not take the bait.

Having reached a decision to just end it, the Amazon warrior dashed forward. She made a last minute change of direction, pivoting nimbly on the balls of her feet and spun to slash at Tatewaki's unprotected side.

Tatewaki moved with a surprising economy of motion, turning almost casually as the blade of his bokken seemed to teleport to meet the flat of her blade and turn it, forcing her off balance and making her stumble. He stepped to the side and away without haste as she skidded to a stop.

"You will need to be quite a bit faster to catch me like that," he said.

Xiao Rin looking shocked, as though she wasn't entirely sure what had just happened. She glared at him then took a more cautious stance. "Is trick, yes?"

"I would think a true warrior could tell the difference easily enough," Tatewaki replied.

She growled and continued to circle around him, but warily this time. He did not turn to follow her movements, but held his stance, which only served to make her more cautious.

"[Xiao Rin, stop embarrassing yourself and me!]" Lo Shan barked. "[This is not a challenge match, this is the elimination of an obstacle!]"

Xiao Rin winced then snarled and darted towards Tatewaki's unprotected back. He swung the bokken behind his head to catch her blade once again and bind it as he turned in one smooth motion, pulling her off balance once more and, with and forceful sweep of his weapon, sent her sprawling.
"I have sparred many times with Ranma Saotome and, while I am by no means her equal, I think you will find that I have some skills of my own," Tatewaki said, turning his gaze to Lo Shan. "If this is the best you mean to bring to bear, this will be a very long afternoon."

Xiao Rin got to her feet and, before Lo Shan could respond, barked something in Mandarin. The other five Amazons drew their weapons and began to advance on him.

"What's this?" Tatewaki eyed them warily then shot Xiao Rin a glance. "I thought this was between us?"

"Not fight. Not challenge," Xiao Rin said, though her cheeks held a flush of shame. "Is extermination. Is war. Obstacles are for killing, any means possible. You tricky, but need die now."

Tatewaki narrowed his eyes. "Come, then."

Xiao Rin actually hesitated, but the others didn't and rushed in. The first came at him with a spear. He deflected the point to his left side, grabbed it and pulled, sweeping her legs out from under her with his bokken. He used the spear to tangle up the second attacker's sword, catching it with the tines, then smashing down on the spear with his own bokken to drive both weapons to the ground. He stepped in and made a slashing strike to the side of her head to send her tumbling off in a boneless heap.

The other three, one wielding a pair of chúi and the other two unarmed, hesitated. They nodded at each other, and while the first one darted in to feint at Tatewaki, the other two began to dance around him in opposite directions.

Ranma recognized it as a modification of the Hiryu Shoten Ha. The Amazons on the outside were weaving hot and cold ki into a more complex pattern than called for in the basic technique, and the girl sparring with Tatewaki was exerting some sort of stabilizing force to contain it all. Ranma realized that the Amazons probably had more than a few tricks up their sleeves like this that they hadn't yet shared. "Kuno Senpai!"

Tatewaki turned his head and, for a brief instant, he locked eyes with her. Then he winked.

It took Ranma a second to decide if she had actually seen it, such a gesture being so far out of character for him. He knows? But then why is he standing right in the center of the double spiral like a dumbass?!

Tatewaki grinned as he locked weapons with the chúi-wielder. "You know, this odd sensation in the air seems awfully familiar…"

She smirked then leapt suddenly backwards as the two other girls finished crossing each other's paths at a run. As the three paths intersected, it appeared to spark things off, the hot and cold spirals collapsing in on each other to generate a crushing vortex centered on the Kendoist.

"Senpū-Ken!" Tatewaki raised his sword with both hands, using a technique Ranma hadn't seen for nearly a year.

"Wait, he can still do that? But what…? Ranma's eyes widened with realization and she dove for cover just in the nick of time.

"Whirlwind Sword - a technique where the sword is spun in a tight arc to create small but intense whirlwinds, which Tatewaki drove right up into the heart of the spiral. And Ranma knew enough about the Hiryu Shoten Ha to know what it would do; destabilize it.
What was supposed to be a brief, controlled but intense tornado became instead a sudden uncontrolled and violent explosion. The blast of air flung the three Amazons back out into the garden to flop on the grass like fish out of water, groaning.

Tatewaki himself staggered for a second as the sudden low pressure dragged the breath from his lungs - but he remained standing and straightened.

"You were right," he said, fixing his gaze on Xiao Rin. "This was not a fight." He turned his scrutiny to Lo Shan. "I have honed my blade against your vaunted godslayer himself, day after day, for more than a year. I am well acquainted with your Amazon techniques."

Lo Shan sighed, shook her head and folded her arms. "[I should have brought the seniors. Xiao Rin, step aside. I will deal with this.]"

Xiao Rin narrowed her eyes, her attention still fixed on Tatewaki. "No."

Lo Shan's eyes widened, the whites showing as her face twisted with outrage at the act of defiance. "[Xiao Rin!]"

Xiao Rin ignored her. She locked eyes with Tatewaki. "Xiao Rin."

Tatewaki blinked. "Your name is 'Showering'?


"I thought this wasn't a challenge?" Tatewaki said, though he shifted back into his neutral stance.

"Outsider good fighter. Better than told Outsiders could be. Want to see how good," Xiao Rin said. "No tricks, yes?"

A smile crossed Tatewaki's face. "Agreed."

"No," Lo Shan stepped forward and, with a wave of her hand that barely seemed to brush the girl, sent Xiao Rin flying off to the side. She stepped forward to thrust her palm in Tatewaki's direction. Though she was many feet away, a massive wall of force slammed into the kendoist and flung him back into a rack of training equipment like a ragdoll.

"Kuno-Senpai!" Ranma leapt from her cover and ran over to check on him. He coughed and struggled to extricate himself.

"I have had quite enough of this farce." Lo Shan stalked forward. "Ranma Saotome, you will come with…"

Lo Shan paused and looked up, then darted back as a black and yellow blur slammed into the ground from above, right where she had been standing. There was an explosion, sending dirt and stone everywhere. Ranma shielded herself and Tatewaki as best she could, then peered back into the cloud, already recognizing the entrance.

Ryouga was crouched in the crater, finger still on the ground where he had hit the breaking point. He was peering out of the cloud. "She's not going anywhere with you."

Lo Shan was only a few feet away. Her arms were crossed and, despite having a few fragments of stone and concrete in her hair and clothes, she seemed utterly unimpressed. "Did Khu Long teach you that ridiculous trick?" She shook her head as she picked a shard of stone from her hair. "It's not
even a particularly good method of toughness training."

Ryouga straightened. "It worked pretty well for me."

"I imagine it did, with such a limited repertoire of techniques. Even broken and useless Joketsuzoku techniques must seem powerful." She smirked at him. "Perhaps I can show you a few?"

She made a gesture and her image suddenly shimmered and split, and then there were a dozen of her surrounding him.

"What, Ninja tricks now?" Ryouga said. He put on a confident front, but there was a hint of nervousness in his voice.

Lo Shan's calmly smug expression twisted into rage. "Ninja Tricks. Do you know how much of your vaunted 'Ninja Heritage' was stolen from us?!"

Without warning, one of the images darted forward and struck Ryouga in the side faster than he could react, then melted back into place with the rest. The others started to run in a circle around him, making it impossible to tell if a strike was from the real Lo Shan, or if each image was actually solid somehow. Another strike to his back, then one to the gut. Ryouga lashed out with a spinning roundhouse kick, but his foot passed through nothing.

His eyes darted between them, but with so many it was impossible to predict which would attack, or keep track. He wiped a little blood from the corner of his mouth. "It'll take more than a few pokes to put me down!"

"Don't boast, boy. I know the limits of the Bakusai Tenketsu training. I could put you down with a single blow if I wished," Lo Shan replied, voice echoing oddly.

"Think so, huh?" Ryouga replied. "Then this shouldn't be a surprise at all. Go hon' yubi Bakusai Tenketsu!" He then held up his hand, fingers splayed. For the span of a breath or two, each of his fingertips seemed to glow, then he thrust his hand down into the ground.

After a momentary rumble the ground all around Ryouga erupted in a series of explosions. Dirt and rock shattered and burst as though the area all around him were being shelled by artillery, yet the small circle of earth he crouched on was untouched. The decoy images were ripped apart by the shockwaves and Lo Shan was sent stumbling back, covering her face, eyes wide.

She recovered quickly, scowling. "Do you have any idea how dangerous that perversion of the breaking point is?!"

Ryouga's confident look was more genuine now. "Pretty sure, yeah. How often have you actually used the breaking point, huh? Because I've been using it almost every day for a year. Can you hit the breaking point of a pile of sand? I could after my first month."

Lo Shan's eyes narrowed. "I'll acknowledge you're a prodigy, boy. You would probably be a challenge for one with ten years of experience and training on you. But… I have far more than that." She drew in a breath, and then exhaled forcefully.

Ranma felt the ripple of ki, the same slight electric tingle to the air that she had felt when Cologne started to pull out multiple techniques at once. She shouted at Ryouga, but it was already too late.

Lo Shan started shedding afterimages like water as she moved forward at terrifying speed, changing direction with a perfect duplicate taking the other path, branching off and making it impossible to tell
which was real. Ryouga threw up his hands to protect himself which, unfortunately, left her target exposed.

Five finger strikes hit Ryouga's chest - savage impacts that were more than just force - penetrating flesh and bone and biting deep.

Ryouga spasmed, coughed up blood and crumpled like a rag doll over Lo Shan's arm.

She grinned as her afterimages faded and pushed Ryouga off her, letting him fall to land in a broken heap. "It has many names, many variations and permutations. But the end result is the same, as I'm sure you understood the moment your heart stopped." She clucked her tongue. "Shame. You had some potential in you."

A tortured scream ripped itself from Ranma's throat as she felt Ryouga's presence flicker and dim. She abandoned her protective stance over Tatewaki and lurched forward, half running, half crawling as she scrambled over to him, heedless of the martial arts master standing over his body. She turned him over, panic gripping her heart. No no no no no no no NO!

"Oh, did that finally spark some life in you, Godslayer?" Lo Shan asked. "Perhaps I should have started off killing a few of your allies for effect."

Ranma ignored her for the moment. Now that she was in contact with Ryouga, she could feel his Ki ebbing away, feel the horrible, ice-cold blocks that were keeping his body from responding. She gripped his hand tightly and willed them to thaw, willed the pulse of life to flow again.

Ryouga's eyes shot open as he gasped and started coughing.

Ranma felt a wave of relief when she sensed his ki start to stabilize, his pulse weak, but steady. And as the immediate sense of panic ebbed, she could feel something else rising to take its place.

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Lo Shan stared, as she saw the boys chest begin to rise and fall again. This is troubling. These Outsiders... they are meddling with forces they don't understand. And none of this should even be possible. Those ki blocks should have ensured his death! "I'm not entirely sure how you did that, child. That technique is supposed to be fatal. But... You are far too dangerous to allow you roam free with the knowledge you have. Now... Are you done hiding behind others, or is there someone else I must kill today? I can promise you that whatever it is you did here, it will not avail you for my next victim." She glanced around to mark any further targets. The boy with the stick was still sprawled out on some training dummies, and there seemed to be no sign of the household servants.

"No more," The redhead murmured softly.

"Are you going to be reasonable and surrender yourself then, Godslayer?" Lo Shan replied with some surprise. "Without even trying your own hand? So... Himura was right. You are broken." Though I loathe to give that arrogant girl that much credit. She narrowed her eyes but she could sense nothing from the girl before her - no intent to attack - no movement - nothing. Not a trap, then? Or do you have another trick up your sleeve? No matter, a quick jab to the pressure points on the back of the neck and... Her left hand darted towards the girl's neck with unnatural speed, faster than the eye could follow or the average person would even be able to react.

Lo Shan was able to sense the shift, though just barely. The girl did not appear to move, but her position had suddenly changed.

And then... Lo Shan's hand fell off.
Lo Shan caught her breath and flung herself back twenty feet, her right hand coming up to the stump where her left wrist and forearm had been a scant second before, grasping it tightly as blood spurted around her fingers. It was cleanly severed a ways above the wrist, but there had been no blade. The wound burned, the flesh around the edges frostbitten, as though whatever had slashed her was unbelievably cold.

The redhead stood and turned. There were no visible aura effects but Lo Shan could just perceive a flicker. Something was very wrong; The girl was not emitting anything that Lo Shan could recognize as a perceptible threat, yet she knew it had been this girl that had cut her. She grit her teeth and focused her ki in an effort to staunch the bleeding.

Ranma opened her eyes. Normally blue, they now had an odd glint to them, almost as though the light was reflecting from them in the same manner as the eyes of a cat.

"The Neko ken," Lo Shan breathed. I forgot that his idiot father had subjected him to that. At least I know what I'm dealing with. A simple animal's mind can be...

"No. More," Ranma repeated, snapping Lo Shan's attention back to her. Her fingers curled into facsimiles of claws.

Lo Shan stared at her. For a moment, all of her thoughts and schemes deserted her.

"How is it that you can speak?" she finally asked. She gripped her severed stump tighter, as if to remind herself of what just happened. "The Neko ken requires that you surrender your human consciousness! It requires a total and complete conviction that you are the animal! How can you be talking!?" She took a reflexive step back, eyes wide as she tried to comprehend what might have led to a mind capable of such a duality.

Ranma took a step forward in response. There was an edge of a growl in her voice, from deep in her chest. "You won't take any more from me..." she ground out, her lips drawing back to bare her teeth. "Nobody... Nobody is going to take away anything else!"

