Ordinary Lives
by en_passant

Summary

In a world not quite so magic as the one we know best, Tokyo’s Nerima Ward is a decidedly normal place, distinctly lacking in out-of-control jilted fiancées, no-holds-barred martial arts combat, and suicide pacts. Even the introduction of the Jusenkyo curse into the life of Ranma Saotome somehow seems to fade into the background of his life; instead it’s his parents’ wild machinations that threaten to turn his life into a three-ring circus, as he tries to chart out a way forward in a mundane world unprepared to deal the unpredictability of curses and magic.
Even past midnight, the train from Shinjuku to points west rarely empties out entirely. Salarymen eager to prove their devotion to the job skulk around the office until ridiculous hours of the night, only leaving once their boss has turned out the lights; the bosses, for their part, can usually be found just a few blocks over in Kabukichō, dropping yen by the tens of thousands for attractive young women in cocktail dresses to pour them drinks and pretend to be interested in their desperately barren existences. The hostesses themselves, of course, often have to hitch a ride back home to the suburbs. Then there are the students and carefree twenty-somethings, spent from a night out at the downtown bars and nightclubs. As much as Ranma Saotome might have imagined himself at this point in his life enjoying the nightlife like those students—hell, he’d probably even take being the salaryman right around now—it is to his chagrin that the outrageousness of the preceding months has slotted him (or, at this exact moment, her) into the unenviable position of hostess at Shinjuku’s Cabaret Club Love Star. An uneasy haze of inebriation and distaste still hangs dimly over her as she snatches a corner seat on the train to Nerima. Quickly following suit, another woman with bobbed brown hair and sharp fringe sidles up next to her. Decked out in casual, comfortable wear, and with the faint remains of a full face of makeup, the two of them cut a familiar figure.

“Ahh man, thank god that’s over with,” Ranma exhales with something between relief and aggravation.

The woman in the seat next to her giggles lightly. “You say that after like, every weekend, Ranma.”

“Well, yeah, and I mean it every weekend! Jeez, Mariko, not like I’m gonna say 24 hours of dealin’ with those drunken letches ain’t more’n enough for a week.”

“Can’t argue with the payday though,” Mariko replies with an impish grin.

“Well, it stands to reason, I guess. I mean, they call it work cause they gotta pay you to do it. Still…” Ranma grumbles, tugging uncomfortably at the hem of her jacket. Her expression of exasperation mixes with something Mariko can’t read entirely but seems suffused with an unfamiliar glumness. “I dunno, you an’ the girls at the club are great and all, and god knows I needed the hand that I got when I was starting out, but do ya ever sit there and wonder, how the hell did I get my life into such a mess?”

Mariko’s smile fades, and her demeanour shifts into thoughtfulness as her eyes meet Ranma’s. This time it’s Ranma’s turn to be surprised. “Aww, honey, I think everyone has their reasons they pick up a job like this. Even if the reason is sometimes like, ‘I’m hot and want to make more money’,“ she says, allowing herself a small, self-effacing laugh. “I don’t get that sense from you, though, Ranma. Even if I can tell you don’t really want to be working there, I don’t think that means your life is a mess.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Ranma answers, clearly dissatisfied but lacking a way to express everything she wants to. Feigning a yawn, she stretches her arms and shrugs noncommittally. “Ah, it’s probably nothing, I’m just tired and cranky, lookin’ for a reason to harp on about my good-for-nothin’ old man.”
“He’s a pain in the neck, huh?”

“Hah, oh god, if only you knew the half of it…”

In truth, more often than not, these days she feels the restriction of silence heavily on all sides, but as a woman she not only has to live a double life, but also put up an additional false front to boot. Sometimes Ranma marvels at the fact that the number of people fully aware of the insanity of her life can be counted on a single hand, when the deepening split between her two halves infringes further and further on her capacity to lead something approaching a normal life. And yet, when it comes down to it, Ranma knows there’s really only one person to blame for this mess. Like so many of the other messes in her life, it all began with her father…

Genma Saotome was a proud man. There were reasons why he merited some allotment of pride—after all, he was a man devoted to his craft, having spent a lifetime refining his skill and knowledge of martial arts, a long history of success in assorted tournaments throughout his childhood and adulthood, and now, approaching middle age, though his own body was beginning to feel the effect of the years, he had a son to follow in his footsteps, a young man who had inherited the moral rectitude and code of honour of his mother, the quick thinking, slyness, and stubbornness of his father, and the mastery of a constellation of martial arts from them both.

“Boy, quit your lazing around! There’s work to be done!”

Yet there were things that probably did not merit such consistent displays of pride. For example, his conduct with his wife—ex-wife, rather—or his conduct with his son, or for that matter, his conduct with anyone. Ranma figured it probably wasn’t fair to say that Genma intended to be self-absorbed and self-serving, any more than it was to say that a scorpion intended to sting. At this stage in his life, he’d grown used to his father’s various antics; having failed on multiple occasions to turn the idiosyncratic form of kempo he practised into the “Saotome School of Indiscriminate Grappling”, his father often relied on get-rich-quick schemes, confidence scams, petty theft, and similar contrivances to keep ahead of his rent payments. His ability to skim by like this was hardly harmed by the Saotome School’s devotion to subterfuge, camouflage, and of course, bluffing.

On the other hand, it did mean that whenever Genma mentioned “work”, it meant that he expected Ranma to do something for him. And today, fighting off whatever kind of fever or flu seemed to be going around town seemed a lot more important to Ranma than appeasing his dad’s latest harebrained plan to bring glory to the Saotome School.

With a sniffle and his features hardly shifting from a deadpan, Ranma issued a flat refusal. “Try your luck some other day, old man. It’s Sunday and I ain’t gettin’ out of bed.”

“What is this weak-willed nonsense, child? I trained you better than this.” He pauses, seeming to wince briefly, before righting his face and grunting. “You’ve been spending too much time with your mother. In your younger days you would have jumped at the opportunity to bring the glory to the Saotome School that it deserves!”

“Y’know, Pops, that kind of guilt trip would have a whole lot more bite if Ma weren’t the one with the real dojo and the sixth-dan ranking.”

“Feh, insolent boy. Not only are you making excuses for your slothfulness, but you slander the
Ranma sighed with a weary resignation, lacking his usual motivation to trade barbs with his father. “Look, if you really want me to tag along on whatever crazy idea you’ve gotten today, the least you can do is go out and get some proper medicine. And none of that ibuprofen nonsense neither, I’m all clogged up and that’s not gonna cut it. Hell, I can’t even do kata work if I can’t breathe right. So if you get something strong, and if it fixes this up, then I’ll do whatever. Till then, I ain’t movin’.”

Genma Saotome was not a stupid man. Foolish, perhaps—even he might admit that his ideas could fail to come to fruition—but not stupid. Though he had lived his life feeling the oppressive constraints of mundanity, even as the world around him accepted those limitations, there was some deep-seated part of him that understood that the world had more to it than there appeared to be. At times, when deep in meditation, or in the midst of the intricate katas of the Saotome School, he felt it, the flash of the supernatural that would inspire the power of the divine.

Many would balk at what they would term superstition, even those who would claim themselves to be martial artists. But there were others who appreciated such possibilities and powers. And if Genma was going to snap his wayward son out of this mood of lethargy and lackadaisy, then by god, he wasn’t going to rely on the vagaries of modern medicine. What use was twelve-hour rhinitis relief when what the boy really needed was a sharp dosage of supernatural vim and vigour? Yes, a pharmacy wouldn’t do in this circumstance…and to his fortune, he knew of a traditional Chinese herbalist not too far from Shakujii Station.

As he entered the medicine shop, he felt bolstered in his resolve. Beyond the cheap trinkets in the front of the store, many rows of traditional remedies lay in neatly-marked aisles. Now, there was the small matter that most of the labels were in Chinese, leaving him only halfway-equipped to even understand what he was buying. But to Genma Saotome, this was a triviality, and whatever minor issues might be encountered due to the language barrier would be mere trifles compared to the benefits that it would bring.

This righteous belief in his own convictions was what led him to a small selection of bottles with labels of varying colours, but each prominently featuring the same name: Zhòuquán Healing Waters. Picking up one of them, he scrutinized the label that accompanied this one: “Zhòuquán Healing Waters: A Maiden’s Heart”. The Chinese characters seemed mostly familiar to him, though a few gave him some pause. Nevertheless, it was clear that it was spring water of a sort—medicinal, to be sure, and from the looks of it, magical, as well. Below its Chinese explanation, in broken English and Japanese, the back of the bottle listed off the capacities of the medicine: “healing all imbalances of the zàng organs: heart, liver, spleen, lung, kidney, and restoring the inner vigour and energy. Additionally, its power aids the drinker in resolving difficulties in romantic life.” Thinking back to the boy’s childish pace in his courtship of the Kuonji girl, Genma wondered idly whether a kick in the rear—perhaps even another suitor or two!—wouldn’t return Ranma to his usual animated state; this potion would be perfectly suited to solving the boy’s recent malaise. And if he wasn’t just malingering, then it couldn’t hurt at clearing out his lungs.

Come to think of it, as much as Genma hated to admit it, he hadn’t been feeling in the highest of spirits either, and a worsening stomach flu had placed some limits on his own abilities. After browsing the rack for a few moments, he came across another bottle that seemed suited to his needs. “Zhòuquán Healing Waters: Bear’s Strength”: this one promised to heal the fǔ organs,
including his ailing stomach, and give the drinker strength beyond a normal human. Taking both bottles with him to the register, Genma was soon on his way back to his apartment, where the magic spring’s waters would surely stoke the boy into action. Really, he figured, anything other than the tendency he’d developed over the last few days to laze about the house would be an improvement.

“Boy!” Genma bellowed as he entered the apartment, kicking his shoes off carelessly at the door as he entered his usual refrain of heckling his son.

“Y’know, you can just say ‘I’m home’ like a normal person,” Ranma quipped drily, clearing his throat as he shifted on the couch. The light from the television scattered blurred figures from the screen back onto the window, and muffled yells punctuated what seemed to be some kind of action movie.

Genma just grunted. The boy’s mother was a good and honourable woman, but he wondered sometimes if she had let him get soft in the head. “There’s no need to coddle you with my language, boy. If you can’t even stand up to words, how will you possibly stand up to the blows of an opponent?”

“You sayin’ you want me to sock you in the face instead, Pops? Sheesh.” Ranma rolled his eyes. “Look, did you get the medicine or not?”

“I have it right here.” Setting down the plastic bag on the countertop, Genma searched the kitchen drawers for a pair of measuring cup. Uncorking the bottles, he poured out some for himself and some for his son.

Shrivelling up his nose, Ranma eyed his father with displeasure. “Yech, couldn’t find anything that didn’t smell like something died in it? Well, I guess they call it medicine for a reason. Bottoms up.” Shrugging with resignation, he put the cup to his lips and quickly downed the mixture, his father quickly following suit.