Lo Shan moved purely on an instinct beyond her normal senses, and it was all that kept her head on her shoulders when the redhead suddenly blurred and flashed past her. She wasn't entirely fast enough though. She felt a sting at her right shoulder and the silk fabric of her robes started to soak through with red. She hopped back and was forced to parry another few savage strikes as the feral girl managed to change direction faster than she thought possible.

I can't read her movements! Lo Shan thought, dancing backwards a few more steps as she fended off the strikes one-handed. She winced as even turning away the attacks left her with gashes on her forearm.

The other Amazons around her were starting to stir. Lo Shan glanced around, caught the eyes of one and, in that moment of connection, communicated all she needed. The warrior nodded and pulled the Outsider weapon from her back; the modified airsoft rifle.

Lo Shan rallied her ki to harden her defense, enduring a few more slashes to hold the girl in position. You are formidable, Godslayer, but in the end...

The rifle was almost completely silent, the dart swifter than any blowgun with nearly the velocity of a bullet at this range. Dodging would be difficult, even for Lo Shan herself.

Ranma swatted the air, changing targets instantly. At first Lo Shan thought she had slashed the dart
with those air pressure claws, but she caught a flash of color between the redhead’s fingers as she turned her attention back to Lo Shan with a backhanded flick of her wrist. *NO!*

Lo Shan slapped the dart away as soon as it struck, but she had felt the prick and could already feel the burning chill of the paralysis toxin seeping through her body. She grit her teeth and marshalled what was left of her ki to hold back the effects, but she knew that she could not fight the poison *and* a weidler of the *Neko ken*. However, other warriors rose and drew their own rifles. She reasoned that if she could hold out but a moment more, there was a chance.

It took a second for her to realize the ringing in her ears wasn't from the drug. Her eyes snapped over to the side to where the sword user had been. His manservant was next to him and, though he still seemed winded, he was ringing what looked like a simple brass bell. *What…?*

The roar was deafening. The water of the pond in the middle of the compound erupted, and a gigantic creature emerged. It looked like a crocodile but it was many times larger than any she had ever seen before. Several Amazons scattered but one was slow and Lo Shan watched with horror as the creature swallowed her whole.

The surprise caused Lo Shan to lose some ground in holding back the poison and she dropped to one knee as her legs went numb.

In a panic, the other Amazons opened fire, some at the giant reptile, the others at Ranma. Ranma leapt into the air and pivoted, like a cat snatching birds out of the air, intercepting the darts and flinging them back towards their owners. The ones that found their mark on the reptile simply bounced off its scaley hide as it pounced on another warrior, snapping her neck with a vicious shake of its head before gulping her down as well.

Lo Shan's head spun with the toxin and she could see Ranma glaring at her with those not-quite-human eyes. One did not get to her age or become an elder of the *Joketsuzoku* by refusing to acknowledge defeat, as bitter a pill as it might be.

"*[Retreat!]*" Lo Shan called sharply, forcing herself to her feet and dashing back, keeping her eyes on Ranma. The girl did not move to pursue but watched warily as Lo Shan made for the hole in the compound wall.

As Lo Shan turned she could hear another scream from behind her as yet one more of her warriors moved too slowly and fell victim to the creature. *There will be an accounting for this, Godslayer! I swear it!*

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Ranma watched Lo Shan retreat, holding her menacing stance until she was sure that the old master had truly fled. It was important that she make herself look big, some corner of her mind told her, and she realized she was growling in a low tone as well. She felt like her ears should be folded back against her skull, despite a different part of her mind that told her with absolute certainty that her ears didn't work that way. She kept her watch on the breach in the wall for long moments after the Amazons were gone.

Then Ranma dropped to her hands and knees and was violently ill.

Mr. Green Turtle drug himself slowly back into his pond. He had learned from his past experiences that the redhead was rather too spicy to be worth the trouble, and none of the other bodies were moving enough to attract his interest. Besides… he had already eaten well. He slipped into the deceptively deep water and disappeared, sinking to the bottom to digest his meal.
Ranma heard someone calling her name. It sounded far away, but then she felt the hand on her shoulder and realized her ears were just ringing. She gasped and shivered as she felt the Link flicker to life.

"Ranma?" Ryouga asked. He brushed strands of her unbound hair from her face as he steadied her. "Are you…?"

She didn't reply, she simply turned and tackled him in a tight hug, and sent him sprawling back on the grass.

"Augh… easy… still sore…" Ryouga wheezed as she burrowed in against his bruised ribs. But he returned the embrace and, for a few minutes, just held her, tucking her head under his chin and stroking her hair. It was one of those comforting gestures that she would never have conceived of accepting before, but it dawned on her that it was something she had been missing for a very long time.

After a few minutes she wiped her mouth. She found there was blood on her fingers and nearly threw up again. She squeezed her eyes shut and tried to block out the spectre of the things that she had just done.

"Are you both unhurt?" Another voice… Tatewaki, though it took a second because his new, calmer tone was still unfamiliar to her. She didn't bother to release her grip on Ryouga or reply.

"I… don't think we're the ones to worry about," Ryouga said quietly. "Are we gonna be okay here with that… thing?"

"He typically sleeps for several days after a large meal," Tatewaki said. "This was… larger than most. My sister has also been careful to train him to recognize the difference between guests and intruders, though he has never…" He was quiet a moment. "We should return you to your rooms until the castle is fully secure."

"What about the survivors?" Ryouga asked. Ranma could feel him shifting as he looked around. "They… they are alive, right?"

"Sasuke is seeing to them. He and the rest of the staff will see them secured. One of the advantages of owning a centuries-old castle is that we have our own dungeon. It should be sufficient." She could sense Tatewaki crouching next to them. "Can you move? We should not linger here with the wall breached thus."

"Yeah, I'll… I'll just…" Ryouga shifted, trying to get to his feet, but he was struggling a bit with Ranma lampreyed onto him. He finally stopped and sighed.

"Can… can you give us a few minutes?" he asked.

"Of course," Tatewaki replied and moved away.

"Is… is the hand there?" Ranma asked once Tatewaki was far enough away. She still refused to open her eyes.

"I don't… wait… yeah… yeah, it's there," Ryouga replied. "About twenty feet from us."

Ranma shuddered. An image flashed through her mind of Saffron's face, smiling even as the razor sharp, ice cold winds sliced his body to pieces.

"I don't want to do this anymore," she whimpered, balling up her fists in his shirt. She could
still feel the blood on her fingers. "I don't want to kill anyone anymore. Why won't they stop?"

"Shh... you didn't kill anyone today, Ranma..." Ryoga said, holding her a bit tighter and rocking slowly.

"I should have stopped her sooner... I couldn't... couldn't move right... She hurt Kuno and I couldn't move... she hurt you and I couldn't move... S-she..." She shuddered again. "I can't... I can't lose you, Ryo..."

"I'm sorry," he replied. She felt a surge of guilt from him.

She succumbed to a burst of annoyance. She had the odd sensation that she should have a tail, and that it should be thrashing from side to side right now to express her frustration. She pulled back and glared at him. "Don't be sorry! Be alive! You and Akane both take way too many stupid risks! What were you thinking, taking on an Amazon Elder like that?!"

"Probably the same thing you were thinking!" Ryoga shot back. "What the hell was all of that, anyway? I didn't recognize any of those moves!"

"I... I don't know..." Ranma trailed off. "I haven't even been able to get through a basic kata all day, and then... and then she tried to kill you and..." She shook her head. "I wouldn't have had to do that if you had been more careful! You were wide open! She's not that much faster than me!"

Ryoga flicked her on the forehead. "Uh huh. I don't think you get to lecture me on being careful just yet, Ranma. Or did you forget who made that crater the Kunos pulled us out of?"

"That just proves my point! You should have let me die! None of this would be happening if it wasn't for me!" Ranma felt her eyes sting; felt the tears and struggled to fight them down. "Why would you do something so stupid!? You didn't even think, did you? How were you gonna deflect that, or how were you gonna beat an Amazon Grandmaster?! Why don't you think things through?!"

Ryoga just looked at her. Ranma found herself dropping her gaze and looking away, feeling uncomfortable with the intensity she saw in his eyes.

"When you dove after Akane when she fell, did you ever think about the landing?" he asked.

"I... you..." Ranma shut her eyes tight. "S-stop looking at me like that, Ryoga! I... I don't... I don't know..." She started to fidget. "I don't know how to deal with it when you look at me like that!"

"Look, I'll make you a promise I can keep, okay?" Ryoga said. He took her hand, startling her into meeting his gaze again. "The next time we jump off somewhere without any clue of how to land? We'll do it together."

Ranma wanted to say something to cut the tension. Something like the things she had said when that same tension surrounded her and Akane. Something casually insulting or perhaps intentionally provocative. But she couldn't bring herself to do it anymore, not knowing how much those comments hurt. All she was able to do was mumble something noncommittal, look away and blush furiously. And to give his hand a grateful squeeze to try and convey all the things she still couldn't bring herself to say.

That ended up being better anyway.

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Sayuri realized very quickly that her estimation of the situation that morning had been severely
understated.

The first things she noticed were the posters. Posters were nothing unusual at any high school, and Furinkan was no different, but Yuka noticed that something seemed off about them; There were a lot more than usual for one, and for clubs that usually didn't have events or recruitment drives, like the chemistry club. They were also professionally done and printed on heavy, expensive stock. A lot of the usual, more homemade posters were missing as well.

After a few hours or checking these posters, Sayuri was starting to see a pattern; there were a lot of 'fundraisers' going on. There was the 'Girls and Boys of Furinkan' calendar preorder advertisement, which ostensibly was to fund further student council sponsored student activities. Then there was the 'Sports Raffle', which had you guess the winners of each game, point spread… it was basically sports gambling that was barely bothering to disguise itself. There were also tickets being sold to several different 'Martial Arts Exhibitions'. All approved by the student council, and all managed by one Hana Yoshimitsu.

Legitimate, Student Council approved versions of Nabiki's typical moneymakers. Sayuri thought. Betcha that student assembly tomorrow is going to be about a crackdown on unauthorized photography, violence, and student gambling. Way to kick her while she's down.

There were others, too, encouraging students to attend away games for their volleyball team with free chartered bus transportation, giveaways, and other contests. No mention about the home team aside from a very dry notice that attendance to Wednesday's game was mandatory.

There was muttering in the halls, too. Students and even a few teachers who suddenly got quiet when she passed. Friends who were reluctant to chat or spend time around her or the others in their group. Even the seating was rearranged for 'efficiency', splitting them all up further. She also noticed that every one of her classes had someone she recognized from the volleyball team in it. Umeko had been moved to her homeroom, and when she caught her looking flashed her a nasty grin. Then her eyes flicked over towards Rin meaningfully, and she mouthed the words 'She's next'.

Sayuri looked away, gritting her teeth to control her reaction as she seethed internally. She's doing it AGAIN! Damn Himura!

She glanced at Rin's back. The girl was oblivious, and Sayuri felt a pang of guilt. Himura knows the game. She knows I can take it. She'll go after Rin and Riko and Hiroshi and Daisuke and Yuka before she gets to me. Her eyes moved over to a group of empty desks. And we can't expect any backup, with those Amazons keeping Akane and Ukyou trapped in the dojo. And who knows if Ranma or Shampoo are even ALIVE at this point. I don't know HOW Himura can keep up with this stupid school vendetta bullshit after all of this!

Sayuri found herself having trouble focusing on schoolwork. It seemed so pointless with everything going on. She noticed Rin was focused on another newcomer to the class; Konatsu Kurenai.

Another pretty girl to the class, naturally nearly every student was clustered around her desk during breaks. And Konatsu naturally knew how to turn on the demure charm, which kept them hooked most of the day, which made it impossible to get the ninja alone.

Okay… Prioritize, Sayuri. Sayuri thought. Your star player is a molten mess because her parents used a potion on her to change her. Everything else is just the same old same old just… to the Nth. The usual players are out of commission, but probably not forever. YOU can't do martial arts or be a super-smart strategist playing mind-chess with gangsters. But you ARE here. You've got another person here who just got a fresh dose of that same potion, so… best angle of attack is to get info for Nabiki and the rest for when they DO get back in the game.
She glanced around. Mineko was in the seat next to Konatsu. She was watching her, but not participating in the group. *Looks like Mineko is Konatsu's keeper. We'll need to distract her to separate them.* Sayuri glanced at Rin again. *If this potion has done something weird to Konatsu's brain, Rin is probably the best chance to get through to her, since she's perceptive and nonthreatening.* Her eyes flicked to the side where Hiroshi and Daisuke were sitting. *And those two are the most distracting students in class now that Ranma, Akane and Ukyou are gone. Tap Yuka and Riko as lookouts, and buy as much time as possible for Rin to get some info. AND… gotta plan all of this without someone like Hana sniffing it out. Where in the school WOULDN'T be bugged, though?*

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To Sayuri's surprise, an answer had already been prepared.

She had pulled Hiroshi and Daisuke aside and broached the question to them, to which they had replied by shushing her and handing her a slip of paper directing her to the old wing of the school near where the second school store had been, and instructions to meet there at lunch. The instructions had been brief, but very specific about the route. She quickly realized they were meant to confuse anyone following her.

After taking enough twists and turns to confuse even herself, Sayuri ended up descending an old staircase to some unused section of the cellar.

"Hello?" she called out into the gloom.

A hand reached out, covering her mouth and muffling the scream. She was pulled back into an even darker side passage, which was blacked out as whatever had been covering it was moved back into place. She growled and stomped hard on the foot of whomever was dragging her.

"Ow!" a familiar male voice cried out. "Sayuri, that hurts!"

She whirled on the brown-haired youth. "Daisuke, what the hell?!

"Easy! We didn't want to let on to anyone following you," Hiroshi said from where he had moved an old shelving unit back into place.

Sayuri glared at him and then at Daisuke behind her. "I'm sure you could have come up with a plan for that that didn't involve getting handsy." She looked around. "So… do you have any lights in here?"

As an answer, a match was struck by someone a few feet away, and used to light a candle, revealing a pale face with sunken, sullen eyes and gaunt, hollow cheeks. Sayuri recoiled a moment, as the flickering candlelight just accentuated the ghoulous qualities of the familiar countenance of Hikaru Gosunkugi.

"Kogane prefers candlelight," he said quietly. He shook the match to put it out then motioned for them to follow. "Keeping the light low also helps to prevent anyone spotting this place. The others are this way."

"What is this?" Sayuri asked as they walked down the hallway.

"It leads to an old coal room that dates back to a time when the original school building was heated using a coal furnace," Daisuke said. "It looks like they emptied it out and cleaned it up back in the 70's or something and then just forgot about it."
Gosunkugi led them into a room with a sink and a counter, and what looked like benches. There was another door, but it appeared to be boarded up. Yuka, Riko and Rin were already sitting on the bench. Light was provided by a number of candles all around. "I used to use this as a darkroom to develop my pictures before I started using a digital camera," Gosunkugi said by way of explanation. He gestured at several pictures on a corkboard of Akane Tendo, and a few of a girl with long brown hair wearing a vintage school uniform that Sayuri didn't recognize.

"Hana doesn't know about this place?" Sayuri asked, looking about. She noticed a duffle bag, as well as an expensive-looking camera and other various photographic accessories.

"No. Nobody does," Gosunkugi said. "Everyone thinks this area is haunted."

"Why is that?" Rin asked.

"Because it's haunted," Daisuke replied.

"Like, literally, actually haunted," Hiroshi added.

"It was haunted," Gosunki corrected them, though Sayuri noticed a note of sadness in his voice. "Now it's just dark and creepy."

"Like someone else I could name…" Yuka muttered under her breath.

"Yuka," Sayuri said sharply.

"It's alright. Everyone thinks I'm creepy," Gosunkugi said. "Even Akane…"

"Look, Gos, we really appreciate the help though," Daisuke said.

"I'm not doing it for you," Gosunkugi replied. "I hated Himura long before any of this started."

"Oh yeah? What did she do to you?" Yuka asked.

"Gos here tried to start his own club," Daisuke said. "Got together the required four members, filled out all the forms, everything. It was supposed to be an Occult Club… though I think the other members were just hoping to play 'Dungeons and Dragons' or something."

"'Vampire the Masquerade,'" Gosunkugi corrected him. "And that doesn't matter. Himura blocked our application then convinced the rugby team to come hang us from the fence by our underwear."

"I think the underwear hanging was their own idea. She just convinced them to run you guys off," Hiroshi said. "Dai and I did some digging; Turns out Himura funneled the funds that would have gone to Gos' club into the Rugby Team and the Rugby Team made sure to keep the pressure on so Gosunkugi and his friends didn't try and reform the club later."

"Apparently she thought the idea was creepy when it came across her desk as Treasurer and decided to shut it down," Daisuke added. "She'd never even met Gos, no grudge or anything. Just didn't like his club idea. Two of the kids transferred out because of the bullying."

"Just in case you're running short of reasons for thinking Himura is an awful person," Yuka muttered.

"So… you work for Nabiki too, Gosunkugi?" Riko asked.

"Not directly," Gosunkugi replied.
"Nabiki sort of lets us handle the details to keep Gos out of Himura's crosshairs," Hiroshi said.

"Gos' big advantage is that no one bothers to take notice of him," Daisuke added. "Not even Hana. Means we can still get intel even when the eyes are all on the rest of us."

"Speaking of which, if we're all missing it'll be suspicious, so we should get to business quickly," Sayuri said. "We need to get Konatsu alone for a few minutes."

"Maybe we should start with something easier to achieve, like building our own rocket to Mars," Yuka replied dryly.

"I'm serious, Yuka," Sayuri put her hands on her hips. "If Rin is right, and I'm pretty sure she is, Konatsu has been dosed with the same potion that Ranma's parents used on her. Which means Himura has it. So the more we can find out about it, the better."

"Okay, but how!?" Yuka threw up her hands. "I don't know if you noticed, but Konatsu is the new hot thing at school! Pretty much everything with a Y chromosome is hanging all over her and she's just as bad for playing into it as Ranma was! Add into that Mineko hovering over her like a hawk, Umeko looking for an excuse to play the big bad martial artist now that the genuine articles are all absent, and who knows what else Himura has cooked up. There's just no way!"

"I've been thinking about that, actually," Sayuri said. "All together you're right, there's no way. But maybe if we break it down a bit? Umeko has mostly got her mad on for me, so I'm pretty sure that I can draw her off using myself as bait."

"Yeah, and get yourself pounded!" Yuka protested.

"She's smart enough not to do anything that'll leave marks," Sayuri replied. "And, if this works, it'll be worth a few bruises. So that leaves Mineko and the Hentai Horde to divert."

"We've got an angle on Mineko," Daisuke said. "Not all of Hana's agents are as loyal as Himura would like to think, and we've got one willing to help us out."

"Not much, of course, but she's reliable enough that she can whisper a few words into the right ears and be trusted," Hiroshi added. "Himura's team has a practise session today, so we slip rumors about a Talent Scout being present. How much you willing to bet a certain girl with Olympic colors streaked in her hair will be falling over herself to be at practise?"


"I... have an idea for that," Riko said nervously. "But... I'll need Yuka's help and... And you're not going to like it."

"What, is it worse than being a petty nobody's punching bag?" Yuka asked, frowning.

"You're really not gonna like it..." Riko repeated sheepishly.

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"You're right. I hate this." Yuka said, arms crossed over her chest and face flushed.

Both she and Riko were wearing bunny-girl outfits they'd swiped from the drama club. Why the drama club at a high school had playboy bunny outfits was probably a question best not asked and not made any better by the fact that they had a variety.
"I'm sorry! I couldn't think of anything else!" Riko said. She was wearing a standard black bunny-girl one-piece with white ears and a tail. She had pink hose and black high heels to complete the outfit.

"And I hate that you couldn't think of anything else and I'm strongly considering hating you!" Yuka growled. She was wearing a red two-piece halter and bikini bottom combo that had been the only one that fit her properly, despite her distaste for it. She picked at the fishnet stockings and shuddered. "God, this just leaves nothing to the imagination, does it? Parading all my flaws out in front of the male lechers of the school isn't exactly what I'd call a good plan, Riko!"

"Don't be so hard on her, Yuka," Hiroshi said. "I mean, this plan works for Ranma all the time, right?"

"Ranma is also insanely hot, as I'm sure you've noticed!" Yuka replied. "I can't pull this off!" She gestured at herself in exasperation then huffed and folded her arms. "Well? Come on, Daisuke, I'm waiting! Get it over with! Make some crack about my stick legs or something!"

She glanced at Daisuke. Rather than reply, the boy seemed a bit flushed and was blinking rapidly and swallowing. Perhaps he was even sweating a little.

When he noticed her turning her gaze to him, he looked away quickly, the flush deepening as he clenched his fists. "I-I-I…! Y-you… you look fine! I mean… I mean you look good. As good as Ranma did…" he stammered.

Yuka blinked, feeling suddenly and uncharacteristically self-conscious. She dropped her own gaze and adjusted the halter nervously. "I… y-you think so?"

Hiroshi glanced back and forth between them, eyes widening. "What…? Now!? You're finally doing this now!? Are you kidding me!?"

"What?" Daisuke and Yuka replied in unison, confused.

Hiroshi threw his hands in the air. "Arrgh! You two are…! Okay, I can't deal with this. You two are adorable. You'll have like five kids, I'm sure, but we've got a timetable to clear the perverts before Mineko gets suspicious so… keep the bunny suit for private time later or something! We need Yuka outraged and sassy."

"Private time!?!" Yuka yelped in outrage.

"Yes! That! Exactly! Be sassy out there," Hiroshi turned her around and pushed her out of the classroom before she could react properly. He then turned to Riko. "Okay, time to go get 'em, Riko."

"A-are you sure I look okay?" Riko asked nervously.

Hiroshi grinned. "I think I said so the last time you wore that, didn't I?" He leaned in and gave her a kiss on the cheek. "Go knock 'em dead, babe."

She smiled, seeming much relieved, and bounced out the door after Yuka.

Daisuke stared after her, mouth hanging open. "What… I don't…?" He looked at Hiroshi then back towards the door. "What?"

"What?" Hiroshi replied.

"What was that!?" Daisuke demanded.
"It was you and Yuka having a breakthrough in your ridiculously tsundere facade and admitting that you find each other attractive," Hiroshi replied matter-of-factly.

"No, not that… what? I don't…! I mean… What was that with Riko!?!" Daisuke demanded.

Hiroshi gave him a confused look. "We've been dating since that movie night thing at the Tendo dojo. Didn't you know?"

"No!"

“Mineko?”

Mineko looked up from the sports magazine she had been reading. It was a free period, which she would normally use to go practise, but this week she had other concerns. She had seated herself out of the way to avoid drawing attention while she kept an eye on Konatsu.

The ninja girl was certainly popular among the boys, which had been expected, but she seemed quite able to handle the situation with her usual demure charm, so Mineko had been content to leave her to deal with them in her own way. She could always step in if someone crossed a line.

So she was a bit surprised when one of the girls in the class went out of their way to speak to her. The girl had long dark hair which fell partially obscuring one eye. She was one of those quiet, detached girls who asked odd questions that Mineko recognized as hanging around with Hana.

"Yes? What can I do for you?"

"My name is Megumi. I'm an… associate of Hana's," she said in a quiet voice. "She told me… all of us… that we should keep an eye out for things that might be important to the members of the Volleyball team?"

Mineko's eyes narrowed. "Is Ranma up to something? Or Nabiki?" Her eyes flicked to Konatsu, who was still being hounded by the various lovestruck boys in the class. "Kuonji, maybe?"

"Oh… no, nothing like that," Megumi replied. "There's a suspicious man in a suit on the school grounds watching the volleyball team practise. Hana thinks he may be a 'scout' or something?"

"A scout?!" Mineko squeaked. She got up and scuttled quickly over to the window to peer outside at the field. Sure enough, there was someone in dark glasses and a three piece suit watching the girls on the practise pitch, occasionally scribbling something on a bulky clipboard. "Arrrgh! Why today!?"

She glanced back at Konatsu. "I can't leave Konatsu by herself like this, but… She looked back out the window. Is it fair to drag her along to this, just for my own needs? She hesitated, feeling that pang of guilt and uncertainty that had been plaguing her since she had watched Konatsu's transformation. She's getting along with people… even smiling! This is how she should be… right? Just a normal girl.

"I can let your friend know where you went once she's free," Megumi supplied helpfully. "If this is something you need to attend to, I mean."

Mineko glanced back at the window, then back at Konatsu, then made a snap decision. "Yeah. Just… don't let the boys pester her too much. And if anything weird happens, come find me on the practise field, and don't ask too many questions, okay?"

Megumi cocked her head. "Something weird? Like what?"
"Just… anything weird," Mineko replied. She grabbed her bag and moved quickly to the back door of the classroom, sparing Konatsu a last glance before slipping through.

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Sayuri was watching as Mineko slipped out the back door of the classroom. "So far, so good," she breathed. Now it was her turn.

Outside the front door of the classroom Umeko loitered with a few other girls from the Martial Arts Club. They had been acting as gatekeepers to make sure that any students they didn't feel should be associating with their group got in. Sayuri and the others had been informed, in no uncertain terms, that they were unwelcome. But for the plan to work, they needed to abandon their post.

She took a deep breath to steel herself, stepped out around the corner and strode forward. She headed towards the classroom door and moved to open it and go inside.

A hand grasped her wrist roughly as she reached for the handle.

"And just where do you think you're going?" Umeko asked, leaning in close and glaring at her.

"I left my pencil case at my desk," Sayuri said nonchalantly, pulling her wrist away.

"Get it next period then! We're using this room now. Just piss off," Umeko retorted.

"The room is for free study. Anyone can use it," Sayuri replied.


Sayuri raised an eyebrow. "So… answer a question for me… how much does Himura pay you to be her bitch, anyway? Or is it just some kind of weird fetish thing for you? Got a bit of a 'bottom' thing going on?"

Umeko reached out and grabbed the front of Sayuri's blouse. "Now look here, you useless, stuck up little dropout…"

"You think I'm afraid of you just because Ranma and Akane aren't here?" Sayuri asked, lowering her voice. "You're not a martial artist. You're a poser who does the same Tai Chi moves my Grandma does and speeds them up to impress the rubes."

She saw Umeko's pupils dilate and, in her peripheral vision, she could see the fist cock back. She knew she had a fraction of a second to shift the venue.

All it took was a smile.

Umeko's eyes widened and she hesitated. Then they narrowed as realization dawned. "Why, you little bitch…" She lowered her fist.

"Too bad there's no place on the school grounds that your boss hasn't got eyes," Sayuri inclined her chin towards one of the hallway cameras that were a leftover from Principal Kuno's constant attempts to catch Ranma out of uniform. "But… you could always do it anyway. I'm sure she wouldn't toss you in the trash like she did Tomoko."