Though Ranma immediately felt something slightly different, he didn’t give it much thought. If anything, it was good news, since it meant that the medicine was taking effect. It wasn’t until a few minutes later, after enduring Genma’s expectant gaze, that Ranma announced abruptly “Ah, to hell with it, if you’re just gonna sit there and stare at me until I do whatever crazy idea you’ve come up with, then I might as well get ready.”

Ranma trudged off with a pout to the bathroom, where Genma heard a few seconds of the faucet running, a few seconds of silence, and then what could only be described as an unmanly, bloodcurdling shriek.

“Ranma!” shouted Genma. For once, genuine concern could be heard in his voice as he rushed to his son’s side. The vision he encountered, though, was not one that he could have possibly envisioned, as a short young woman—every bit the spitting image of his ex-wife Nodoka, down to the reddish sheen of her hair—fulminated with a rage that seemed to have barely crested.

“YOU,” the girl— **god**, no, Genma realized, there was nobody else that it could be but **Ranma**—stormed towards him with righteous fury. Gripping his shirt, she spat invectives as far as her voice would carry. “You…you colossal **idiot**, what the **fuck** did you **do to me**????”

“Now, just hold on, b-boy,” Genma stammered. The immediate reminder that at this moment, she was **not** a boy, only incensed her further, and Genma could see it. “I swear on my own honour, it was just medicine!”
Barely paying any mind to her father’s justifications, she burst out of the bathroom and back into the kitchen, eyes locked on the bottles that sat innocently on the tabletop. Her eyes scanned the first few lines, and she started reading off the characters as best she could. “Jusen… Jusengo? Jusenkyo? ‘Cursed Springs Water of Transformation’? This what ya call medicine!? You better have a damn good explanation for this, Pops.”

“You mean…it’s not ‘Magic Springs Healing Waters’? But that name…”

“You illiterate old fool! Whaddaya think noroi means? It means curse! I let ya go off and buy one thing for me, and I end up with a Chinese curse. Just great.”

“Now, son, don’t lose your head off this. I’m sure there’s a way to resolve this quickly…”

“Says you, you’re not the one who—heh, hang on, you took some of it yourself. See how ya like this!” Ranma yells, quickly filling a cup with water from the sink and pouring it on her father. As quickly as her own transformation, black and white fur quickly sprouted from every point on Genma’s body, and within a few seconds it was clear that Ranma was standing face to face with a panda bear.

“That…what… Pops?” Ranma said, her own incredulity at her own metamorphosis briefly suspended from the sheer shock of witnessing a transformation occurring in front of her. “Oh god, this can’t be real…”

Genma, lacking any kind of way of responding verbally, merely made a vague gesture with his hands—paws?—as he looked down at himself.

“Well you’ve really fucked it up this time, old man,” Ranma said, the shock in her voice fading and giving way to a colder, more incisive anger. “For once in your life, maybe you can clean up this mess. I’m gonna go to Ma’s.” She marched off to her bedroom, emerging a few minutes later with a duffel bag and a winter coat, leaving the giant panda sitting helplessly in the middle of the apartment.

Nodoka Saotome had had a relatively peaceful morning, preparing herself a light breakfast and some tea before practising a sequence of iaido katas. She’d given little thought to what do with the day; though she would frequently see her son when they set aside time to hone their skills in kendo or iaido, he’d been more withdrawn as of late, and she hadn’t expected any visitors on what was otherwise a quiet Sunday. So she was briefly jarred from her routine when she heard a telltale jingling of keys and rattling of the door to her home. Quickly sheathing her sword, she nevertheless carried it with her as she approached the opening door. In all likelihood it was Ranma, but she wouldn’t want to be unprepared if some thief had mistakenly believed her home would make for an easy mark.

Instead, as the door opened fully, neither of those seemed to be true. A young woman, one Nodoka didn’t recognize but who nevertheless looked strangely familiar, turned her half-lidded eyes up to face Nodoka directly. They were a deep, vivid blue, just like her own, though they seemed as conflicted and ill-fitting as the girl’s clothing.

“Er, miss, can I help you?” Nodoka asked, assuming a vaguely defensive position. “You seem to have my key, but I think you may be at the wrong building number.”
The girl’s face screwed up in thought. “Uhh, I dunno how to explain this, Ma, but I’m Ranma.”

Clearly taken aback, Nodoka searched for words. “I don’t know if this is your idea of a practical joke, but Ranma is my son, not my daughter.”

“Look, I don’t know how to prove it to ya, but before you ask, you can blame it all on Pops. I know I don’t exactly look it right now, but I’m your son, Ranma Saotome,” she said, pinching her nose and sighing. “Sorry ‘bout all this.”

For a time, Ranma had managed to convince himself that this curse wouldn’t be such a big deal. The only trigger was cold water, right? How hard could it be to just avoid cold water? The trademark Saotome bravado permitted him to hold this impression for all of a few days before realizing just how many mundane elements of his life could now threaten not only to tee up a cascade of humiliations, but also potentially threaten to get his curse revealed, whisked away by some government society and subjected to study.

The first and most pressing matter was the weather. Rain, not typically something that Ranma would have considered enough to scare him off from anything, quickly became a barometer of his own tolerance for the world to judge him on the basis of a very different set of criteria than he was used to. Forecasts subsequently quickly became tea leaves, a kind of proxy divination for whether he would be leered at by the cashier at the convenience store across the street. Worse still, his father developed a paralytic fear of the outdoors, refusing to leave the apartment on all but the clearest, driest of days.

Worse, though, was the matter of food and drink. Through a bit of experimentation, Ranma found that the shift from water cold enough to trigger the curse and warm enough to reverse it was around body temperature, making every meal something of a complicated process of navigation. Given what was quickly becoming an exhaustive need to remain hydrated, any day he left the house in one form or another, a laundry list of dietary requirements followed along with him. Any day blocked off for his male side meant no picking up a canned coffee at the corner store; a rainy day where he left the house was a day where soup or hot tea were off limits.

This was ridiculous enough as it stood for Ranma, whose valiant attempts at assigning some kind of discipline to his days earned him a headache about as often as they earned him a day without switching back and forth, but with only his mother and father in the know of his fantastical curse, he was either left risking the peril of discovery, or letting things resolve themselves decidedly in the direction of disaster.

There was the matter of Ukyo Kuonji, Ranma’s girlfriend of several months, and with whom things were going just fine until his father decided to make the feminine yin of his zàng organs, well, a little too feminine. Or, more to the point, there was the fact that he had stood her up three times in a row due to a spat of spring showers, and then there was the fact that Ranma wasn’t exactly the best at making excuses to begin with, and then there was the other fact that Ranma began recoiling from Ukyo’s hand if she’d so much as touched the condensation on a cold glass of water. So when Ukyo showed up unannounced at Ranma’s apartment, only to be greeted by an unfamiliar woman, it maybe wasn’t the biggest surprise that weeks of her suspicion went implicitly confirmed. “So that’s what he’s been doing! Sleeping around for weeks without so much as the shame to hide it! And you,” she said, prodding Ranma in the chest, “mark my words, you redheaded robber. I won’t let your man-thieving ways go unpunished! And don’t think your two-timing boy toy is going to
get away scot-free either…”

Things with Ryoga, meanwhile, were better only by comparison.

“Ranma, you coward, you can’t just keep skipping out on our practice sessions like this. Or have you finally learned that all you’re good at is running away?”

“That’s awfully rich comin’ from the guy who’s showed up late to every practice session we’ve ever had. If you were any worse with directions, you’d be so late you’d end up showing up on time for the next one.”

“Don’t go trying to turn this around to somehow make this my fault. You broke a vow between men!”

“Look, don’t make this out to be a bigger deal than it is, man. Ya think I’m gonna duel in the middle of a thunderstorm? Maybe I really have hit you one too many times over the head…”

“What kind of excuse is that, Ranma? You’re scared of a little rain!? I’ll show you rain—”

Before he knew it, Ranma had been pelted in the face with an open water bottle. It was a small mercy that the two of them were in sufficiently private quarters that his ‘little secret’ wasn’t immediately exposed to the world, but Ryoga could only gape in silence as Ranma spontaneously transformed.

“Listen,” she said, her voice thin and raw with impatience, “I swear there’s a good explanation for this.”

Yet somehow, life proceeds apace. For all his faults, Ryoga is trustworthy when it comes to keeping secrets, and his life, however discombobulated from its previous state, begins to take a more predictable contour. Though he’s faced it with a bleak resolve, lacking any kind of legal identity or employment history for his female half, and lacking the ability to keep himself from transforming on a hair trigger, he secures a job at, of all things, a hostess club, where his natural talent for acting can at least let him fleece a bunch of lonely, horny old men out of a couple thousand yen per hour, wasn’t exactly a challenge.

And as much as Ranma hates to admit it, her life is approaching something like a rhythm, something like a balance. And if it isn’t exactly the kind of balance she’s thrilled by, involving a half-panda leeching away her only source of savings and weekends full of drunken slobs making comments about a pair of boobs she’s owned for all of a couple months…well, there’s something perversely refreshing about the fact that she’s managed to wrest some degree of freedom from her father’s scheming.

There’s a lot that remains unanswered in her life—after all, “balance” can be the calm before the storm as often as it implies any kind of stability. She wonders if she’ll ever be able to explain matters to Ukyo, or if her own fears over the curse have already shattered the trust between them. She wonders if she or her father will even come by a way to rid themselves of the curse, when everything she knows about the world suggests it should have been impossible to be subject to this magic in the first place.

And if not? A shallow blanket of terror fills her at the thought. Would things continue as they are
now? Her father spending his days lounging around the apartment, bitterly whining about the weather, aimless but for the dream of a cure? Her mother, decrying her father’s recklessness while at the same time seeing in Ranma the closest she can get to a daughter? That would leave her, in the middle, splitting her life between her parents’ homes, her parents’ worlds, and the two spheres of her existence.

Lolling her head against the train seat, Ranma perks up her head briefly to listen to the announcement: Shakujii Station. Standing up and stretching her legs, she wishes Mariko a quick goodbye and steps off the train. “Alright, where to,” she mutters, but though she presents the option to herself like it’s a choice, Ranma knows the lie of it. As much as her father has been more subdued as of late, she’d rather know for sure, at least for tonight, that her father isn’t going to wake her up with a shinai to the face at 4 in the morning, just to put out a bunch of flyers on the street advertising his new pyramid scheme, or his stolen yatai, or his “Indiscriminate Grappling Advanced Kempo” lessons. It’s much easier for her to provide for him in the abstract, and though she knows she’ll have to go back and face him again sooner or later, to do more than just drop off food or money, tonight isn’t the night.

Tonight she’ll go back to her mother’s home; it had been a source of comfort for her in these last few weeks during a volatile time. Her father, on the other hand, would be free to wallow for a few days longer. Maybe he’ll be angry, but as far as she’s concerned, he could do with a bit more introspection. What was it he always liked to say whenever Ranma complained about being dispatched on those “character-building missions”? Right. “The life of a martial artist is filled with peril.”

Chapter End Notes

Language notes

咒泉乡 Zhòuquánxiāng: The Chinese transliteration of Jusenkyo. While the second character, 'spring', is a common character that is immediately identifiable in Japanese, the third is a simplified character that doesn't exist in Japanese, and the first is an obsolete variant of the more common 咒 noroi, meaning “curse”, which explains some of Genma's confusion.

脏腑 Zàngfǔ: A division of the body's organs according to traditional Chinese medicine between yin organs (zàng)—heart, spleen, lung, liver, kidney—and yang organs (fǔ)—small intestine, stomach, large intestine, bladder, and gall bladder.
When Ranma comes to, she’s hardly even fazed that she had fallen asleep in her female form, her curse slowly becoming second nature, by turns, in managing or ignoring. Her mother, too, seems to take it in stride when Ranma emerges from her bedroom with a loose braid of matching hair.

“Good morning, son,” she says, and Ranma’s too tired to be able to discern whether she’s saying it lovingly or has a hidden sardonic side. “There’s soup and rice there for you. I’m not sure how warm the water in the kettle is, but you’re welcome to try some.”

Wordlessly, Ranma shuffles over to the kettle, bringing it to the sink and pouring out some over one hand. When nothing happens, she knows she’s overslept by a decent amount. “Ah hell,” she mumbles, refilling the kettle and putting it back on the stove. “Guess it really was a late night. Sorry for kickin’ up such a fuss again.”

“It’s no trouble to me at all. If you’ll permit a mother a little selfishness, it has been nice to see more of you over these last few months, even if the circumstances regarding your father’s, ahem, ‘accident’ are truly unfortunate.”

“You don’t gotta tell me twice me, Ma,” Ranma says, her frustration barely concealed, “I get that it ain’t exactly easy to hold down a stable job if you can’t go anywhere when it rains, but I’m out here bustin’ my ass to make rent every month and it gets me sore whenever I go back there and the lazy panda ain’t doin’ anything but mope around the house.” As Nodoka nods sympathetically, Ranma picks up the kettle again and pours the water over her hands, this time a little more successfully. “That’s more like it,” he murmurs approvingly as he starts assembling a breakfast.

His mother’s eyes change as he does, and when he looks up at her again, it seems he’s in for the mushy treatment. “Oh, son. I’m so proud of what a thoughtful, responsible man you’ve become.”

“Aw, Ma,” he says, a soft blush rising to his cheeks. “I mean, I’m just doin’ what I gotta. Much as it’s Pops’ fault we’re in this mess, he’s the one who’s really paying the price, yanno?”

Her expression hardens slightly. “Genma has always been a foolish man. I suppose it is folly to expect more of him, but it is not easy to forget that he is responsible for this curse in your life.”

“If there’s one thing the old man ever taught me that’s stuck, it’s that I’m not gonna let this stop me. Really, I’m gonna be fine.”

“I’m sure you will, son. Really, I know that a boy will have a different relationship with his father. It’s only natural.”

“It’s not that I don’t appreciate it or nothin’, but someone’s gotta look after the old man. Wouldn’t be right to leave him to rot.”

Nodoka hums thoughtfully for a moment. “Actually, Ranma, I have been giving some thought to the current situation, and I think I have an idea that might be able to help the both of us,” she begins, as Ranma’s eyes follow hers searchingly. Though he loves his mother and cares for her, a small part of him fills with dread whenever his mother has a ‘great idea’. Already, one of those ‘great ideas’ turned out to involve buying him more women’s clothing than he ever thought he’d need. “It pains me to have to say, but recently circumstances regarding the dojo have been…more
difficult. This year’s classes are ending in a few days, and my previous instructor for the second class, Taniguchi, is moving to Sendai to take care of her elderly parents.”

“Right, so…you need someone to take over teaching iaido?”

“You have a true gift for understanding form. I’m sure you would have no trouble teaching what you know. And it could be useful to provide for yourself and your father in, perhaps, a more…fitting way.”

Ranma winces slightly; he knows that his mother doesn’t have a tremendously high opinion on his weekend work, but for the nature of the job being under-the-table, and the pay, there are few other options. Still, the fact that his mother is willing to offer him the opportunity for an out heartens him. “Aw, don’t swell my head Ma, ya definitely don’t need me ending up just like Pops. But…’course, if it can help you I’m happy to do it.”

She laughs gently. “Then, if you’re interested…there is an upcoming tournament at the Tokyo Budokan in Adachi. I know that you are eligible to qualify for fourth-dan at the examinations, but additionally, I hoped that a demonstration and instruction by a younger member might encourage students to stick with the discipline.”

There’s a small twist to Nodoka’s lips, briefly knocking her son off balance. “Uh, yeah, sure, that sounds great. I’ve been workin’ on a lot of the tatehiza kata lately anyway, should be a cinch to show off those moves.”

“Indeed, son. Moreover, though, I wonder if a certain kind of young person might bring more appeal…” By all measures, Ranma can’t read his mother’s expression as anything other than idle musing, but he can’t help feeling a vague sense of unease beginning to burble within him.

“More appeal like, I gotta make—oh,” he says, as he finally pieces together her insinuations, “oh no no no, Ma, no, please don’t tell me you’re really thinkin’ that I’d…”

“The beauty and grace of a young lady skilled in a martial art can be a wonderful inspiration to young women and young men alike.” Her smile is positively beatific.

Ranma shifts uncomfortably. “Look, you know I wanna help and stuff, but that kinda thing could be dangerous. What if someone I know shows up? I’m tryin’ not to get caught with this magic stuff here, last thing I need is somebody asking a buncha questions that could get me found out.”

“I understand your concerns, son, but even if an acquaintance were to make an appearance, nobody will know to recognize you, either. And would it not be worse if your curse were triggered in a public place like that?”

“You’re not gonna give up on this one, are you?”

“I wouldn’t dream of making you do something you are uncomfortable with, Ranma.”

Groaning, Ranma buries his face in his hands, beginning to worry that his mother’s learning to enjoy this just a little too much. “I’ll think about it. If it rains.”

Predictably enough, the forecast for the day of the Twenty-Seventh Annual Iaido Championship
includes scattered showers throughout the entirety of Adachi Ward, and Nodoka, beaming like a saint, presents Ranma with an immaculately assembled iaido outfit: a white keikogi with his mother’s zekken patch and a delicately embroidered flock of cranes, a patterned black-and-white obi, and a black hakama. If there has ever been any doubt in his mind that his mother was left yearning for a daughter, her latest ploy to revitalize the dojo certainly dispels it.

It isn’t even that he particularly minds the attention she’s given to his ‘other half’; on the contrary, over the years he’s sometimes wished that he and his mother could connect more deeply than their common passion for martial arts, and some small part of him is grateful to have that, even if it comes at the cost of tenuous psychic slights to his masculine ego. Standing here now in her female form, Ranma has a hard time even articulating to herself whether the body she’s currently wearing even bothers her so much, either; now that the shock of having it at all, and the ridiculous procession of humiliation that followed is more or less behind her, she can appreciate its benefits and drawbacks on a more objective level. Her flexibility, dexterity, agility, and poise are increased, at the cost of raw strength and reach; and given the priorities of iaido, it is, if anything, an advantage to be using this form.

Yet, whether it’s her sharp, tailored presentation, or simply the bare fact of appearing for all the world to be a young woman in a relatively underrepresented discipline, Ranma can’t help but feel a certain self-consciousness as she and her mother enter the elaborately diamond-motifed Tokyo Budokan, that eyes are lingering on her before she’s drawn her sword a single time. Suddenly, she begins to see a perverse logic in her mother’s unsettling proposal for her to attend the tournament in her cursed form.

Something in her heart skitters away at the thought, and she tries to refocus her eyes—and her mind—on anything else. “So this building is pretty ritzy, huh?”

Nodoka just smiles and nods, her expression the very essence of tranquillity. “This is actually the first time I’ve been here, as well. I think they only finished it sometime the last few years.”

“Huh,” Ranma replies. “Seems like this place is way bigger than any of the other martial arts halls we’ve been to, too. Ya think there’s gonna be more people in the stands that are lookin’ for a place to learn?”

“That’s my hope, son. It’s been some years since a major iaido tournament was held here in Tokyo, but they tend to attract aspiring iaidoka from the area as well as from around the country.”

Briefly shocked out of half-lidded agreement, Ranma’s eyes widen and her voice swaps to a sharp whisper, uttering a sequence of words she never thought she’d have to. “Ma! Careful who you’re callin’ ‘son’, I’m tryin’ not to get any more weird looks, okay?”

“Hmm, you are right. Perhaps ‘daughter’ is more apt?”

“…Okay, I’m gonna head over and get registered now,” Ranma replies, at least in part so her mother doesn’t see the spreading blush across her cheeks.

After picking up her schedule and examination time, Ranma spends a few moments perusing the list of events. Her examination isn’t until later in the afternoon, so she’s mulling over which of the eighth-dans she wants to see when the flash of a black and gold tenugui in the corner of her eye
forewarns her to imminent doom. “Oh for the love of—” Ranma’s whole body tenses with exasperation. “Ryoga.”

“So…” he begins, eyes wandering over her body with an audacity that’s making Ranma a little uncomfortable. “What’s with the getup?”

“What’s up is that I didn’t know you were gonna be sneakin’ around here, for one thing! What are you doing here?”

“So, you break out the chick costume whenever I’m not around, or…?”

“Ugh, no, just—look. Ya ever learn things about your parents that you didn’t figure you’d ever wanna find out?”

“I barely see my parents, man. With how late they always get in, I kinda figure they’re as bad at directions as I am.”

“Yeah well, I’m thinkin’ Ma might be on the upswing on the whole ‘treat me like the daughter she never had’ thing. You don’t wanna know what my closet looks like right now.”

“Look, if you’ve got something you wanna tell me…”

“Shaddup, Ryoga! You know what I mean!” Ranma snaps, a little too loudly, her cheeks flushing. “Sides, it ain’t exactly the worst to see her happier than she’s looked in a while…”

“Well, Ranma, guess you’re gonna get used to playing dressup for a while,” Ryoga answers with a barely-concealed snicker.

“Yanno the worst part is, there was kinda no way out of it this time, what with the rain and stuff, but the whole angle she had on me to start was that I’ll be a role model for the girls, and the guys will be too busy oglin’ me to care whether I waved around the sword like a helicopter. Like, sure, thanks for banking on me gettin’ treated like a piece of meat, Ma. Can’t wait until we have a bumper crop of pervs joining the dojo.”

“Don’t worry, Lady Saotome, I’ll make sure to defend your honour from the crowd of perverts we’re about to get overrun by.”

“I hate you so much, dude.”

“Hmph. We’ll see whether you still think that when the Hentai Horde is at the gates.”

“Hentai Horde? Haha, what the hell are you even on about now?” Ranma asks, not sure whether it’s funny or unsettling to hear Ryoga feign some kind of overdone display of chivalry for her, even in jest. “You know what, never mind. You’ve always been a weirdo, I don’t know what else I expected. So are you testing today or what?”

“Nah, you know I’m more into the kendo side of things anyway.”