Umeko grit her teeth. "You're all talk now, aren'tcha? Wouldn't talk so big without some technicality to hide behind, would you?"

Gotcha. Sayuri didn't bother to hide the smug look. After all, it simply fed the fire at this point. "Got
some spot where your Big Sister can't babysit you? I'm game if you are."

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Rin watched Sayuri walk away with Umeko and her small gang of thugs. She didn't like the idea of Sayuri heading off alone with them and she hoped that Sayuri knew what she was doing.

She took a deep breath. Dad always said the time to doubt your Team Captain ISN'T in the middle of a game. Gotta focus on my part.

She glanced at Daisuke next to her, who was watching intently. He waited until Sayuri and the group of bullies were well around the corner before he turned to her.

"Alright, wait until the classroom clears," Daisuke told her. "Stay out of sight until then."

"O-okay," Rin said nervously. "Um… Mr. Yuka's Boyfriend-san?"

Daisuke paused, a pained expression crossing his face. He took a breath. "Yes, Rin?"

"W-what if I can't convince Konatsu to talk to us?" Rin fidgeted nervously. "What if I mess this up?"

He gave her a confident grin and a thumbs up. "You'll do fine. She's probably not gonna agree to come meet with us or suddenly see that she's been messed with. That's fine. Just find out what you can. Listen and remember everything she says so we can pick through it later. Just keep her talking as long as possible, okay?"

"I-I'll try. But I wish you had gotten someone else to do this…" Rin mumbled.

"Hey… you're the person that actually got Mousse to say ten words in a row that didn't include 'Die, Saotome!' or 'Shampoo, I love you!'. I'm pretty sure you're the best one for this job." Daisuke gave her a wink then stood and made for the classroom. He threw open the door and sauntered toward the far window to peer out across the athletic fields.

With an exaggerated pause for dramatic effect, he cried out, "Hey look! There are two cute girls out there wearing skimpy bunnygirl costumes!"

The collective snap of male heads turning to see was like the crack of a whip, followed by a deep rumble… the sound of dozens of feet shuffling and stomping. Daisuke ducked back and flattened himself against the wall as both doors were suddenly slammed aside and a herd of Furinkan's most hormonal male students practically climbed over each other to get out, pelting down the hallways towards the exits.

As he darted out in pursuit, Daisuke gave her a final thumbs up charged off after the crowd.

Rin took a deep breath, squared her shoulders and walked nervously up to the classroom door. She stepped inside and slid the panel closed behind her.

Konatsu was still seated at her desk in the hastily emptied classroom, flipping through her textbook. She even didn't look up as Rin came in.

"Ms. Konatsu?" Rin said timidly as she stepped forward.

Konatsu still didn't look up. "If you've come to admonish or interrogate me on behalf of Ukyou Kuonji or the others…"

"N-no!" Rin said quickly. She hurried over to the empty desk next to Konatsu's and slipped into the
chair. "I-I just…"

Konatsu raised her head and fixed her with an icy glare. "I have spent most of my life being used and abused by my family, and then used and abused by my supposed 'saviors'. I don't feel the need to account for my actions to either."

"I-I'm not either of those things, Ms. Konatsu…" Rin said sheepishly. "I'm… I'm just the girl who comes in sometimes for a deluxe okonomiyaki, remember?"

Konatsu's expression flickered slightly. "And to talk about Mousse or Ranma Saotome. They put you up to this because they knew I wouldn't speak with them."

Rin shook her head. "They're not here, Ms. Konatsu. They don't even know you're here. It's just us… just the volleyball team, and Hiroshi and Daisuke. We… we just are worried about you because you're our friend."

Konatsu snorted. "We hardly know one another."

"I don't have to know a lot to be worried about someone," Rin said. "A-and… And Ms. Himura worries me. S-so… I just want to know what happened."

Konatsu regarded her a moment. Her expression thawed, softening a bit. She sighed and turned back to her textbook. "You've been misled about Ms. Himura. She is not the ogress that Ranma or Ukyou make her out to be."

"She isn't?" Rin asked. "I-I mean, I've heard things, but that isn't why…"

"She helped me. She and Mineko. When no one else did." Konatsu turned to glare at her again but her expression softened almost immediately. "My parents were retainers to the Tanaka family for a very long time. Generations. All true shinobi need a lord to serve and Oda Tanaka was ours. I… forgot this during my long time with my stepmother and stepsisters. They had no interest in upholding our clan's obligations." Konatsu gripped the edges of the textbook. "And then… Ukyou seemed to wish to take the role of lord for herself. She took advantage of my feelings for her…"

After a moment she relaxed slightly. "I think I would still be there if it weren't for Mineko."

"You were friends with Ms. Mineko?" Rin asked. "I guess… she must have come by at different times than I did. I never saw her there."

"She often came by during the lunch rush, when you and the others were at school," Konatsu said. "She and I talked a lot. As much or more than you and I did, though I opened up to her more." She sat back in her chair. "I know you want to understand why I left, but… This is not easy for me. There are… a lot of emotions to process, and it is sometimes difficult for me to maintain my composure."

"Why?" Rin asked. "I mean… not 'why is it hard', that's obvious, but… why maintain your composure?" She cocked her head. "That's part of what worried me. If… If I had to uproot my life like you have I'd be bawling my eyes out!"

Konatsu took a deep breath and straightened herself. "A shinobi must conduct herself with a certain decorum. I still have duties… long neglected duties in fact." She glanced at Rin. "Duties that will likely put me at odds with your friends from the dojo, so long as they insist on their unjust war against Ms. Himura."

"But… Ms. Himura was the one to challenge Senpai…" Rin said, confused.
"Because it was the only way to stop the predations of a dangerously perverse individual!" Konatsu said. "Ranma Saotome's life is full of unhealthy relationships, manipulation and exploitation of those weaker than him. Perhaps… perhaps that is what led Ms. Ukyou to such things, but… but she made her own choices with that. I can no longer, in good conscience, be part of such… depraved behaviour." She leaned forward and put a hand on Rin's shoulder. "Doesn't it bother you? Their 'harem'? That they all worship the ground Ranma walks on, or how they twist their own desires to be more pleasing to him? Even resorting to… to…" Konatsu shuddered, "no, nevermind. I am speaking ill of those who cannot speak for themselves. But… Rin… You should rethink who you associate with."

Rin was silent for a moment. She looked down at the ground. Then, finally she spoke.

"Ms. Himura's father knew my Dad," she said quietly. "They were both hoping to get into Olympic Volleyball. Her Dad inspired her to play the game, same as mine did for me. Except her Dad got caught cheating, so he didn't get to go. Himura knows all of that… but she still blames my Dad and blames me. Just because my Dad got to go, and hers didn't."

She looked up, looking Konatsu in the eyes. "I don't know who she is around you. I don't know what she's like to Ranma, or to Nabiki, or Mineko or anyone else. But I know what she's like to me. I've tried to ignore it. I've tried to pretend it wasn't happening. I've tried to be friends and I've tried to prove myself by working hard. But nothing works because of something that happened before I was even born. Who I am doesn't matter to her. That's who Himura Tanaka is to me. Whatever I think about Senpai or her relationships, who I am at least always mattered to her."

Konatsu narrowed her eyes. "Who I was didn't! Ukyou was always trying to make me dress and act like a boy. Like her."

Rin was silent for another moment. "I don't… I don't know how to tell you this…" Rin took a deep breath. "A-and I don't think you'd believe me if I did, so I won't even try. All I can say is that If Ukyou-senpai made you feel that way, I'm sorry. B-but… She isn't the one who changed you. Ask Mineko about the potion."

Konatsu blinked. "What potion?"

"Just ask her. About the potion made from Jusenkyo water," Rin said.

"Why would Mineko know anything about a potion made from Jusenkyo? She's never even been to China," Konatsu said. She held up a hand. "Yes, yes, I'll ask her. On the condition that you don't discuss any of this with Ukyou or Ranma. Or with anyone likely to relay it to them."

Rin nodded.

"I don't want any contact with them, nor do I want them finding me and trying to convince me of the errors of my ways. I am not angry with you, Rin, but you are very close to people with whom I am angry. I would ask you allow me to deal with it."

"I-I will," Rin said. "I promise not to talk to them about anything we talk about, unless you tell me differently. But… can we still talk sometimes? I know Mineko doesn't like me, and she's your best friend, so…" She pulled out her phone and slid it forward, already on the screen to add a contact.

Konatsu hesitated, then reached into her pocket and drew out a brand new candy red flip phone. "You… will have to do it for me. I still don't understand such modern devices." She handed the phone over to Rin. "How did you know I would even have one?"
"I… just kind of assumed?" Rin said sheepishly, as she took both phones and swapped numbers with practiced ease. "Even Senpai has one. You didn't have one before?"

"Mineko insisted," Konatsu took the phone back. "Ms. Himura is very kindly paying for it. She calls me on occasion to check up on me, which is very thoughtful, given her busy schedule. She has already used it to give me several tasks as her family retainer."

"Retainer? You work for her now?" Rin asked.

"I always have, I just wasn't aware of it. As I said, family obligations. I have much work to do to repair the stain on my family's honor for being unaware of my obligations for so long." Konatsu gave Rin a reassuring smile. "Do not fret. Whatever you fear, they have been small tasks - fetching a drink or delivering a package. They are things to make me feel useful, I believe. Nothing of the nefarious sort you and your friends would imagine."

Rin shrugged. "I don't really imagine Himura doing things. I only know what she has done." She glanced out the window, seeing Daisuke gesturing in her direction. Riko and Yuka were sprinting across the field, being closely pursued by a large crowd of boys. "I… should get going. I think my friends need me." She put her hand on Konatsu's. "Thank you for being willing to talk, Ms. Konatsu. I'll keep my word, I promise."

Konatsu nodded. "I know I will never change the minds of most of your friends… but I have some hope I can show you at least that Himura and the others are not so bad."

Rin sighed. "I'll… try to keep an open mind."

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"This was a terrible idea!" Riko panted as they ran, nearly sobbing as they did their best to keep ahead of the horde. Her arms were crossed over her chest in an effort to avoid having anything flop out, as the bunny-suit did not make a particularly effective sports bra.

"This was your idea!" Yuka shot back, sprinting alongside her. Part of her was silently resenting the fact that she wasn't having any issues with bouncing out of her equally skimpy outfit. The decision not to wear the high heels that came with the costumes and to stick with their regular school shoes was turning out to have been a wise one, however.

"Yes, I know! Why didn't you stop me!" Riko wailed.

They had severely underestimated just how starved the local population had gotten for a spectacle. With Akane's daily horde battles done and as the challenges and chaos around Ranma receded as Ranma worked out the issues with fiancees and friends. Even the usual melange of antagonists was absent or otherwise occupied, so reports of a couple of girls in skimpy bunny costumes had drawn a far larger crowd than expected and things had gotten swiftly out of hand.

"We have to focus on getting away!" Yuka gasped. "If they get a clear look at our faces, our reputations are done!"

"I… I can't!" Riko wheezed as she started to fall behind. "I can't keep on running!"

Yuka looked over her shoulder and realized that their pursuers were far closer than she had expected. Apparently a lot of the Hentai Horde had been keeping in shape despite no longer pursuing Akane. She whimpered and for one distracted moment she didn't look where she was going.

So when she bumped into someone, she was convinced that they had caught her. She swung without
thinking, crying out as she threw a blind punch.

Her fist was caught easily. She blinked as the fear induced fog cleared a bit and she found herself looking at a familiar white-robed figure. "Mousse!"

Mousse frowned and adjusted his glasses. "Ranma, why did you change your hair color?" His eyes flicked down to the top of her bustier. "Oh, I beg your pardon. You're not Ranma." He released her fist.

Yuka resisted the powerful urge to throw another punch. Pragmatism took over. "Mousse, save us!" she cried and grabbed Riko to drag her behind the Chinese martial artist.

"Wha…? I'm really just here to see Rin…" Mousse said, confused, then looked up and saw the approaching horde. "Oh. I see."

"Hey! You! Glasses-nerd!" one of the jocks from the Rugby team stomped up to Mousse. He was nearly a head taller than the already tall Chinese boy, and glared down at him, snorting like a bull. "We see those girls behind you. Outta the way!"

Mousse frowned. "'Out of the way'? Why? Do you have some business with my friends?"

The jock snorted. Most of the rest of the team was crowding up behind him, seeing an opportunity for a fight. Those of the crowd who were smarter, or who at least had longer memories and remembered Mousse's previous fights on campus were backing away with varying degrees of haste.

"You? Friends with a coupla cute girls like that? Nah." He chuckled and put his hand on Mousse's shoulder with the intent to shove him away. "Now, out of the way. Your betters need to introduce…"

*SNIKT*

The Jock didn't get any further as there were now three razor-sharp claws being held just beneath his chin. He yelped and threw himself backwards, away from Mousse.

"What the hell are you doing, you freak!?" he screeched in a voice that was a few octaves too high.

Mousse glared at him, then regarded the claws. He sighed and shook his head. "No, you're right. Rin would be disappointed in me." With a snap, the blades were gone, disappearing back into his sleeve.

Seeing that he was rapidly losing face, and needing to distract from the slight puddle he had made, the Jock bounced to his feet. "Y-you're gonna pay for that, beanpole!" He cocked his fist back, stepping in to punch Mousse in the oversized spectacles.