“Right, one too many hits to the head. Explains why it looks like you forgot who I am and started pullin’ a white knight like we’re back in grade school and I’m Akari.”

“Hey, that’s a low blow, Saotome.”

“If only. Man, if gettin’ ya in the you-know-where was a legal hit in kendo, now that’d be something worth watching.”
“Awfully easy to say for the one who’s missing the you-know-wheres right now.”

Ranma bursts out laughing despite herself. “Oof, talk about low blows. Now come on dumbass, let’s get some lunch. I’m in the clear until 2 and if you just came here to ogle the iaido girls, I’ll be at the yakiniku place across the street.” Before she stops to think about whether it’s a good idea, she punctuates it with a wink, and nearly stops her own heart in the process.

“You know, Ranma, you sure can pack it in for all that you’re a complete shortstack. Are you even over 150 in that form?”

“Hey, free food is free food, I’m not gonna let my chances go to waste here just because you got some complex about how much girls are supposed to eat. And for your information, I’m 151 and a half,” she says, with a little too much earnestness for Ryoga’s comfort.

“Look, you…just because you can pull off the puppy eyes look, don’t get used to it…”

“Man, you are a total mark, Ryoga. I can’t wait to see how bad you get played when it’s an actual girl doing it.”

“Since you’ve obviously decided to throw out your commitment to our vow of brotherhood on its ass, probably not that much worse.”

“If it gets me another order of pork belly, I’ll do whatever it takes. Anyway, what gives? Whatever idea you’ve got of your ‘vow of brotherhood’, you’re definitely missing the law about spotting your buddy a couple yen for a meal.”

“Maybe I’d buy that if you didn’t play dirty, Saotome,” Ryoga answers, turning his chin up with indignation. “That was hard-earned money that you fleeced me out of. Consider your protection from the oncoming pervert squad cancelled.”

“Right, can’t wait,” Ranma breathes, rolling her eyes. As the two enter the large arena, she can see that there’s a fair number of people sitting in the stands, some clearly there to support friends or family, and others in hakama and gi who might still be waiting to test. If her mother is really right that a good performance could motivate some of them to inquire about their dojo, now she knows the audience she’s going to have to play to. “Well, there’s your people, Ryoga. A full line-up of perverts right there for you to join while I wow the crowd. Guess we’re gonna see whether they lose their sense of decency when I put on the light show. Same goes for you. Wish me luck!”

“Ranma, you bastard…” Ryoga mutters, but Ranma’s already turned and headed for the examiners, moving with such carefree levity that Ryoga can’t help but feel vaguely pissed off. Heading for a spot in the stands with a few other people that look to be his age, he takes a seat and tries to forget the part of him that kind of wants to punch Ranma for suckering him into buying her lunch, (and especially the part of him that thinks she’s kind of cute when she does it), and just appreciate the technical display that she puts on for what it is: artistry and advancement in a martial art she’s been practising since childhood.

Meanwhile, near the centre of the arena Ranma casts off her sword bag, standing face to face with the examiners; now that it’s just her and the sword, whatever petty apprehension she might have felt over her mother’s schemes, or the fear of discovery, or whatever just happened with Ryoga, has melted away into the calming ritual of reiho. The sequence of bows, motions of the sword, and
tying of the cord of her scabbard to her sash follows with ancient fluidity, more than a decade of practice behind every gesture, as she shifts into the half-seated position of tatehiza.

First: ukigumo, “drifting cloud”. Springing up backwards, she jerks her sword away from an oncoming attacker, then bringing the hilt forward again to draw, a swift shift of her legs returns her to a half-crouch before she strikes again. Removing one hand from the hilt, it follows behind the sword as she slashes, quickly pulling it skyward again as her legs organically bring her to a kneel, allowing her to make a final angled overhead strike. With her imaginary opponent dispatched, a quick flick of the sword to the side casts away excess blood, before a lightning-quick sheathing that returns her to a neutral position.

Second: yama-oroshi, “wind blowing down from the mountains”. Here, she begins with an aggressive strike with the butt of the hilt, before snatching the sword back into range for her right hand to draw. Now perpendicular to her opponent, she first holds the sword out, before using her left hand to guide a powerful slash across her body. She rotates the sword with ease until it points toward a corner of the ceiling, then directly up, and then—both hands gripping the hilt—a vertical cut downwards. Once again, her sword is thrust to the side, and once again sheathed in a single, smooth motion.

Then, the protocol of reiho once again, but in reverse. As her exercise draws to a close, her mind flicks back from a single-minded focus on the kata and interior focus on her body and sword, slowly taking in the scale of the arena. The formal component of her test over, Ranma bows out of the examination area and heads for the stands, searching for a glimpse of Ryoga’s gaudy bandana or her mother’s red hair. When she doesn’t see either immediately, she lets out a sigh as her mind decompresses from the test, taking a moment to catch her breath.

“Um, hi?” an unfamiliar voice behind her utters. A gentle tap on the shoulder confirms to Ranma that someone’s trying to get her attention, and she turns around.

“Uh, hey there,” Ranma replies, glancing over at the girl who’s approached her. Looking to be around her age, her brilliant black hair cascades in a gentle inverted bob, framing warm brown eyes and a sheepish smile. She seems tall to Ranma, before Ranma reminds herself mentally that everyone is tall at her height.

“I saw you down there on the arena. What rank are you testing for? You’re pretty good.”

“Oh, thanks.” A faint blush fills Ranma’s cheeks; it isn’t exactly every day a pretty girl will walk up and compliment him. Or that is, Ranma forcibly reminds herself, her. “I’m testing for fourth-dan. Just here looking, or you takin’ a test too?”

“Wow, that’s a pretty high rank! You must have practised a lot to get where you are. I’m just hoping to get shodan here.”

“My Ma actually runs a dojo, so I’ve been learning in her style since I was a kid.”

The girl’s face seems to light up. “It’s so cool to see another girl here, actually. It can be kind of tough to be a girl in martial arts, huh?”

Ranma laughs awkwardly. “Heh, yeah, I guess. I dunno, Ma’s been teaching me for a long time so I never thought it was that weird.”

“Well, I think that’s great,” the girl replies, before glancing down at Ranma’s zekken. “So, Saotome, huh? My name’s Akane Tendo.”
“I’m Ranma.”

“Well, it’s nice to meet you, Ranma Saotome.”

“Hey, you don’t gotta be all formal about it. Just Ranma is fine.”

“Okay, Ranma then.” Akane bites her lip, looking unsure of how to continue. “So…you’re local, right? Is your mother’s dojo looking for more students? I’ve been kind of looking for a place to learn for a while now…”

Ranma can’t decide whether to feel vindicated that she’s succeeded in getting Akane interested in joining the dojo, or resentful that her mother’s plot is actually working. Still, she can’t help but flash a grin. “Oh, yeah, actually. Her place is in Nerima, by Shakujii Station. This year’s classes are about to start up, and we have a few people who are heading out, so there’s definitely some room for new members.”

“Oh, small world! I live over in Furinkan, so not too far away at all really. In that case…I’ll probably try to get in touch soon. Do you have a number in the phone book?”

“Yeah, should be there. If not, Ma’s around here somewhere today, I can hassle her about giving you some contact info.” Ranma peers out at the crowd searching. “Speakin’ of, I should probably go see if I can find her…”

“I’ll let you get to it. It was good to meet you, Ranma. And listen, even if things don’t work out with the class, you seem pretty cool. If you’re okay with it, I’d like to be friends.”

“Friends, huh? Sounds good.” Ranma surprises herself by thinking it, but the idea of a normal friendship, even with someone who more or less takes it as a given that she’s a girl, sounds refreshingly comforting. In the last few months since her father’s ridiculous stunt, the relationships in her life had become somewhat narrowed in scope; with the possibility of becoming unrecognizable as far away as a rainy day or a glass of water, only her parents and Ryoga are in on the secret, and she worries about maintaining contact with others, if the risk would be that the same thing happens with them as it did with Ryoga. And as much as it frustrated Ranma to have to admit, the truth was that her female form was “safer” from the threat of random squalls and the majority of incidental mishaps.

Akane beams with warmth, and Ranma feels a little more like she’s making the right decision. Thinking through logistics for a moment, she speaks again. “Hey, listen Akane, I’ve got a buddy I wanted to catch up with before I get outta here, but I gotta find Ma anyway since I’m headin’ back to Nerima with her. Wanna tag along and meet her, maybe see if you can work out whether you can join the class?”

Akane looks genuinely surprised, as if she has no idea what friendship actually entails. “Oh, if you don’t mind?”

“Nah, it’s no trouble. I’m sure the two of you are gonna get along anyways.” Ranma motions to Akane, and the two of them head off in the direction of the building’s main lobby.

“Is your mother a lot like you?”

“Uh, how do you mean?”

“Um,” Akane says, like she suddenly regrets asking, “well, Ranma, you’re kinda…boyish? Not that I think there’s anything wrong with that!” she adds frantically. “I mean, it’s—it’s nice. To see a girl who isn’t afraid to be herself.”
Ranma looks at her for a moment, trying to process exactly what Akane’s just said, and breaks out into peals of laughter. “Ha, oh that’s great. Naw, she’s about as different from me as it gets. Really nice. Though,” she says, her voice shifting to a conspiratorial whisper, “lately she’s been all about gettin’ me to try out a buncha girly shit. Guess she’s thinking the same way as you. Uh, no offence or anything.”

“None taken. Don’t worry, your secret is safe with me.” She puts on a devilish smile, like she knows more than she lets on, and Ranma goes stiff like she’s instantly aged a decade.

“Right, cool,” she says, once again relying on nervous laughter to cover for her. “So how about you, Akane? Your folks into martial arts too?”

“Well, my mother died when I was really young.”

“Aw. Sorry, that was stupid of me, I shouldn’t’a—”

“Don’t worry about it, silly. It was a long time ago. Anyway, he’d never say it, but I think my dad always wanted a son to ‘carry on the family legacy’ in martial arts. My two sisters were never all that interested in it…so that left me.” Akane wears a thin-lipped grimace briefly, but her face snaps out into a look of embarrassment just as quickly. “Now I’m sorry, I shouldn’t be whining or anything.”

“Naw, don’t sweat it. Now that you say it, I think our dads are a lot more similar than you might think,” Ranma replies with a snort. “So what kinda martial arts does your old man do?”

“The Tendo school is kind of old-fashioned and there’s a bunch of different subschools, even some unarmed techniques in there. It’s mostly focused on iaijutsu and kenjutsu, so it’s a good fit for learning iaido and kendo, but there’s only so much you can adapt on your own before you’re better off learning formally.”

“Huh, I can see that. My dad’s kinda come up with his own style, calls it the Saotome School of Indiscriminate Grappling. Don’t get me wrong, he could probably kick just about anybody’s ass, but he ain’t had much luck teachin’ it since he got himself kicked outta the kempo federation. Upside, if I ever got caught in a wuxia action flick, no way I’d lose.”

“Kicked out? There’s a story there…”

“Trust me, there’s basically nothin’ about my Pops that isn’t a story.”

Before long, Ranma and Akane come face-to-face with Nodoka. When she sees that Ranma is bringing along a plus one, her face radiates with a serenity that can only come from being utterly vindicated. “Hello, daughter,” she says. “And Ranma’s friend…?”

“Hey, Ma. This is Akane Tendo, she was thinking of joining a new dojo. I thought you could run her through what ya do, see if she’s a good fit.”

“I see. It’s wonderful to meet you, Ms. Tendo.”

“Thank you, the pleasure is mine,” Akane replies shyly.
“Alright, Ma, I’m gonna see if I can’t find Ryoga before we check out. Nice talking to ya, Akane.” Ranma, feeling like she’s done her job, waves the two of them off, and heads back into the arena.

As she wanders back, on her own this time, she briefly to herself what to make of the past few hours. More to the point, would any of this have happened if she’d attended in a male form? If the rain had let up soon enough, if she’d have banked on some kind of harebrained scheme to try to change her in a safe area—or hell, if her father hadn’t doused her with the damned cursed Chinese spring water—where would she be now? Would Akane still have approached her out of a sense of admiration, intent on making friends? Almost every iteration of the world Ranma can think up ends up in this strange what-if scenario, where her body, something that up to this point she’s considered more an adaptable tool than anything else, can change everything about the way she’s viewed.

Uneasy thoughts churn inside her—is the same thing changing her relationship to her parents? To Ryoga? The possibilities are as wide-open as they were frightening, and hang loosely in her mind as she searches the open area for Ryoga. As she passes by the stands, eyes poring over each section, she can’t help but feel a twinge of self-consciousness as she notices the glances she occasionally receives back in kind.

“Ranma, *there* you are.” Ryoga runs up to her from the side, voice half-breathless like he’s been searching for her himself.

“Uh, yeah. Were you looking for me? With your sense of direction, you shoulda just stayed put.”

“Well, hindsight is 20/20,” he says, rolling his eyes. “I somehow ended up in the business office upstairs before they told me I wasn’t supposed to be there.”

“Ha, only you could manage that, Ryoga.”

“So what’s with you? Where did you end up going after your test, anyway?”

“So yanno how I was telling you how my mom suckered me into this whole thing? Well, I hate to admit it, but I think she was onto something. Cause the first thing that happened when I bowed outta the arena was this girl came up to me and told me how great it was to see another girl doin’ martial arts and that she wanted to join the dojo.”

“You mean, she saw… *you*, and—because—” Ryoga starts, before succumbing to fits of laughter.

“Yeah, yeah, laugh it up all you want. You’re not the one whose life is turning into a sitcom,” Ranma grumbles.

“Now that you say it, though…I’m pretty sure she’s not the only person whose attention you got.”

“How do you figure?”

“Well, there were a couple guys up in the stands I overheard. One of them seemed really into you. Like, *really* into you.”

“Oh god, I *was* right. I take back anything good I said about Ma, this plan was a terrible idea.”

“Hey, look on the bright side. At least it means you know you’re good looking.”

“Not exactly the kinda attention I’m lookin’ for, dumbass!” Ranma yells, gently punching Ryoga in the shoulder. “Ha, not that it matters that much I guess, long as they sign up for the class.”

“Well, I guess it’s fine for now. But what are you going to do once they join the class, if they’re
only there to see, you know, the redhead?"

Suddenly Ranma goes stock still, like she hasn’t thought through the totality of the consequences of her attendance in female form until this moment. For a few seconds, her face is totally blank, before, slowly, she speaks again with an eerie quietness. “Oh, I’m gonna kill her.”

In an isolated stretch of hallway in the Tokyo Budokan, a young man with brown hair sits by himself, eyes gazing skyward, his features carved by a resolute satisfaction with the absolute conviction that he is having the very best day of his life.

“Those malcontents and ruffians and blackguards!” he cries, fist held skyward. “For so long, they have mocked and defiled the honourable Kuno clan. They have hurled insults, and made light of the pain of loneliness that comes from having none to share in the majesty of the Kuno name. But none of this matters any longer, for I have found mine own true purpose on this day! I, Tatewaki Kuno, will ever after forsake the hinterlands of Oita Prefecture and its accursed iaido association. No longer shall I be the Blue Thunder of Beppu. To know the touch of thy tender hands, the depth of the warrior’s spirit that burns in thine heart, the scent of orchids and jasmine upon thy fiery locks, I will forsake it all! I must know thee, fire-haired girl, and when thou comest to know me in turn, thou shalt love me as well.”

Elsewhere in the building, a redheaded girl sneezes.

Chapter End Notes

Language notes

ゼッケン zekken: The bib/patch worn by athletes; in iaido and kendo this usually includes the person's surname, dojo name, and location.

手ぬぐい tenugui: A cotton hand towel often used as a headband/bandana, especially to protect the head from the helmet in kendo.

初段 shodan: In the Japanese dan ranking system (which typically goes from 1-10, with 10 being the highest), shodan is the first degree rank that isn't a beginner/kyū rank.
“You’re back,” is the first thing Genma says when Ranma returns the next day in mid-afternoon, carrying with him an overstuffed duffel bag, a sword bag, and as many groceries as he can carry. With a noncommittal grunt, he returns to his kata, holding an uncomfortable-looking position with one leg off the ground.

“Yeah, well,” Ranma begins, slipping off his shoes and bringing the bags into the kitchen, “who’d’ve thought, turns out even Ma can be a handful sometimes. Don’t think this doesn’t mean I’m not still pissed off at ya or anything.”

“Hmph,” he answers. Dropping his pose, he leaves the wide-open practice space in the centre of the room and begins picking through the grocery bags. “At least you’re in your proper body today. It’s disturbing to see one’s own son in such a state...”

“And whose fault is that, ya stupid old man? You’re walkin’ on thin ice here…”

“Bah. To think, I come across a tool that allows you to unlock the magical potential within you, and what thanks do I get? My only son and heir to my name and legacy, spurning me as he flaunts himself heedlessly!”

“Ya tryin’ to piss me off until I leave again or what? Hell, ya want me to quit so bad, why don’t you try out some of that ‘Maiden’s Soul’ nonsense and see how you like it?”

“I did try it, actually,” Genma replies, going uncharacteristically quiet. “It seems not to have any effect, anyway.”

“Huh,” Ranma answers. Logically, it makes sense that remaining a human of any kind is preferable to his father’s situation, but it hadn’t occurred to him that his father might be willing to try it as an alternative.

Genma shifts uncomfortably. “Nevertheless. I spoke with the herbalist where I bought the magical spring water.”

“The cursed spring water, ya mean. And you? Went out? Thought you were all about the Saotome School Secret Technique #38: ‘If they can’t see you, they can’t catch you’ these days.”

“You would sit here idly and sign away your manhood so idly, boy? I’m searching for a cure. Or, even better, a way to control the magic held within these bottles, to empower ourselves further with their living essence!”

“Okay I’ll just pretend I didn’t hear the ‘living essence’ crap. What’s this you’re sayin’ about a cure?”

“The herbalist said that she knows someone experienced in these matters, an old woman from Qinghai who lived near the original source of these springs before coming to Tokyo.”

“So? Are we gonna go see her or what?”

“…Is it safe?”
“Look, ya think I woulda come over here like this if it was gonna drop a thunderstorm on us?” Ranma says, exasperation bleeding through his voice. “Put on a parka and a gas mask, whatever, or don’t go. But I’m gonna go see this old mummy and see if she’s got a cure for this. If Ma gets pissed about losin’ her dress up doll, she can go stuff it. She’ll live.”

“That's my boy,” Genma answers, some ghost of his pride returning to his voice. “Well, if you're sure it’s dry enough, then there’s no time to waste. She runs a restaurant in West Ikebukuro. If we leave now, we should be able to arrive before the dinner rush, and have a proper discussion.”

Nodding, Ranma begins to organize his belongings. “Let me get my stuff put away, and then we’ll go.”

It’s not an especially long train ride from central Nerima to Ikebukuro, twenty-five minutes at most, and Ranma’s grateful that, given the time of day, they’re heading into the city. As it is the trains are more or less typical for a Tokyo weekday, but Genma’s panicked expressions—like he’s going to be hit in the face with water any minute—make Ranma feel like anything more crowded and he’d have to bring his father in for a stroke.

When they arrive at Ikebukuro Station, Ranma shoots him a look like see? I told you nothing would happen, pointedly ignoring the exact same unease within himself, always on high alert while in his male form (his normal form, it takes him a little too long to remember), that his secret could be exposed to the world. He’s never been particularly concerned with scientific theories—what separated the things in the world that could be explained from those that could not—but he knows well enough that something plainly supernatural happening in the middle of a train station in Japan with hundreds of witnesses, and the secret would truly be out, something that could never be taken back again. So Ranma leaves his ribbing of his father at a quick glance of smug self-assuredness, and says no more on the matter as he flicks open a folding city map.

“Where to next, Pops?”

“It’s in the first district of West Ikebukuro, so north of here a few blocks, and on the eastern end. The name of the place is Seito Hanten.”

“Seito, like how?”

“Like the Chinese city, Chengdu.”

“So you can read some Chinese characters, old man.”

“Cheek doesn’t become you, boy.”

“Well, ya kinda asked for it when ya fed me some crap outta the bottle you couldn't even read.”

“The life of a martial artist—”

“Is filled with peril, yeah, I got that, Pops. Right now I’m just tryin’ to figure out where this martial artist is gonna go to fix the peril that you got us into.” Rolling his eyes, Ranma consults the map again, tracing his finger along a line on the map. “So up along this street for a couple blocks and it should be just to the left of us.” He folds up the map and begins walking towards the north exit of the train station.
Though his motions and demeanour are calm enough, Ranma’s heart races as he looks down the street in the direction of the restaurant, and the constant reminders from his father haven’t exactly helped matters. With the tumult in his life in the past few months, he’s barely had the time to stop and think of what it would be like to return to the life before his curse became a regular fixture. His friendships as a man—would they return to normal? Would his newly formed friendship with Akane amount to nothing? Would his mother’s plans to revitalize her dojo fail without her female form to teach the new students? The possibilities are vast, overwhelmingly so, and it strikes Ranma that there’s probably a reason he’s tried not to think about it too hard.

Snapping his focus back onto the street, his eyes catch on the sign for the Seito Hanten. Taking a few steps ahead, he reaches for the door and enters, feeling a strange premonition, like he’s about to step into a dream state, into another world.

Once the two of them are inside, Ranma briefly feels like they’ve been deceived, sent on a meaningless mission to a slightly run-down but otherwise perfectly mundane Chinese restaurant in a random part of town. A few antique-looking folding screens decorate the mostly plain tiled room, while a young woman in the corner, dressed in a vivid purple floral qipao, clears dishes and glasses from a table. Ranma’s about to suggest that they must have made a mistake when the woman, noticing the commotion from Ranma and Genma entering, looks up from her work.

“Oh!” she says, seeming faintly surprised. “Welcome, customers. I’m sorry to say that we are currently closed. We begin serving dinner at 5.”