"Pole?" Mouse brightened slightly. "Oh, yes, that should be okay." His arm snapped out again and he held up what appeared to be a length of a bo staff, blocked the punch and pushed the jock back before he drew forth the rest of the weapon… which turned out to be a flat headed push broom. "Ah! I was wondering where I had left that."

The rest of the rugby team stared in bewilderment as the Chinese teen pulled the five foot broom from his sleeve, which clearly should never have been able to fit.

Mousse shouldered the broom then glanced back at the girls cowering behind him. "You're Rin's friends, right? Is Rin about? I'll be done with this in a minute."

"Uh… sure?" Yuka replied nervously.
"Excellent." Mousse turned back to the Rugby team. "I believe you were about to make me pay for something?" he said to the lead Jock.

"G-get him!" the jock yelled,

The entire team charged as one, moving to form a blocking line to try and bear him down with sheer weight and numbers.

Mousse twirled the large broom as though it were light as a feather, using it to poke a few in the gut or groin, or to clock a couple of others upside the head with the flat broom head. And always, he kept the broom spinning. The solid, meaty thwacks that signalled contact between wood, bone and flesh rang out repeatedly as the members of the rugby team were quickly scattered and sent sprawling.

Before they could recover, Mousse darted into the middle of the group, broom still whirling as he knocked each one back off his feet when they tried to regroup. He was quick to punish any that dared to try and get back into the fight. For the next twenty seconds or so, he was a blur of motion, each step of the dance punctuated with the dull clunk of wood striking a body as a counterpoint to the groans or yelps of pain. When the dust cleared, the entire team was laid flat out on the ground, unable or unwilling to try getting up again.

Mousse shouldered the broom again, looked over the group and sighed. "This may sound a bit hypocritical coming from me, but… you guys should really learn to tell when a girl isn't interested."

Despite it being quite obviously impossible, he tucked the broom back into his sleeve and walked back over to Yuka and Riko. "Are you two all right?"

Yuka crossed her arms self-consciously over her chest. "Yes, uh… thank you, Mousse. I'm kind of surprised that you came to our rescue, honestly…"

"It is considered a point of honor for martial artists to aid those in need," Mousse replied. "Besides, you are Rin's friends, and I also know something about being bullied. Any one of those factors alone would have been more than enough reason."

"Ah… yeah… well… it's just… I was kind of a jerk last time you saw me…" Yuka said awkwardly. "I… guess I owe you an apology."

Mousse cocked his head then nodded slightly. "Accepted. Rin explained the situation to me afterwards. I can understand your perception of me as… 'hostile'. I also accept that I bear responsibility for Young Mi's dangerous actions here."

"Speaking of which… I thought you were going to steer clear of the school to avoid leading her here?" Yuka said. "Not that I don't appreciate the save!" she added quickly.

"Since Young Mi knows Shampoo attends this school, I felt it was necessary to keep an eye on it. Though I have tried to do so discreetly so as to avoid drawing her here with my presence. Turning into a duck has advantages," Mousse said. "Besides, it makes it easier to walk Rin home."

"You mean you've been walking Rin home every day!?" Yuka yelped.

Mousse nodded and folded his hands into his sleeves. "Yes. Rin is very insightful. She and I have talked about a number of things. She's helped me understand Japanese culture and the mindsets of those around me much more clearly, and even pointed out a few ways that I might better approach my own… issues." He sighed. "I would try to return the favor, but… interpersonal relationships aren't my strong suit - much less those dealing with multiple elder siblings, which seems to provide
the bulk of the strife in Rin's life."

"So you have no clue about what's going on right now?" Riko asked nervously.

"No. Why? What trouble has Ranma Saotome gotten into this time?" Mousse asked.

Yuka grabbed his hand and started dragging him towards the school. "Oh you have no idea! We'll get Sayuri to explain things to you. She's got the best handle on what's going on."

"Where is Sayuri?" Riko asked, following behind.

"I'm sure she's fine," Yuka replied. "Sayuri's pretty level-headed. I don't think she'd get herself into a situation she didn't know how to get out of."

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As Sayuri hit the concrete floor of the equipment room for the third time, she realized she had no idea how to get out of this situation.

She coughed in an attempt to get her bruised diaphragm to draw in air again. Umeko had been focusing a lot on body blows and, while Sayuri had already retched up most of her breakfast, it was clear Umeko wasn't satisfied yet.

"Get up, bitch," Umeko sneered as she paced a few feet away, always between Sayuri and the door. "No… no, on second thought? Stay down. On the floor, at my feet, where you belong!"

Sayuri groaned and forced herself to her hands and knees, raising her head to glare at Umeko as she got slowly to her feet.

Umeko growled softly and cracked her knuckles. "Okay then…"

The roundhouse kick was surprisingly fast, though not nearly as fast as Ranma or one of the other high-end martial artists. Sayuri managed to react fast enough to twist away from it, but it still clipped the side of her head and sent her sprawling again.

"Umeko! You're not supposed to leave marks!" one of the other girls said in a worried tone.

"She came at me first. You all saw it," Umeko replied, taking a step towards Sayuri. "I'm sick of her stuck-up attitude! Trying to sneak in and take everything we spent three years building, after she didn't have what it took to stick with it! She deserves to lose a few teeth for that at least. Himura will understand."

Sayuri felt an odd sensation, deep in her gut. She knew, in a detached sort of way, that she should be afraid - but she wasn't. Not really. She was angry. A seething storm raged inside her - it kept pushing her - pushing her to get up again each time Umeko knocked her down. But at its center was also a calm, cool core, like the eye of a hurricane. She wasn't beaten yet. With an icy, crystalline certainty, she knew what she needed to do, even if she wasn't sure yet how to do it.

Her hand landed on something smooth, round and rubbery. A volleyball. For a moment she considered it ironic, but this was where the volleyball team equipment was kept. It seemed the other teams had been pushed to other storage rooms entirely.

Still, the ball sparked something. A dim memory. Something that had happened during a game. She could feel the ball, feel that spiral of white hot anger and icy calm flow into it, swirl and mix, start to spin. She had never been clear what was happening before, but the haze of pain and the dizziness...
from the kick to her head had left her feeling somewhat detached, and that oddly objective viewpoint made it easier to see. Slowly she pushed herself up, while at the same time she experimentally fed the storm inside the ball. She could feel it start to vibrate in her hand as it began to twist and quiver like there was a gyroscope inside of it.

"Still not staying down, huh?" Umeko growled. "I was gonna be content just to kick you around a bit, but if you're still not gonna learn…"

Sayuri turned. She recognized Umeko as the source of her anger, at least for now, and she could feel the ball start to pull. She didn't care anymore about mitigating things, or surviving until Umeko got tired, or finding a way to escape. She just wanted the girl to shut up. She flung the ball at the martial artist as she turned.

It wasn't the best throw. It didn't even look like it would have hit, and even if it had, it was a volleyball, and she was no Rin. In the normal world, where normal people lived, the ball would hit the wall behind Umeko to her left. The girl would become enraged and she and her cronies would descend on Sayuri and give her the beating they had been promising.

But this was Nerima.

As soon as the ball left her fingers, Sayuri knew something was off. She could still feel it, as though dozens of little threads were connecting it to her fingertips. It was also starting to spin, accelerating as it left her hand. She was fairly certain that violated several laws of physics. It was still off course, but she could feel the slight tug at her fingers, and felt like maybe, somehow, she could change that. She closed her hand and pulled back sharply.

The threads snapped. What had already been a rapid spin became absurdly so, actually causing the ball to flatten slightly and bulge out in the middle as the forces within it were unleashed. It also changed course at the last moment, redirected by that final tug.

The ball slammed into Umeko's side with enough force to throw her all the way across the room where she crashed into several racks loaded with equipment. Because that's what happened in Nerima.

Everyone stared, dumbfounded, Sayuri included.

The odd, calm detachment had evaporated now, replaced with a building sense of panic. What the hell did I just do!? she wondered. Umeko was coughing and struggling to get her wind back while two of her cronies knelt next to her to help disentangle her from the piles of netting and stands.

While they were distracted, Sayuri picked up two more volleyballs. That 'bottled storm' feeling might be gone, but she gambled that her tormentors didn't know that. "Okay, who's next?" she snarled, though a little wheezily owing to the beating she had taken. She held up the volleyballs in what she hoped was a menacing fashion.

The remaining thugs eyed her nervously, then retreated towards Umeko to heft her up. The blow from the ball had been enough to knock the sense out of the wannabe martial artist and her head was lolling to the side as they shouldered her arms and carried her out of the room. The last one out turned back and, somewhat nervously, said, "Himura will hear of this!" then she beat a hasty retreat before any divine volleyball retribution could be delivered.

Sayuri dropped the volleyballs and leaned heavily against the wall, panting both from the exertion and from relief. She reached into her pocket, pulled out her phone and flipped it open to check on something. She closed it again and grinned to herself. "Yeah… You bet she will," she muttered.
"The Joketsuzoku INVADED!" Mousse yelped incredulously. His glasses were pushed up on his forehead and his eyes were wide and frightened.

"Yeah… They're after Ranma, though they've gone after Akane, Ukyou and Shampoo too," Yuka said. They had retreated to Gosunkugi's little hidey hole and were still waiting for Sayuri to return, so she had taken it upon herself to give Mousse the rundown. "Cologne negotiated some kind of cease-fire, but they're all holed up at the Tendo Dojo."

"Umm… Not all of them…" Riko said sheepishly. "Shampoo is still kinda… sorta… missing…"

"And all we don't know where Ranma or Ryoga are. Just that they're probably connected to that big explosion," Yuka added.

Mousse slumped back in his seat. His eyes looked haunted. "What could have possessed the Elders to do such a thing?"

"We… were kinda hoping you could tell us?" Riko asked.

"I have not had contact with the village in a long time," Mousse said. "I am an exile, after all."

"Are you going to be okay?" Rin asked nervously. She sat down next to him and put a hand on his arm.

Mousse shook his head. "I am a Joketsuzoku male who practises martial arts. It is a violation of our laws. This is fine so long as I stay out of Joketsuzoku territory, but… you are sure Khu Long used the term 'Contested Ground'?"

"Pretty sure, yeah," Yuka replied.

Mousse took a deep, shaking breath. "Then… they consider this territory annexed, or in the process of it. Which means if I am found here, they will kill me. Or worse." He folded his hands in his lap.

"Kill you?!" Yuka yelped. "Isn't that a little extreme?! I mean, I thought they wanted strong male martial artists!"

"They want strong Outsider male martial artists," Mousse replied. "Inbreeding is a problem which we must constantly combat and adding worthy outsiders is the preferred method. But they see no value in a Joketsuzoku-born male who learns martial arts. It is a distraction from our proper duties as healers, caregivers, husbands and fathers and wasted effort that could have been put towards training a woman."

"I always sorta figured Ranma was gonna go back there to be a king or something, the way Shampoo fawned over him," Yuka muttered.

"Far from it," Mousse said. "There are… allowances given for their lack of knowledge about Joketsuzoku laws and customs, but Ranma would be expected to learn our customs and assimilate eventually. He would have been tasked with passing on his martial arts skills to a new generation of his daughters, but he would not be allowed to fight as a warrior himself. Though… I suspect both Shampoo and Khu Long would bend the rules for him quite a bit," He paused a moment, considering. "I wonder if that's what sparked this? Elder Khu Long was always considered more progressive than the Council liked, especially when it came to the matter of male's rights or acceptance of Outsider women. It is possible they feared she would use the addition of a powerful male warrior to the village as a rallying point."
"So instead they want to get Ranma and make him into a good, meek little Amazon man," Yuka muttered.

"Except… he isn't a man…" a voice said from the door. They all looked up to see a very battered-looking Sayuri leaning heavily against the door frame.

"Sayuri!" Yuka reacted first, yelping her friend's name and rushing to her side to support her. "Oh, holy crap… What did she do to you?"

"She… beat the hell out of me… What did you expect?" Sayuri replied. She chuckled then winced and grabbed her side. "Ow… don't do that… laughing bad…"

Yuka lifted the other girl's shirt, seeing the redness of her abdomen, and the ugly yellow and purple bruising already starting to rise. "Ooookay, that's enough of that, we're going to go see the nurse!"

"No!" Sayuri said sharply. "Umeko's fangirls already… nnnh… carried her off in that direction. Probably best I steered clear for a bit."

"Carried her off? Why? Did you get a lucky hit in or something?" Yuka asked.

"Sayuri, you know there's a no fighting rule!" Riko groused. "If you hit her and her cronies vouch for it, Himura will kick you out of the team!"

Sayuri smirked. "Don't worry… got it covered, trust me," She looked up and blinked. "Oh… hi, Mousse." She let Yuka guide her over to a chair and eased herself down into it.

"I think your friends are correct, you should see a healer," Mousse replied, lowering his glasses to get a better look.

"I'll go see Doc Tofu after school. He gives a discount for martial arts related injuries, right?" Sayuri joked. She winced a bit, holding her side.

Mousse frowned. "What did you mean, 'Ranma isn't a man'?"

"I… uhh… I was saving that part of last," Yuka said. "See, we were expecting the High School Sports Commission to ban Ranma from playing because… well, regardless of how he looks, he's a guy, right? They'd check his records and find out he's a boy."

"Except that didn't happen," Sayuri added.

"Yeah… so we… Me, Daisuke and Hiroshi… snuck into the government records building with Nabiki's help and did some research. Turns out Ranma has two sets of birth records. One for a boy, one for a girl. One is fake," Yuka continued.