Ranma glances back at his father, who speaks up. “This is the restaurant owned by the elder Kelun, is it not?” He stumbles over the Chinese pronunciation, but the message is clear nevertheless.

The woman seems to hesitate, eyes darting back and forth between Ranma and Genma. It occurs to Ranma that two grown men showing up at an old woman’s Chinese restaurant, one of them showing barely any skin, sounds like it comes straight out of the plot of some yakuza movie. “If you have business with Grandmother, you will be able to speak with her when the restaurant is open.”

“Tell her Elder Yao sent us. She said that Kelun might know something of the Zhouquan spring waters.”

“Zhòuquán,” she whispers breathily, like Genma’s just uttered a magic word. Well, in a sense, Ranma supposes, he has. Suddenly, her expression hardens. “I will get Grandmother. Please wait here, customers.”

She heads into the kitchen, and quickly returns holding the arm of an old woman. Though the days of her physical fitness seem to have passed her by many years ago, something that Ranma sees—perhaps in her eyes—makes him feel a strange reverence, like he knows that she once wielded a terrifying strength. The way she looks at him and Genma, a thoughtful appraisal followed by a wicked grin, only amplifies the feeling.

“Hah. So Old Yao really wasn’t pulling my leg about this.” The old woman’s fierce eyes shift back and forth between the two of them. “But where are my manners. My name is Kělún, and this is my granddaughter Shānpú. Please, take a seat here,” she says, motioning to a nearby table.

“I am Genma Saotome, and this is my son Ranma. Indeed, although I wish it were not thus, the powers of the spring waters we purchased were all too real. Elder Yao said that that you lived near the source of these waters, and might know something of the magic that resided within them.”
“What she says is true. My granddaughter and I come from Nǔjiézú, a small village in the Kunlun Mountains in Qinghai. To the north of our village is a valley with thousands of pools and springs known as Zhòuquánxiāng—Jusenkyo, you might call it in Japanese. There were many legends that some of these pools had the power to transform anyone who came into contact with their waters into a different form.”

“So it’s true…” Shanpu herself seems to be as mystified by her grandmother’s story as Ranma and his father. Ranma glances at her as she says it, and his eyes meet hers for a moment. It’s only now that he gets a good look at her that he realizes that she’s quite a beautiful woman. Her hair gleams with a deep, almost otherworldly sheen, and even with the complex, floral double buns framing her hair, not a single strand appears to be out of place. Her eyes, almost the colour of rust, are wide and expressive, and a slight flush fills her cheeks—and his too—as they each realize they’ve been staring at each other.

Kelun, hardly fazed as the two snap their eyes back onto her, continues. “When I was a young girl, however, the Yellow River had a great flood that spilled into many of the pools, and hereafter it was said that the magic of the springs had been diluted. Rather than transforming those who touched it, it could be safely used to affect the body’s internal chi, the balance of its yin and yang.”

“Then how do ya explain what happened to Pops and me?” Ranma asks, as much out of curiosity as out of annoyance.

“It *is* the transformation, then.” Kelun says, as if answering her own question. “If that’s the case, would you mind demonstrating for an old woman?”

Genma and Ranma share eye contact briefly. “It’s our only lead, Pops,” Ranma says with a shrug, and turns back to Kelun. “We’ll need some water to trigger the transformation. Room temperature is fine.”

Kelun nods to her granddaughter, who steps away briefly, returning with a pitcher of water and two glasses. Setting the glasses on the table before her, she fills the cups and shifts them gently towards the two.

In a fit of whimsy—and maybe, just a little, a desire to get one over on his father—Ranma gets out ahead of his father’s grip, takes his glass, and pours it over him, letting them observe the more aggressive supernatural transformation of Genma. As Shanpu and Kelun’s eyes widen, taking in the spectacle of fur erupting from skin and the contortion of bone and body, it leaves him free to deflect a little attention from himself, chuckling lightly and sinking his hand slowly into the other glass. In comparison to his father’s, his own transformation, extreme as it feels to him from the inside, is visually less spectacular, a small mercy she’s happy to enjoy under the current circumstances as Ranma self-consciously tugs at her pants, adjusting their fit slightly.

“Well, this is certainly in line with the legends,” Kelun says finally, squinting as she inspects Genma’s new features. “And the boy—” she starts, her eyes finally glancing over to Ranma, before correcting herself. “—aha, the *girl*. I see now.”

Ranma resists the temptation to let her irritation show, at least not too much. “You can see the problem.”

“Well, for your father, yes. I can’t imagine the Chinese government would be too pleased to hear of a wild panda roaming the streets of Tokyo. For you, hah! Not so much of a problem, I think.” she replies, cackling all the way.

“Hey, watch what you’re saying, ya ghoul! This ain’t just some kinda joke, this form’s been giving
me nothin’ but trouble.”

“I should imagine so. Yet, even in that form, you are still able to move about the world without any kind of suspicion or danger, are you not?”

“Well, yeah, but that don’t mean I gotta like it.”

“I didn’t say anything about liking it. How much of a problem it is, on the other hand, on the other hand, is something that you have considerably more control over.”

Ranma goes quiet for a moment. “Ya mean like—wait a sec, hey, I ain’t here to get psychoanalyzed, I’m here cause Pops said you knew about a cure.” Looking briefly at her father, she adds, “And for starters, if you’re done gawkin’ at us, we could really use some hot water here. I think if we go any further with the old man like this he’s gonna lose it.”

“Shānpú? Would you mind?” Kelun asks, before turning back to the redhead and the panda. “I’ll be frank here. It is far too early to be talking about ‘cures’. If there has even ever been one, its existence would not have been documented in any source for a long time. I am an old woman, Ranma Saotome. It has been many, many years since the flooding of the Yellow River into Zhòuquánxiāng—when China was still an empire.”

“Hang on, what are you saying? You don’t know if there’s a cure?”

“Listen to what I’m saying, child. It has been easily seventy-five years since anyone would have recorded a single curse from these springs. Did you think an antidote would simply be waiting in the wings for you?” Kelun pauses, as if the question isn’t quite rhetorical, but Ranma makes no move to answer, and the old woman sighs, as if worn down. “I have some old acquaintances who still live near Nǖjiézú. They may remember more about the legends of Zhòuquánxiāng, or failing that, they may know where to read more about its history. If anyone would have this kind of knowledge, it would be them.”

“So, if anyone’s got the cure, they would.”

“Indeed. But you must understand that my primary concern right now is the nature of this curse itself. Either someone has been hiding access to a preserved form of the cursed springs for some time, or the magic potential of the springs is beginning to return for some reason. Your position may certainly have quite dire personal consequences, but do not mistake my motivations as altruistic.”

The three share the silence briefly, eyes focused in thought. Even Genma’s eyes, hooded in deep black fur, seem to pierce the veil as the three mull over the revelations, both on the side of Kelun and the Saotomes. It doesn’t last long though, as the whistle of a tea kettle prompts Shanpu to return to the table.

“Whoa,” Ranma laughs nervously. “It ain’t gotta be quite that hot. Here, I’ll measure it out,” she says, taking the kettle from Shanpu and pouring some hot water into the glasses, then cutting it with a small amount of the colder pitcher water. “And uh, thanks,” she adds, a light blush coming to her cheeks, restoring her original form with a quick dip of her fingers.

“Ahem,” Genma grunts, shifting in his seat and clothing now that he, too, has lifted his curse. “So, Elder Kelun, where does this leave us? We know that the source of these legends is true, but regarding the curse…”

“A proposition, then. It has been some time since I have practised the traditional arts of Nǖjiézú,
but as it will take some time to hear back from Xiǎoméi or Dú, there may be some things we might yet learn about the waters of Zhòuquán. If you can bring me whatever remains of the waters you purchased, and perhaps whatever else Old Yao has stocked, I might be able to learn more about the curse itself, and perhaps your condition as well.”

“That’s all fine,” Ranma cuts in again, “but the old man here is so bad at reading Chinese he got us in this mess in the first place, and I ain’t about to pretend I’m all that much better if it comes down to gettin’ us closer to a cure, so I dunno about how much I can find at the shop.”

Shanpu, quiet for much of the conversation, suddenly speaks up. “I can help with that, Ranma,” she says brightly. “Can come meet you by the station in Nerima and find the Zhòuquán water that Grandmother is looking for.”

“Seems we have a volunteer,” Kelun says conclusively. “Now, my granddaughter and I should prepare for tonight’s dinner rush. I could spare her for lunch hours one day. Sunday? Monday?”

“I got work this weekend, but Monday should be fine. Just uh…not too early, if you can swing it,” Ranma answers, wincing slightly in anticipation.

“As long as Shānpú is here by four, any time is fine.”

“ Noon?” Ranma suggests, and Shanpu nods.

“Then, Saotomes,” Kelun says, “I expect we will be in touch again quite soon.”

Ranma feels a strange buoyancy after leaving the Seito Hanten that he hasn’t felt in a long while, a lightness in his step, something approaching a good mood. It lasts for all of an hour or so, until, as he’s setting up the open space in the apartment to practise kata, a creeping dread in the pit of his stomach reminds him all over again that it’s a Friday, and the first shift of his weekend hours at Cabaret Club Love Star are beginning in just a few hours.

His heart ignites with frustration, and Ranma feels a whiplash in his emotions so strong, so swift, and so violent he feels ready to break something, to see just how deep his fist can go into the wall, to take Genma by the stupid fluffy panda ears and yell so somebody, anybody, could fully understand how ridiculous it is the way in which he’s somehow expected to treat any of this as normal, subject to the whims of shifting weather patterns and his father’s now more-or-less standing cash flow crisis and his mother’s worrisome affection for her part-time daughter.

It figures, he thinks, that just on a day where most everything seems to go according to plan; a cloudless sky and a forecast of sun for days, where his only interaction with the curse has been a five-minute aside, a proof-of-concept that itself seemed to bear fruit in the hope for a cure, that fate would see fit to remind him that the curse is, indeed, a curse. Thinking back over the preceding weeks, he strains to remember a single day where the curse hadn’t been prompted for some reason or another. If it hadn’t been a full day wearing his male form, only to catch a stray drizzle, the desire for a cold drink, or his mother’s fancy to try on some new purchase (no wonder her dojo was barely solvent), it was a day spent in his female form, only to come home and want nothing more than to soak in a hot bath.

More unsettling than the prospect that his female form is somehow becoming part of the fabric of his normal life, though, is the more or less self-evident fact that in his current state, he more or less
doesn’t feel comfortable with anything. What use was it to be “restored to manhood” by hot water, when any of a million kind of contrivances would take it away again? What good could come of becoming invested in the life of his distaff side if it’s going to be washed away at the end of the day?

Nothing comes from dwelling but a wasted hour, though, and soon enough Ranma is weaving through the Friday night crowds at Shinjuku Station, mentally steeling herself for the hours of hostessing. Among the throngs of casually-dressed young women, she can’t help but realize she hardly stands out; her oversized athletic jacket and acid-washed jeans might as well be a uniform. If she sets aside the ludicrous events of her life, she wonders, how different is she from these women alongside her on the train, really? She thinks back to the events of the iaido tournament—how much more different would she be if she were currently sporting another 15 centimetres of height and a flat chest?