"We didn't know which one until Himura dropped the other half on Ranma himself… herself… Ranma herself?" Daisuke said, earning an annoyed glare from Yuka. "Some kinda old chinese potion using Jusenkyo water that used to belong to one Genma Saotome before he hawked it… after returning to China from a 14 year long training trip with his 'son'."

Mousse pushed his glasses back up, eyes widening. "Do you mean to say…?"

"The potion was supposed to make someone who was born female permanently male… including altering their memories," Sayuri said. "Except Genma botched it, and so when he used it on his daughter…"
"You get the recipe for one Ranma Saotome," Yuka finished. "Take two helpings of insane parents, one isolated and confused girl, stir for fourteen years on a training journey, mix in Jusenkyo water and a whole mess of mind-altering drugs, add psychological trauma to taste."

"Yuka, that's pretty crass even for you," Sayuri admonished her.

"Ranma Saotome is female by birth?" Mousse said. His eyes flicked back and forth as he processed the new information. "Khu Long… did she know?"

"She said she suspected," Sayuri said. "She's at the Tendo Dojo now if you want to ask her."

"If she suspected… Then everything she's done so far with regards to Ranma makes so much more sense!" Mousse replied. "She could have overpowered him, drugged him and dragged him back to China at any time; But if he was, in reality, a female then the marriage law wouldn't apply and the Kiss of Death would take effect. Ranma would be killed on the spot and Shampoo would have been dishonored twice over for falling for it, extenuating circumstances or not. But by training Ranma and indoctrinating her, she could make a case for the Kiss of Sisterhood, and…" He slumped back in his chair, massaging his temples. "That sneaky old mummy!"

"I'm surprised your first reaction wasn't to realize that the marriage between Ranma and Shampoo is effectively null and void," Yuka commented dryly.

Mousse blinked, then glanced at Rin. His eyes fell. "That… might have been my reaction until the recent past. But… I am of the opinion it would make no difference. Not as far as Shampoo's feelings are concerned, anyway." He looked up. "Speaking of… you said she was missing?"

"Cologne thinks the other Amazons took her hostage. They were trying to capture Akane and Ukyou too," Sayuri replied.

"That doesn't make sense. If they have Shampoo they could force Khu Long to surrender to them as well." Mousse rubbed his chin. "I need to find her."

"Woah, woah, woah!" Yuka said. "Didn't you just say the Amazons would kill you if they caught you?"

"Yeah, they're already on the lookout for martial artists while they're trying to catch Ranma. They'd spot you," Hiroshi said.

"If I was human at the time," Mousse gave them a confident smile. "I doubt any of them can fly, though."

"They know about your curse," Sayuri pointed out. "You should still be careful."

"I know my people," Mousse said gruffly. Then he paused. "I… thank you for your concern. I will try."

"Mu Tsu," Rin said. She wasn't able to meet his eyes, looking away at the floor instead. "I-I know that you have to do this… b-but… but…"

"I'll come back," Mousse said. "I'll still come by the school every day to check on you."

Everyone else in the room exchanged a glance.

"Y'know… I should be getting back to class…" Sayuri said, standing up stiffly.
"And we… uh… need to carry her to class," Yuka said as she and Riko stood.

"We've… uhh… we've got… ummm… a thing." Daisuke said.

"Yeah, a thing," Hiroshi added. "And so do you, Gos."

"W-wait, what thing? I don't have a thing!" Gosunkugi, who had been silent in the corner so far started, looking around nervously.

"Yeah, you've definitely got a thing," Daisuke said, hooking Gosunkugi's arm. "Come on."

"No, wait! I swear I don't have a thing! I gave my thing to the bullies last week!" Gosunkugi said in a panicked voice.

"Gos, not that… wait, what thing are you talking about?" Hiroshi asked, then hooked Gosunkugi's other arm. "Nevermind, let's just go."

"N-no! You don't have to…!" Rin looked around in a panic, but everyone was slipping out of the little room and heading back down the dark corridor. "It's not… It's not…" she trailed off as Riko gave her a wink and closed the door. "like that…" She sighed, letting her hand fall to her lap as she looked at the floor.

"Your friends are strange," Mousse commented. "Nice… but strange."

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Sayuri wasn't shocked when the call came over the PA for her to report to the Vice-Principal's Office. The whole class was hushed. The bruise on her temple as already coming in nicely, so they knew something was up. Yuka stood to go with her, but Sayuri waved her down.

She walked down the hallway, her heels clicking on the floor, echoing almost unbearably loudly. Each classroom she passed seemed quiet. The walk seemed far longer than she remembered it being.

She raised her hand to knock at the door, but before she could a voice from within called out, "Come in."

She opened the door and stepped inside. Unlike Principal Kuno's Hawaiian-theme fantasy, the Vice Principal's office was utilitarian and relatively professional (Which made sense as the man functionally had all the responsibility for the day-to-day running of the school, just without the authority). However, the balding, middle aged man was nowhere to be seen. Instead, Himura was sitting behind his desk, with Umeko standing next to it, arms crossed. Umeko looked rather battered, her face covered in bruises, scrapes and contusions, like she had… well, exactly like she had been thrown bodily into an equipment rack. Behind the desk and to Himura's right was a girl Sayuri didn't recognize, with long green hair tied back in a ponytail and a severe expression.

"So you're Vice Principal now too?" Sayuri asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Vice-Principal Chinen and I agreed that, as acting Student council President and Captain of the volleyball Team, I should handle this myself and with his blessing." Himura said with her typical empty smile. "I understand there was an… 'altercation' between you and Umeko. Is this true?"

"I won't deny that there was an altercation, no," Sayuri said, brushing her hair back from her forehead casually.

"I see. And you do remember the rule about such things, correct?" Himura asked.
"I remember a provision about being able to defend yourself if attacked," Sayuri replied.

"You attacked me!" Umeko said, pointing to her own face. "D'ya think I did this to myself?"

Sayuri raised an eyebrow. "So you're suggesting someone with no training beat up a martial artist with… what, a volleyball?"

"That's exactly what you did, don't play games!" Umeko shouted. "Don't think you can lie your way out of this one, Sayuri!"

"Well, it seems we're at an impasse," Himura said. "Each of you claims that the other was the instigator, which leaves the decision in my hands." Himura leaned forward, steepling her fingers on the desk. "Given the circumstances, I'm inclined…"

"Get up, bitch… No… on second thought? Stay down. On the floor, at my feet, where you belong!... Okay then."

"Umeko! You're not supposed to leave marks!"

"She came at me first. You all saw it. I'm sick of her stuck-up attitude! Tryin' to sneak in and take everything we spent three years building, after she didn't have what it took to stick with it! She deserves to lose a few teeth for that at least. Himura will understand."

Sayuri tapped the 'stop' on the playback on her phone and gave Himura a questioning look. "Well, Himura? Do you understand, like she said?"

Himura's smile didn't even flicker. In fact, it seemed almost to widen. "Well, well," she said. "Someone has been spending some time with Ms. Tendo, hasn't she?" She sat up straight. "Anyway, as I was about to say, given the circumstances, I'm inclined to believe your story, Ms. Kamei."

"WHAT!?" Umeko whirled, staring at Himura with shocked disbelief.

Himura leaned back in her chair and raised an eyebrow at Umeko. "Umeko… Umeko, Umeko… Umeko… You honestly can't tell me that you're surprised? After putting me in this position?"

"Putting you…!?" Umeko croaked.

Himura stood up smoothly, linked her fingers and stretched her arms over her head. "Ahhh… Umeko… you've been talking about doing this to Ms. Kamei since that little skit they did during the school barbecue! There are plenty of witnesses and camera footage of you leading Ms. Kamei to that storage room… even without her recording this could rattle confidence in the student council." She sighed and reached out, straightening Umeko's collar. "Umeko, dear… this is not how we do things."

"Like hell…" Umeko muttered under her breath, but Sayuri caught it.

"Now, perhaps if Ms. Kamei is willing to be charitable and put this whole matter behind us…?" Himura asked, turning to Sayuri.

"Oh no. I think I'd prefer to insist the bylaw be upheld," Sayuri replied, shooting Umeko a nasty look.

"Well, then that's that," Himura said with a sigh and a shrug. "I am sorry, Umeko, but you are free to try out again next semester."
"WHAT!?" Umeko howled. "Wha… you can't do this! Himura, I've been with you from the start! You can't!"

Himura's smile dropped. Her voice became dangerous. "Did you honestly think I would protect you this time? Now? Did you think I would accept the risk when I'm so close?" She took a step forward, actually causing Umeko to draw back. "All you needed to do was what you were told, Umeko. You never wanted to work for power and you didn't have to, as long as you stayed inside the lines. But even that was too much for you." She sighed. "I'm disappointed, Umeko. And I'm sorry. I gave you too much too fast maybe. Perhaps a few months of having to do things for yourself will make you more mindful of what you had." She turned and walked back to the desk, sitting down and not sparing her another look. "You may go now."

"I… You can't," Umeko said, her jaw trembling. "You can't! I know stuff, Himura! You can't just throw me away…"

The girl with the green hair was on her in an instant, pinning her up against the wall.

"I'm not throwing you away, Umeko. If I were, we never would have had this conversation," Himura said, sorting the papers on the desk. "In fact, I am going to keep a very close eye on you. You and the things you know. And… I do hope you understand the value in making sure you are the only one who knows those things. Because I know things too, don't forget."

The green haired girl said something in chinese that made Himura chuckle.

"If the burden of that knowledge becomes too much, Tan Pohn has reminded me that she has a fix for that as well." She finally looked up, giving Umeko a smile. "See that it doesn't. I'll overlook the obvious threats this time. Behave and I might have a way for you to redeem yourself in the future. Now… Tan Pohn, if you would please see her out, I'd like to have a word with Ms. Kamei."

The girl with the green hair frog marched the stunned Umeko out of the office, the door clicking shut behind Sayuri as they left. Sayuri got the feeling that whomever this new girl was, she was someone a lot more dangerous than Umeko. And chances were, Umeko would be dangerous enough with the grudge she'd be nursing over this.

She'd still rather have gone with them.

Himura walked back around the desk and motioned to one of the two chairs in front of it. "Come, Ms. Kamei. Sit."

"Is there something else you need?" Sayuri asked, folding her arms again and staying put.

Himura sighed. "Yes. I need an end to this childishness." For just a moment, the mask dropped, the fake smile faded away and Himura flopped back into the chair looking distressingly ordinary. "Look, Sayuri… Might I call you that? Sayuri… While I admire your fighting spirit - and I do! - at this point? It's misguided. The challenge is over. Ranma isn't coming back to school and you know it."

"Because you set her up!" Sayuri snarled.

"I didn't dose her with the potion, did I?" Himura asked. "I didn't falsify her birth records. I didn't drag her across half of Asia for fourteen years to avoid her figuring out she wasn't a boy. And I didn't stuff her in a pit full of starving feral cats when she did!" She stabbed the desk with her finger on that last point, making Sayuri jump a little.

Himura took a breath, as if startled by her own vehemence, then settled back in her chair. "No…
What I **did** do is find out about it. I found out about it, and you know what I did? I **waited**. I waited until Ranma had made friends, spent time as a girl… acclimated to the idea! You know as well as I do that all that supermale ego nonsense was already starting to crumble, thanks to the lot of you."

She leaned back and spun her chair around slowly. "I **could** have told Ranma about all of this right at the height of his male pride… but I **didn't**. I waited until Ranma had the kind of connections that would help her survive. I saw an environment that would foster that and I made sure it flourished."

"You stacked the deck against us in volleyball and otherwise didn't do anything," Sayuri replied.

"Do you think your bond with Ranma would be nearly as strong if you hadn't struggled? Do you think she would have been as invested in it if it wasn't such a challenge?" Himura replied. She put her feet up on the desk. "I had a father that was a lot like Ranma's. So, believe it or not, I **empathized**."

"You honestly want me to believe you weren't doing all of this for your own benefit?" Sayuri asked. She walked over and sat down in one of the chairs.

"No, of course not, that would be idiotic," Himura laughed. "But there's room for both, isn't there? And besides, in the course of all of this, I found a much better prize than some silly contest between me and the local alpha male." Himura swivelled her gaze to Sayuri. "That's why I had already decided to take your side in this. This contest… doesn't suit me anymore. I'd like to wrap it up so I can focus on bigger things, and I think we'd all like to get on with our lives. So… I made a peace offering to get you here, so I can offer you a way out."

"A way out?" Sayuri asked. "You mean, throw Ranma and the others under the bus?"

Himura laughed again. "No, silly girl!" She sat up and put her hands on the desk. "You'd never accept that and we both know it, so that would be a colossal waste, wouldn't it? No, no, this is a way out for all of you. You, Ranma, your friends, Nabiki Tendo… all of them. I'm giving you an opportunity to walk away. And with what I've heard? Your friends have bigger problems."

"Yeah. I'm guessing you're going to claim you had nothing to do with that?" Sayuri asked.

Himura shrugged. "I won't deny I invited them here. The scroll is theirs, after all. But I've got little control over them otherwise. I had some side business with them which is no concern of yours. And I **mean** that; My business with them is in regards to some contacts I have in China. It won't affect you or your life or the lives of your friends." She leaned forward. "I'm more interested right now in settling our business. So… let me put my cards on the table. If you agree to end the contest… I'm afraid it would have to be a forfeiture on your part, but you're looking at that anyway with how things are… I would be willing to **give** you the volleyball team captaincy. Your friends would be welcome on the team… Yes, even Ms. Ito, and even Ranma, should she decide to return to us… And my only requirement of any of you would be to do what I suspect you're inclined to do anyway; Play volleyball."

"You're going to **give** me the volleyball team?" Sayuri asked. "Your volleyball team. The one you were going to use to take a shot at getting into the Olympics?"

"Once the new Student Council elections are done in two weeks, yes, of course." Himura beamed. "I have to maintain some authority around here, after all. But… I find the urgency I originally had for that goal has waned. I've found a much more interesting project. So… in order to pursue it, I am willing to offer you a very generous deal."

"And if I refuse?" Sayuri asked.
Himura shrugged, and the fake smile was back. "Well, you go out on the court again on Wednesday. And I suppose if you're certain your team is ready, you can absolutely do that. But… if they're not? You'll forfeit. You need five players, and you're not allowed substitutions. And then when my team has won two more easy games, your team will lose the challenge anyway. So the real question isn't if you should give up… because you've already lost. The question is if you're willing to put aside your pride, let things be in the past and spare yourself and your friends all the humiliation."

Sayuri sighed and leaned back in the chair. She crossed her arms and closed her eyes. "Let things be in the past', huh?"

"Well, I know there were some rough spots…" Himura replied cheerfully.

"I didn't play a single round of volleyball when I was on the team. Not even in training," Sayuri said. "I carried equipment, I fetched water, I set up and broke down the courts, and I got blamed when someone was having a bad day."

"Well, obviously that will change…" Himura said, her smile starting to fade.

"Do you know the first day you actually remembered my name?" Sayuri asked. "The day I'd had enough and walked out. You had to ask someone what my name was so you could mock me for it. Afterwards, of course, the rumors about me started flying. Suddenly Umeko hates my guts. I became the girl who quit - who couldn't make the cut - who didn't even try."

Himura sighed. "I… misjudged you."

"No," Sayuri said sharply. "You didn't judge me in the first place. You didn't notice me. Like how many others on your team?" She stood. "Do you know why you deal with me now? Do you know why you even know my name to ask if you can call me by my given name? Because I became a threat." She leaned over the desk. "And if you're wanting to deal with me now? It's because I'm still a threat."

"Is that what you want to be to me, Sayuri?" Himura asked, her voice low and dangerous. "A threat? Because I don't long suffer threats. It isn't a choice between being my enemy or being nothing, you know. I'm offering you a third option. I'm offering you friendship."

Sayuri straightened. "Umeko was your friend," she said, and then turned and walked towards the door. She paused as Himura spoke once more.

"I'll give you some time to reconsider, Sayuri. We can talk after Wednesday's game. You'll see that I'm right," Himura said. "But… that will be your last chance. Think about it."

Sayuri sniffed, opened the door and stepped through it without another backward glance.

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"The hole in the wall is secure and should be bricked up again by tomorrow morning, Mistress," Sasuke said. "Your Uncle has been contacted and is sending additional servants to assist, but he cautions it will be several days before they arrive."

Kodachi grit her teeth, pacing back and forth on the grass. She was still wearing her green leotard, which was dirtied and a little battered from fending off the Amazons. She tapped the handle of her ribbon on her chin. "Unacceptable."

"I… I beg your pardon, Mistress?" Sasuke said nervously. "Which part? If there is something amiss, I would be happy to see if additional personnel can speed…"
"All of this!" Kodachi whirled on him, glowering. Her eyes flashed with a barely contained fury. The small ninja shrank back timidly in the face of her wrath.

"That these… these foreigners could simply walk onto our lands uncontested, attack my family and those we have taken as wards…!" She clenched her fist. "And that they could do such things with such impunity and walk away…!"

"Peace, dear sister," Tatewaki's voice called out from the doorway. He had changed into a loose robe and sported a few bandages to mark his injuries, as well as several visible bruises, but seemed much better than she had found him. "While I do not dispute these things were outrageous, poor Sasuke does not deserve to be the outlet of your wrath."

Kodachi blinked, then glanced down at the cowering Ninja. She sighed and lowered her ribbon, which she only just realized she had raised to strike. "You… are right brother dear. Sasuke, please forgive me my momentary outburst."

"I… I…" Sasuke's eyes widened as he received what was his first apology in memory from his Mistress. He immediately bowed in a humble grovel. "Y-yes, of course, Mistress! The matter is forgotten!"

Kodachi watched as her brother strode closer. "Do your wounds yet pain you, brother?" she asked.

He smiled and shook his head. "Minor aches. I took the least of it, and at that it was little enough to be worthy of no mind now. Yourself?"

"The attack was a feint. They never met us directly. What scrapes and bruises I have are from incaution and haste on my part," Kodachi muttered. "And what of our 'guests'?"

"If you mean Ranma and Ryouga, they are in their room resting. I asked the servants to give them something to help them sleep. I fear both of them were greatly shaken by their experience with the leader of the assault." He smirked a bit. "If you mean our other guests? They are also resting in their rooms… though those accommodations are somewhat more secure and decidedly less comfortable."

"And here I had thought you mad when you had the dungeons put in," Kodachi said, a small smile tugging at her lips.

"I was. That will not make me even slightly reluctant to take advantage of the fruits of that madness should they be useful, however." He sighed, looking out over the pond. "We need to alert the authorities about what happened here. There have been fatalities."

"Unavoidable ones," Kodachi reminded him. "And you know they will do nothing but cordon off Nerima and wait for the matter to play out. Nerima has long been our family's responsibility for a reason, brother. Calling for aid at this early juncture will only discredit us."

Tatewaki sighed. "Perhaps all the more reason to inform them, so they do stay clear." He motioned towards the detached hand still sitting on the grass in the middle of a pool of blood.

Kodachi walked over to it and casually kicked it into the pond. "I have little interest in coddling authorities that refuse to exercise that authority out of fear." She folded her arms, glancing over her shoulder at him. "Ran… Sasuke told me of the Neko-ken, but… Do you suppose this has happened before?"

"I have seen this 'Neko-ken' before," Tatewaki said. "I even intentionally provoked it, if my recollection is right. Ranma shredded my best bokken almost casually. But it was not like this. It was
a mindless state… and, for the most part, harmless and instinctual. This… she was in *control.*" His eyes fell to the remaining bloodstains on the grass. "It may have been easier for her if she hadn't been. She is no killer. I know deep in my heart that she is not ever meant to be."

"Agreed," Kodachi said, with an odd note of fierceness in her voice that surprised even herself. She paused a moment, chewing on that protective feeling. *Odd… I had for so long waited for my Darling Ranma to be my white knight and save me… And now I am seeking that same role for myself for the abused girl I find exists in his place?* She took a breath. *Yes. Yes, I suppose that I am. *I will take that burden myself, if needs be."

"I would prefer if no one needs bear that burden," Tatewaki said gruffly, then glanced at the pond. "Any more than it has already been borne, at least."

"So then what do we do?" Kodachi asked. "I doubt they will give up so easily."

"I don't know," Tatewaki replied. "But I think it is long past time that I return to Furinkan High."

Sayuri sighed as she walked towards the gates. They had all agreed to meet there before heading home but, after the meeting with Himura, she knew she was going to be the last one there.

Sure enough, she could see them all standing around waiting for her. It made her feel a little better knowing they were waiting for her. But at the same time, they stuck out terribly.

"So, what happened?" Yuka asked as she came up. "We heard some rumours of a fight? Urnoko was pissed when she came out. I thought she was going to start something, but when she saw us, she just kinda hunkered down and went on her way. Don't tell me you actually took her?"

"The didn't give you detention, did they?" Riko asked, looking worried. "Or-or-or… *kick you off the volleyball team!??"

"Or suspend her," Hiroshi added.

"Or *expel* her," Daisuke chipped in.

Sayuri held up a hand, eyes scanning across the group to the person she wanted to hear from first. She fixed her gaze on Rin. "Rin, what did you find out?"

Rin fidgeted, unable to meet her gaze. "Th-that… that she really *is* a girl now. Ph-physically, I mean."

Sayuri paused, waiting for more. When no more was forthcoming, she prodded. "*And?*

Rin whimpered. "A-and… and… *IPromisedNotToTalkAboutTheOtherStuffOrSheWon'tTalkToMeEverAgain!*"

Sayuri's shoulders sagged, and she rubbed her eyes. "*Rin…*"

"*Rin, that was the whole point!*" Yuka said. "Sayuri got beat up and she might have gotten *Detentionspendexpelled!* Daisuke had to skip class to run interference so Riko and I could get away from the Hentai Horde! *I had to wear a playboy bunny outfit!*"

"*I didn't get Detention. Or expelled,*" Sayuri said.

"*B-but… I got her cell phone number,*" Rin said.
Yuka paused, mouth open as she was ready to launch into another rant. She closed her mouth, a wide grin forming as she clapped her hands. "I take it all back! A little bunnygirl sprint is worth something like that! Hand it over, Rin!"

Rin shook her head. "I-I can't! I promised! She t-trusts me a little bit, and she might talk to me more, and she might e-even listen, s-so…"

Yuka's expression soured. She clapped a hand over her eyes. "Rin… She's been brainwashed by Himura. With a magic potion. That changes people's gender. I don't think you're really honor bound to keep any promises. I'm pretty sure we can list this under 'It's for her own good', y'know?"

Sayuri's breath caught a moment as she remembered her conversation with Himura. Doing things for her own good, huh?

"Rin… Do what you feel is best," Sayuri said.

Everyone's eyes snapped to her.

"Are you… feeling okay, boss?" Daisuke asked.

"I'm serious," Sayuri replied. She took a deep breath. "Do you know what Himura called me in to talk about? About how all of this… everything she's done… was for Ranma's own good."

"You can't be serious," Yuka scoffed.

"She was," Sayuri replied. "I think she honestly, truly believes on some level that… that all of this… that tearing apart Ranma's life like this… was for Ranma's 'own good'. Because she found out about the scroll. Because she knew the truth, so that justified all of this."

"You don't think we're like that, though?" Riko asked nervously.

Sayuri shook her head. "I don't want to risk it. Just the thought of thinking the same way she does give me the creeps." She looked at Rin. "Rin… you've usually got a pretty good read on people, so… I'm going to trust you with this. Keep Konatsu talking as much as you can, even if you can't tell us what you're talking about. Just… be careful what you tell her, okay?"

"Shouldn't we ask Nabiki what to do?" Daisuke asked. He held up his hands quickly as Sayuri glared at him. "I mean… I honestly think you're right, both you and Rin, but that's just my gut feeling. Nabiki's usually pretty particular about what she leaves for us to make a call on, and what she wants to know about, and this seems like a Nabiki-call situation."

"Nabiki has her plate full and I don't think she needs to know about Himura screwing with me on top of it all," Sayuri said. "As for Konatsu… we'll tell her tomorrow if we don't find out anything else shareable but for now," she took a breath, "maybe we should keep the Rin angle quiet?"

"I just wanna go on record as stating I hate this plan. But… I've hated most of our plans lately, and you're team captain, so I'll follow your lead," Yuka said. "But that reminds me… what exactly did happen in that meeting? Why aren't you toast?"

Sayuri paused for effect. "Himura kicked Umeko off the team for fighting."

"WHAT?!" the others yelled in unison. Even Rin got in on it this time.

"She's got some new girl. Green hair, Chinese accent. Was across the room before I even saw her move. Neither did Umeko, so I'm guessing Umeko's outlived her value." Sayuri folded her arms,
suddenly feeling cold. "She… she offered me a truce. She said that if I would forfeit the rest of the matches that she'd back off... she would even give me the Captaincy of the Volleyball team once the student elections were done. She was… uh… pretty confident that she'd win those."

"What, seriously?" Yuka said.

"Yeah… She seemed pretty serious." Sayuri said. "She seems to want to wrap this whole thing up. She even said you all could play… even Rin… She'd stay out of it as long as she got her forfeit."

"And you believed that?" Yuka asked incredulously.

Sayuri nodded. "I do, actually. If only because it feels like she's… impatient. Like she's found something bigger, better and shinier and wants to move on, so she wants to wrap all this up."

"Wow… I think Himura must be the first person I've met who's managed to get bored with Ranma," Daisuke muttered. "Annoyed, exasperated, grievously injured, sure, but I'd never call him… her… boring."

"Y'know… her being bored with us might be a good thing," Yuka said quietly.

Daisuke turned and gave Yuka an incredulous look. "Not that I exactly enjoy being on Himura's list of people to screw with, but what makes you think being in her dustbin is any better?"

Yuka shrugged. "That's just it… We'd be out. She's done with us and, in my experience, that's your chance to sorta blend back into the background. Whatever she's chasing now, it's got nothing to do with us."

"So you just want to give up?!" Riko demanded.

"No, but I don't wanna get messed up, either!" Yuka shot back. "You know how I and every other 'normal' student gets by, with all these crazy martial artists and ghosts and so on? We're beneath their notice. The bug who gets squashed is the one who buzzes around and annoys the people who squash bugs. Himura? She's the sort who uses a magnifying glass on bugs. If we've got a chance to get our heads back down out of the fire…"

"W-W-What about S-Senpai? Or-or Nabiki-Senpai, or U-Ukyou-senpai, o-or…” Rin started stuttering badly from the emotion as she clenched her fists. "H-H-How can y-you just…!"

"Because I'm scared, okay?!" Yuka shouted, causing the shorter girl to step back in shock. "I'm scared and you all should be too! Whatever is going on is about changing who people are against their will! It's about Yakuza and people's lives being destroyed and people dying! And…" she shook her head, "and I just can't do it anymore, okay?"

"Yuka…" Riko said, taking a step towards her.