There are no easy answers, and Ranma knows it, but it’s starting to weigh heavily on her mind how the division of her body has made the division of her mind feel so extreme. It’s the only relief she has that meeting with Kelun has offered her the possibility to return to the way things were before.

As Ranma pulls open the door to the back entrance of Love Star, she’s greeted by a familiar face in the midst of stuffing her belongings into a locker. “Hey, rookie,” Mariko says, beaming.

“Oh hey, Mariko. You’re lookin’, uh, cheerful as ever.”

“Well, I heard that scientists learned that smiling actually makes you happier. You should try it sometime,” Mariko answers, prodding Ranma in the stomach, “no wonder you’re always moping. How was your week?”

“It was—” Ranma starts, about to find something to complain about, when she realizes that for all her sour mood walking into the club, the last few days haven’t really brought anything but good news. “—pretty good, actually. My old man’s got an angle on something that could get him moving again, so he won’t haveta just be sitting around the house like a slob. And I mighta picked up a second job from my Ma teaching at her dojo, so if that all pans out, I could cut back my hours here or be able to quit. Not that you aren’t great and all, but ya know what I mean.”

“Hey, no hard feelings! This job isn’t for everyone, honey,” she says, motioning to the door to the changing room. “But seems to me like you were carrying a bad attitude when you came in the door, for having such a good week.”

“Well, it ain’t exactly my first choice to be here…”

“Sure, but why let it take away the good stuff? You had a nice week, right? Enjoy it. Let it carry you through the weekend. Don’t let a couple boozy old guys steal it from you just as quickly as you got it.”

“Huh.” Once again, Ranma finds herself placed in the position of reassessing her life on a dime, and she’s not quite sure how to feel that the most sage advice she’s received about her curse yet (she isn’t quite willing to consider the more worrisome possibility that Mariko’s the best source of advice she’s had in her entire life) has been from the senior hostess at a sleazy Shinjuku bar.

“Just think about it. I don’t know your whole life story or anything but it can help sometimes to have a little outside perspective.”

As more hostesses enter the changing room, the conversation turns to other topics that Ranma rather quickly tunes out, but when she moves out into the main room of the lounge, for once she
doesn’t have to fake the smile on her face.

When Ranma wakes up, she’s surprised that she’s even capable of feeling like this on a Monday morning. Sure, she’s a couple hours short of a good night’s sleep, and she’s going to have to brave the ridiculous assaults on her masculinity and manhood that Genma seems to have developed a hyperactive focus on since she contracted the curse, but the usual hangover of demotivation and vague disgust with herself that has accompanied her mornings after a weekend of shifts at Love Star, replaced instead with a sensation of hopeful anticipation so foreign that she can’t even give it a proper name. An afternoon spending a few hours with a woman as beautiful as Shanpu, and the opportunity to learn more about the curse plaguing her? Even the imminent onslaught of insults from her father isn’t enough to dampen her disposition, even as he finds, every day, new and creative ways of testing the limits of her patience.

“What’s this, boy? So spoiled by your mother’s indulgence that you’ve lost even a shred of masculine pride? You look like a woman.”

“Wow, real insight there, old man. What gave it away, the boobs? Or the bottle on the counter that basically reads ‘drink this to transform into the redhead of your dreams’?”

“Hmph. Even then, to accept it with such flippancy…truly, I mourn that my son will never become a man among men.”

“Whaddaya want, old man, for me to carve you up into a throw rug? You’d think me literally goin’ out in search of a cure today would be good enough.” Ranma rolls her eyes as she sets the kitchen faucet to its hottest setting, tapping her foot as the water begins to rise in temperature.

“Feh, disrespecting your elders again. I knew your mother was too soft for you. A man needs to have pride in his own son, and yet this is how he is rewarded.”

“Well yeah, Pops, turns out Ma and I can have a normal conversation even if the kettle ain’t hot enough yet. Yeesh. Least now ya know why I usually stay over at her place after workin’ the weekends.”

“This is what I’m saying, boy! Your mother is treating you like a daughter, and now you forget even the very essence of what makes you a man. I’m reminding you for your own good.”

As the water begins to steam, Ranma flicks her hand under the tap, triggering the transformation with a wince. “Ow! Yeah, real nice of ya to harass me till the water’s practically boiling,” he says with a sigh, before turning around and walking back in the direction of his bedroom. “Well, I’m gettin’ ready to head out and meet the Chinese girl. You can thank me later.”

Usually, at this point in the conversation, Ranma would be ready to slam the door to the apartment and march out indignantly, but to his surprise his thoughts are almost immediately taken up by indecision of what to wear to his meeting with Shanpu. Not a date, he is vaguely surprised to have to remind himself, and as he slips out of his sleep top and athletic shorts he begins for something appropriate to wear in his drawers and duffel bag. Matters aren’t helped when he’s repeatedly reminded that the majority of the best-looking clothing in his wardrobe is intended to be worn by a petite woman, and for a moment his father’s words threaten to knock him loose.

*Your mother is treating you like a daughter.*
“Maybe so, pops,” Ranma mutters to himself, “but I can’t say it ain’t better’n bein’ treated like shit.” In a fit of pique, he pulls the women’s athletic jacket from his duffel bag and throws it over his shoulders. It makes for more of a tight fit than he’s used to, but it provides him a strange, unplaceable comfort as he gives his outfit a quick once-over, before deeming himself ready to take on the world. Grabbing his bag, he darts to the kitchen briefly to recover the two bottles of cursed water, and ducks out the door without so much as a goodbye.

When Ranma arrives at Shakujii Station, it’s thankfully free of any large crowds, and he contents himself to lean against a railing, glancing periodically over at the entrance to the train station. So while he hears an insistent, rising whine in the background, it isn’t until he’s a half-second from being bowled over that he realizes someone has decided to casually disregard the distinction between the street and the sidewalk, her Fuji Rabbit scooter leaping up onto the pavement and coming to a screeching skid right in front of him. Wearing her hair up and swimming in a Chinese army surplus bomber jacket, she’s hardly recognizable to Ranma, but no less attractive, and that’s when everything finally aligns in his head: this is Shanpu. “Ranma!” she says with an infectious euphoria.

“Shanpu, uh, hey,” Ranma replies weakly, in the midst of trying to calculate whether he’s alive through his own martial arts instincts, insane discipline on the part of Shanpu, or merely sheer luck. “Thought you were gonna come by train. Nice scooter, though.”

Shanpu just winks. “Thought it might be more fun this way. Want to get on?”

“Uh, yeah. Lead the way.” Still recovering from the disorientation of what he’s half-sure was mere moments away from a gruesome trauma scene, Ranma jumps onto the back of the scooter, only to be dimly alerted by his own body that holding on tightly to Shanpu wouldn’t exactly help the matter of the rising flush of attraction. Cursing under his breath, he half-seriously wonders whether he might not have been better off staying in his female form today.

A few seconds of awkward adjustment and he thinks he’s in the clear, but Shanpu just glances back at him, whispers “enjoy the ride”, and *smirks*, and Ranma sees his life flash before his eyes.

He’s not sure whether to be thankful or not that Elder Yao’s herbal remedy store isn’t a long way from the station, but the expression of pure bliss on Shanpu’s face tells him everything he needs to know about how she felt about it, and all at once a set of puzzle pieces locks into place in his head like a light switch.

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“Come on, Ranma,” Shanpu says, throwing a bike lock around her scooter and giving him an effortless smile.

His heart now beating a million times a minute, and flush with (possibly misplaced) confidence, he jogs up to the door of the shop, holds the door, and once they’re inside, tries some small talk. “So, you uh, come here often?”

Shanpu giggles, but indulges him nonetheless. “Not a lot of traditional Chinese herbalists in the city limits. Mostly in Yokohama Chinatown. The community from Qinghai here is small as well, so most of us know each other. We’ve come here since many years for supplies for grandmother.”

“Guess cursed water wasn’t on the shopping list though, huh?”

“Actually, grandmother tells me last night, she used to give me cat’s water when I was younger. Supposed to be good for ambition and independence!”

“She gave you—right, it was just regular water then, far as anyone knew. Lucky that didn’t
“Transform ya.”

“Don’t know about that, I think cats live pretty good lives!” Shanpu gives a wink, and Ranma can’t help but think her playful grin can be called anything other than *feline*.

“Sure, less the pound catches ya and decides you’re better off gettin’ fixed.”

She just sticks out her tongue in response, and the two share a laugh as they make their way through the narrow aisles of the shop to the section with the bottles of Zhòuquán spring water. Looking over the various bottles, Ranma can’t help but wonder whether he came out unlucky to be cursed at all, or whether he should be counting his lucky stars that his dad didn’t stumble across Cursed Springs Water of Transformation: Octopus.

Shanpu handles a bottle with so many characters on it Ranma can’t even begin to guess what it might contain. “Think I found the worst one. Cursed Springs Water of Transformation: Ox-Crane-Eel-Yeti.”

“That sounds like some kinda medieval torture. Remind me not to get on your grandma’s bad side.”

“Trust me, grandmother’s bad side makes you pray you had Ox-Crane-Eel-Yeti curse,” Shanpu says gravely.

“Uh, I’ll stick with what I’ve got now,” Ranma says nervously, and glances back at the shelf. Trying to lighten the conversation, he starts trying to identify the unique bottles to pick up. “So how many of these are we getting? All the ones ’sides for the two Pops already picked out?”

“Should be around eight or so,” Shanpu answers, picking out a handful of them and setting them on the ground, before running over to pick up a plastic basket to put them in.

“Alright, I got here, uhhh, Duck, Black Pig, Ox-Crane-whatever, Octopus, and Twins, plus the Maiden and Panda ones.”

“Here, Cat and Pious Man,” she says, grabbing two more. “Should be enough so Grandmother can maybe learn something from them.”

“Okay, lemme bring those up. You need anything else?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll buy things for grandmother myself.”

Ranma nods, and carries the basket full of terrifying, terrifying bottles over to the cash register. Cringing slightly at the cost, he nevertheless slides a pair of 10,000 yen bills over the countertop, making a mental note to drag his father over the coals for buying fake medicine for almost 3,000 yen a pop. He’s adjusting the bag straps on his shoulder and preparing to leave when he hears a shout, followed by what could only be a string of Chinese expletives. In front of Shanpu is a young man who looks to be about their ages, with long hair and thick-rimmed glasses, in a state of something between lovestruck awe and blind confusion.

“Shanpu? What’s goin’ on?”

“Ranma, run!”

Figuring that since Shanpu has already been inducted, if somewhat unceremoniously, at ground zero of his life’s biggest secret, she probably qualifies as someone to trust for better or for worse, Ranma glides straight for the door, zig-zagging out of the way of the bickering pair. Shanpu comes...
hot on his heels, making a beeline for the scooter. Tossing the keys ahead to Ranma, she yells, “Start the engine! I’ll get the lock!”