"Isn't that what you were saying, Captain?" Yuka said, ignoring Riko and looking Sayuri in the eye. "Isn't that why you brought it up? I mean, we're doomed anyway, right? Ranma is done, and without Ranma, there's no team, so… Let's take the out while we can, right?"

Sayuri dropped her gaze. "I… I don't know." She sighed. "Everything you're saying makes perfect sense, Yuka, but…"

Yuka's expression darkened. "But you needed me to be the bad guy about it, huh?"

Sayuri's head snapped up.
"Why'd you bring it up if you're not gonna go for it, huh? Waiting for that first person to cut and run so it'll make it okay for you to give up without it being your fault?" Yuka snapped, crossing her arms.

"Yuka, that's enough," Daisuke barked, startling them both.

They turned to see the brown haired boy was clenching his fists. "You know… I thought you got it, Yuka. I thought you understood. You're talking about us being bugs, well… well this was our shot to stop being bugs for once." He glared at her. "So now bad stuff might happen to you and you're out? You were only playing the game because you figured you'd get something without any risk?" He snorted and shook his head. "Fine. I'll give you until tomorrow, then I'm going to Nabiki with everything. C'mon, Hiro." He motioned to his friend as he jammed his hands in his pockets and started stalking away.

"Dai?" Yuka said, startled out of her anger by his sudden outburst. She reached out towards him, then dropped her arm and clenched her fist.

Hiroshi glanced at his friend's retreating back, then back at Riko. "I'll… uhhhh… I'll call you later, okay Riko?"

When Riko nodded, he jogged after his friend to catch up.

"Yeah… okay… sure. It's all on me again. That's just fine," Yuka muttered, head down. She started walking in the opposite direction.

"Yuka?" Sayuri said.

"It's over, Sayuri. Just… just let it go. Ranma will find a way to take care of herself. She always does," Yuka said as she trudged off.

Sayuri didn't try and stop her. She noticed Riko's apologetic look and nodded for her to go after Yuka. She wanted to go herself, but… she knew that wasn't her place anymore. Not right now.

"I'm not going anywhere, Captain," Rin said once the others were out of earshot.

Sayuri smiled and gave in to the urge to pat her head. "Thank you, Rin. I appreciate that."

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"I'm hooome!"

Shampoo jerked awake at the singsong voice. She guiltily realized she had dozed off in her cage after several fruitless hours struggling with her bonds. Her head was still covered, so the best she could do was swivel to follow the sound. She could hear the big cat rumble as it shifted and padded over to greet the ringmaster girl.

"How long you planning to hold Shampoo?" Shampoo asked, sitting up. She hoped she could goad Young Mi to take off the hood again. The girl had been very careful to limit how much information Shampoo could get about her surroundings.

"Oh, my poor sweetling, were you lonely?" Young Mi asked, tittering. "Don't fret. Darling is being quite dutiful, and I haven't had a good opportunity to snatch the little athlete out from under him yet. Tomorrow, maybe."

"You don't need Rin," Shampoo said. "Have Shampoo. All you need to get Mousse's attention."
Leave Rin alone." She focused on keeping her tone even, so as not to betray any emotion.

"Oh that will hardly do for what I have in mind, Sweetling." Something rapped against the cage bars, likely the handle of Young Mi's whip. "I want all the people Darling cares about here for this. Besides, my patron has asked me to keep you out of circulation for a while longer, so I'm inclined to take my time and do this properly."


"Fishing for information, my little canary?" Young Mi asked. From the direction of her voice, Shampoo got the impression she was leaning closer. 'I'm not inclined to say. Not that it really matters. I've not asked many questions, so honestly I doubt I could provide you anything useful. Discretion is an important skill for someone working for a circus." There was a clatter as the whip handle was dragged along the bars of the cage. "Suffice it to say that all I really know is they are someone who wants you kept in a cage for a while. Someone with an interest in your 'Airen', though there are no shortage of those, are there?" She chuckled.

"Just caged? Not dead?" Shampoo asked.

"They don't appear to care overmuch if I kill you, if you're hoping for that," Young Mi replied. "It simply seems they want you out of the way for a few days at least."

"Out of way for what?" Shampoo demanded. "Young Mi, you cause harm to innocent once before. Airen not part of this, not harm you, not harm Mousse, not block your way. Allow Airen be hurt now?"

Young Mi was silent a moment. "That red haired girl… The one I mistook for you. Her lover… the boy with the Jusenkyo curse… They are well?"

Shampoo opened her mouth to correct her, then shut it again, realizing Young Mi didn't know about Ranma's own curse, and it was probably better if she remained in the dark. Besides, it would be easier to stoke the fires of a guilty conscience if the situation was simpler. Something Shampoo and her Pintou shared was a talent for misdirection. "Have been to hospital couple of times since."

"I… see," Young Mi said, the manic energy draining from her voice. "I… regret what happened. And I mean no ill will towards your Airen. But that matter is between him and his enemies, and I can't let it sway me from my own." She tapped the bars again. "It's a matter of honor. Surely you understand that."

Shampoo winced. She knew full well the lengths someone could go for honor; She had gone to many of them herself. But at the same time… "Doing dishonorable deed not way to uphold honor."

Young Mi was quiet again. "I… suppose we shall see. Come, Samson," were her final words on the matter as her boots clicked against the concrete as she walked away.

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Himura wasn't surprised to find that the Amazons had turned the flat she had provided them into an impromptu field hospital. Amused, yes, but not surprised.

She had been to the Kuno Estate before, after all.

Tan Pohn and Su Tzu were flanking her. Himura drew a note of satisfaction from their wide-eyed looks when they saw their sisters laid out being tended… and noticed that a number of them were missing. She hid her smugness, however, as they approached the one she had come to speak with.
"Honored Elder…" Tan Pohn choked out, a horrified look on her face.

Lo Shan was sitting on a stool. Her upper body was bare as Amazon healers fussed over her, treating several deep cuts. Her eyes were sunken, and she looked like she had aged significantly in the past day. But most shocking was the sight of her handless stump and the deep crimson of her blood seeping through the bandages the healer was wrapping tightly around it.

"You've come to gloat," Lo Shan said in a flat tone, eyes fixed on Himura.

"I've come to offer medical aid, Honored Elder," Himura replied, carefully keeping her tone and expression neutral. "My grandfather's company has many contacts I can call upon discreetly. If you are in pain, we specialize in painkillers that will not dull your senses. And in Japan there have been many advances in prosthetics…"

"Spare me the patronizing sympathy, child!" Lo Shan cut her off with a snarl. She took a shuddering breath, waving off the healer as she examined the ruin of her arm where her hand had once been. "You knew this would happen."

"I suspected," Himura replied. "Though I did not expect such a dramatic turn of events. If I had, I would have been more strenuous in my warnings."

"No, you would not have," Lo Shan replied with a sigh. "And I would not have listened, and you knew that." She returned her gaze to Himura. Her eyes were hooded, dark circles under their sockets making her look old and tired. "You believe you have learned to anticipate me perfectly."

*Because I HAVE, you old bag,* Himura thought wryly. "I would not dream of such presumptive arrogance, Honored Elder."

Lo Shan chuckled. "Yes you would. I see it in your eyes. But… My old teacher once adored humiliating me for acting rashly, or out of hubris. I find myself humbled again, this time by circumstance and chance. If you wish to claim credit for that, so be it. Be it chance or clairvoyance beyond your years, you were right." She leaned forward, switching to Japanese. "So, Himura Tanaka… The one who calls Japan her territory… What is your counsel?"

*Finally willing to listen? I suppose losing a limb will do that,* Himura thought, though she found herself rubbing her own left wrist self-consciously. She forced herself to stop. "I believe direct confrontation right now is a mistake, Honored Elder. Even in her current state, Ranma Saotome cannot be taken by force."

"Anything can be taken by force, child. It's merely a matter of whether the prize is worth the force necessary," Lo Shan snorted. "I have already paid enough for this."

"As you say, Honored Elder." Himura inclined her head. "I have heard from Su Tzu that Khu Long has invoked several *Joketsuzoku* covenants. Might I ask what the specifics of those are?"

Lo Shan scoffed. "Khu Long is stalling for time. The Covenants were intended as a way to forestall civil war should Amazon leadership come under dispute. With no support from the Council, her position is laughable. Within two suns of the declaration, we must meet on Neutral Ground, which she has declared to be the Tendo Dojo, and discuss the matter in an attempt to prevent conflict."

"Good. Then might I suggest an approach?" Himura said. "Appear weaker than you actually are. Appear willing, in principal, to compromise, even as you avoid actually agreeing on anything of substance."

Lo Shan raised an eyebrow. "To what end would we take such an approach?"
"My Grandfather always taught me that there is a fine line between despair and desperation," Himura said, folding her hands behind her back and starting to pace. "Despair can rob an enemy of motivation to act, can cause them to see the situation as bleaker than it is and downplay their own resources and capabilities. But desperation can motivate them to exceed their own resources and limitations. The latter is to be avoided, and I fear we have pushed them too close to it too fast. Despair must be built gradually, like a slow-banked fire." She tapped her chin. "Give them breathing room, but only a little. A Cease-fire. They will be allowed to go about their lives but not to leave Nerima. The Tendo Dojo will be a haven… for now, they will be allowed to attend school, but their lives will be contained in a small area. Offer that part reluctantly, if they are to accept these shackles they must not realize how little power we have to place them upon them."

"And then?" Lo Shan asked.

"Watch them - and be obvious about it. Make sure they never feel that they have privacy, keep them always paranoid," Himura replied. "Sneak into their places, like the Dojo or Ms. Kuonji's shop and change things around, just enough so they get the sense someone has been there. Just enough so they are never sure. They will be unmolested, but not allowed to relax. Ranma needs to be kept away from the others as much as possible… require that she stay with the Kunos for now. She will be a separate matter."

"You expect them to agree to this?" Lo Shan seemed dubious.

"If you act quickly, while they are still huddled and unsure? Yes. Nabiki Tendo's is the loudest voice of the group, and with most of her emotional support devastated by recent events, this is as good a time as any," Himura put her hands on her hips. "We let them continue to struggle through the Volleyball challenge… say you want to allow Ranma to fulfill that last obligation of honor before he returns to China with you, or whatever other justification you feel Khu Long will believe. Give them a slender hope so that they will cling to that, rather than seek out more desperate action. Then they will fail, that hope will be snuffed out and they won't have the will to pursue it further."

Lo Shan snorted. "There is no honor or glory in winning by such means."

"No, but it is a win, and about the only way you can beat a group that refuses to acknowledge defeat," Himura argued. "Regardless, this will give me some time to work on Ranma to win him over."

"You expect to convince the Godslayer to return to China when all other methods of coercion have failed?" Lo Shan asked.

Himura smirked. She reached into her pocket and produced a small metal flask. "Not at all. Thanks to a successful test and your kind help perfecting the formula? All I need to do is convince him to take a sip."

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"I'm… leaving."

The announcement was quiet… reluctant… mournful. For a moment, Kasumi felt a pang of regret and doubt. She exchanged a glance with Akane, who got up with her to walk to the front door. Nabiki simply pulled her knees up to her chest tighter.

They walked to the front door where Soun stood, worn backpack slung over his shoulder. Kasumi retrieved a bag that she had packed with a number of easy-to-prepare meals. It would be enough to see him through the first week at least. She handed it to him.
"Is… this really necessary, Kasumi?" Soun asked. "I swear to you, I did not mean for things to come to this…!"

"Are you prepared to say as much to Ranma?" Kasumi asked. "Are you prepared to face the consequences of doing that now?"

Soun shuddered. "Perhaps… perhaps if you explained things to her before she comes home…"

"I will do no such thing!" Kasumi said, more sharply than she intended. She stopped herself and took a steadying breath. "Father… you are a part of an… unfathomable wrong. One you did nothing to right. You always taught us that it was a martial artist's duty to protect the weak… and yet you participated in stripping a girl of her very form and identity. Everything you taught us about honor tells me you will need to face Ranma… to explain your actions, in your own words, and face her judgement like a man. I cannot… I will not make excuses or platitudes on your behalf in this." She reached over and straightened his gi a little, struggling to keep the tears from coming. "All I can do is… give you time and try to heal a little the wounds you've caused before you must face them. For the sake of our family's honor, Ranma must come first now. There is no escaping this debt."

"I… see," Soun said. He turned to Akane. "And you feel the same, Akane?"

"Ranma comes first," Akane said firmly.

"Nabiki does not even wish to see me off?" Soun asked weakly. It felt very much like he was grasping for any reason to delay. Kasumi also noticed his usual waterworks were absent. He did seem to understand the gravity of the situation, at least.

"Nabiki has a great many burdens of her own at the moment. She was the one who found the truth, father," Kasumi said sternly. "She might not have idolized you as we did, but she trusted you, and that is a rare and precious thing from Nabiki. That wound will take time to heal, father. Give her that much at least, and do not begrudge her her discourtesy."

He sighed, his shoulders slumped. "You… are right. You are always right, Kasumi. I… should go while there is still light." He turned and took a few steps, hesitated, then continued through the gates without a backward look.

Kasumi forced herself to watch him go, though she wanted nothing more than to turn and retreat inside, or to call him back and forgive him. She felt her newborn resolve wavering under its first real test. Then she remembered what he had done - what he had made possible - and the surge of anger and betrayal that came with that memory washed away any remaining hesitation. She turned and followed her youngest sister back into the house.

000 (End Chapter 33)

Thank you for sticking with me this long. I apologize for the delay between chapters, but this one took a lot of work to get into reasonable shape.

I hope to make your patience worthwhile!

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