Shanpu’s gentle lob of the keys is surprisingly well-aimed, and they fall easily into Ranma’s hands. They’ve built up an advantage of maybe twenty paces when Shanpu reaches the scooter, frenetically undoing the bike lock and hopping on with just moments before the bespectacled young man reaches them. As Ranma starts the gas, they quickly leave their pursuer in the dust, and after a few minutes, turning the corner into a narrow alleyway, he slows and looks back to Shanpu. “Are we good now?”

Shanpu exhales sharply, her shoulders slumping with relief. “Probably, yes. We shouldn’t stay put for too long, though. That guy has a maddening habit of catching up when you least expect it. Might not expect it from being so blind without his glasses, but it feels like he has bird’s eye view of the whole world sometimes.”

“Who was that?”

“That,” Shanpu says, “was Mûsî.”

“Mousse? Uh, are you guys related or something?”

“No, why would you think that?”

“Well, like…when ya say it in Japanese, ‘mousse’, ‘shampoo’, ‘cologne’…no offence, but it kinda sounds like a bunch of stuff you’d find in a salon or something.”

Shanpu has obviously heard the comment before, and her good humour seems to briefly run dry. “It is a coincidence. I think it’s like a joke that the creator of this universe plays on us sometimes… Shānpú doesn’t have the same meaning in Chinese.”

“Sorry, didn’t mean to hit a sore spot like that,” Ranma says, face falling like he’s accidentally kicked a puppy. “Hey, speakin’ of, what does your name mean? In Chinese?”

“Shān is same san as in ‘coral’, pú is…not sure of Japanese word, but a gem that isn’t polished yet.”

“Huh. Kinda like a diamond in the rough? That’s a really pretty name, Shanpu.”

Shanpu’s face returns to its baseline state of animated and smiley, but this time with the ghost of a blush. “Thank you. What are the characters in Ranma?”

“I like to say it’s supposed to mean ‘wild horse’, but I think my dad is either illiterate or has a bad sense of humour, cause ran is kinda more like, chaos or rioting or war. Ma is always tellin’ me I should write it like it’s ‘orchid’ and ‘jasmine’ when I’m in cursed form, but that sounds kinda girly to me…anyway, I’m kinda rambling, sorry,” Ranma says, before briefly checking his watch and coughing. “Hey listen, we got a lotta time before your shift starts down in Ikebukuro. Didja wanna get some lunch? I know a couple places over in Sakuradai, not too far from here. My treat.”

Shanpu doesn’t hesitate. “Sounds great, Ranma. Lead the way.”
The two of them find a gyudon restaurant before too long, and as they settle in with their orders Ranma strikes up a conversation again. “So ya never actually told me what the deal was with that Mousse guy.”

“Ahaa,” Shanpu laughs nervously. “Mùsī has been trying to get me to date him for years. He’s mostly normal now, but if he sees me around a boy, it’s like he forgets everything he learned in the last decade and thinks if he chases them off, I’ll date him.”

“Ugh, that’s uh…sorry, that really sucks.” Ranma isn’t sure how to feel that he can empathize viscerally with the idea of men who won’t give up trying to feel him up, not least of which because it’s happening in the middle of his meeting (not a date) with a pretty girl. “He’s not gonna mess with ya at work, is he?”

“He doesn’t dare. I think he’s scared of grandmother.”

“Well the way ya talked her up, I bet he is. Hell, I kinda am at this point.”

Back to giggling, Shanpu puts a hand on Ranma’s shoulder. “No need to be too scared, I think. She seemed to like you. You have a better attitude than grumpy panda father.”

“Coulda fooled me! She made funna my curse. ‘Not so much of a problem’, I’ll show her a problem…”

“You have to admit, when you compare it to Ox-Crane-Eel-Yeti…”

“Okay, point stands. Nothin’ to make ya feel a little better about all the crazy crap that goes on in your life than seein’ just how much crazier it could be. Just kinda sore about the way she treated it like it was nothin’.”

“I think maybe grandmother is making a different point. It’s not ‘easy to solve’, but a challenge she believes you can solve.”

“A challenge, huh?” Ranma pauses, thinking over the framing. “Well, I guess when ya put it that way, it kinda makes sense. I can help her sort out some of the loose ends goin’ on with the curse water here, work with the curse instead of against it, then when her friends from back in Jusenkyo write back, then I can get the cure.”

“Just hope the curse water isn’t about to become a big problem. Maybe 100 years ago, it isn’t such a big deal for such magic to be discovered, but today…”

“Yeah, I’m kinda tryin’ not to think about it. I keep getting nightmares some mad scientist or psycho pervert is gonna discover me and like, cut me open to try to discover my magic or something.” Ranma stops abruptly, realizing he’s threatening to move the conversation into a dark and possibly strange direction. “But hey, your grandma seems smart. I think she can figure out what’s going on with these curses. I…gotta weird feeling about this, Shanpu. Like, kinda like dread, but for a good thing? Is there a word for that?”

“You mean hope,” Shanpu answers, like she’s teaching a child basic vocabulary.

“Hope, huh?” I must be hanging around Ryoga too much. “Hah, I barely thoughta that. You’re right though. For the first time in these last few messed up months, you guys have given me some hope. So uh, thanks. I appreciate it.”

“Anytime, cutie,” Shanpu says, and plants a kiss on his lips. Among the wild array of thoughts that fills Ranma Saotome’s mind, one stands out with an absurd stubbornness: Huh, guess it was a
Chapter End Notes

Language notes:

Some transcriptions for the Amazons' names, since they're appearing in their Chinese form here: 可崘/Kělún, 珊璞/Shānpú, 沐絲/Mùsī, plus the minor characters 藥/Yào 'medicine', 毒/Dú 'poison', 小梅/Xiǎoméi 'little plum'.

成都飯店 Chéngdū Fàndiàn/Seito Hanten: Chengdu Chinese Restaurant.
丁 (Flower Wars)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The trip back from the gyudon restaurant in Sakuradai to Ikebukuro is quiet, but it’s a pleasant quiet; for Shanpu, free of her grandmother’s relentless ambition to squeeze more potential out of her granddaughter at all times, and for Ranma, free from the expectations placed on him by his parents, each with their idea of who they want him to be. Shanpu contentedly yields the driver’s seat on the scooter to Ranma again, and wraps her arms around him and his slightly-small jacket as he zips down side-streets and cuts through the beginnings of rush-hour traffic, but neither of them speaks. For the moment, they’re both content not to interrogate the meaning of their kiss too hard.

In a few minutes all this simplicity will go away, and they’ll go back to their normal lives, with all of the hectic demands of filial duty they entail. Just how much the reprieve is worth begins to dawn on the two them as the sign for the Seito Hanten grows closer, and the grim reality of the end of their afternoon diversion becomes more and more clear. “Mmmrmrrgh,” Shanpu mumbles crankily into Ranma’s back, when the scooter finally comes to a stop.

“Hey, listen, I ain’t exactly hoppin’ to get back to whatever insane crap life is gonna throw me soon as I ditch, but you’re the one who told me that your crazy old ghoul of a grandma could come up with punishments I woulda wished I couldn’t even dream up. So excuse me if I’m a little trigger happy on kissin’ up to her and making sure everything’s like she asked for.”

“Hah. Cute to see you squirm a little like that.”

“Don’t tell me you’re buildin’ her up like she’s one of those shrivelled up old martial arts masters so you can see whether you can make a grown man scared of a nice old lady.” Ranma shivers; for a moment, it feels vaguely like the kind of misdirection her father might spring on her as part of one of his schemes.

“Would be fun to do. But Mûsî can tell you, I’m not kidding! Maybe not a martial arts master, but she could probably knock you out with acupuncture or moxibustion if you’re not careful.”

“Yeah, maybe not so hot on the meeting Mousse, or…whatever his name is, again either. I’d uh,” Ranma stumbles, cheeks reddening, “I’d kinda like to hang out with you again though. Yanno…outside of this whole curse business. Maybe just do somethin’ normal, hopefully not run into stalkers or anything.”

“Let’s do it,” Shanpu replies with a wink. Ranma’s blush deepens, and as his eyes meet hers he’s beginning to suspect that she knows that wink is cute enough to move mountains.

Ranma is about to open his mouth to answer when he’s distracted by the nearby plinking sound of a raindrop. Glancing down at the pavement, he sees a few damp spots on the ground, and groans.

“Aw, man. Just when I think I’m in the clear…”

Shanpu’s eyes wander, but it’s clear her sixth sense for weather isn’t as finely tuned as Ranma’s.

“What’s going on?”

“See the raindrops?” Ranma says, pointing out the droplets multiplying on the ground. “Let’s get inside quick, I don’t wanna change in the middle of the street.” Hopping off the scooter, he tosses the keys back to Shanpu and dashes under the awning of the Seito Hanten to take cover. Holding
the door to the restaurant open, he motions Shanpu inside, before following her lead.

Inside, Kelun sits at a table over a pot of tea. Seeing Shanpu and Ranma enter the small dining area, she calls out to a young woman quietly cleaning tables. “Liú,” she says, presumably the girl’s name, before adding something in Chinese. Ranma can make out “xièxiè” but even without understanding much else, Kelun’s meaning is clear, and Liu heads out via the kitchen.

Kelun turns back to the pair, quickly motioning for Shanpu to replace Liu in the kitchen and start up her own work, and then focuses her attention exclusively to Ranma, who withdraws the bag full of bottles of cursed water. “So we managed to get seven of these, plus the two that Pops bought. Should give you a mix of stuff to work with.”

“Excellent,” Kelun answers. “I’m not sure yet if it will be able to give us any definitive answers, but with any luck we’ll at least know more than before.”

“Guess so. I never asked, but uh, how were ya gonna test them? I mean I know it ain’t necessarily my business and all, but I hope you ain’t plannin’ to just give that crap to whoever. Last thing I want is for the whole mess to blow up and have a bunch of secret agents start showin’ up at my door all, ‘we need to cut ya up for science’, if ya get what I mean.”

“No, it wasn’t my plan to draw such unnecessary attention, nor to leave anyone saddled with a transformation curse. Consider this, Ranma,” Kelun says, before pouring a small amount of her tea onto the table. “If you touch a small amount of this with the tip of your finger, it is not enough to trigger the transformation, is it?”

Ranma shrugs, as if conceding the point, and reaches out with his finger experimentally to touch one of the pearls of liquid on the table. He can feel that the temperature is cool enough that it would transform him, and the tip of his finger tingles with a kind of anticipation, but nothing happens. “Huh, guess you’re right. I could feel something for sure, but the change didn’t quite go through. It doesn’t take much though, the rain out there was about to get me when we ducked in here.”

“Aha,” Kelun says conclusively. “What you felt there was the interaction of your body’s chi with the water. Within all of us, yin and yang, the Five Phases, exist in a state of balance, with constant generating and overcoming interactions. If my predictions about the curses of Zhōuquánhǎng are correct, hot and cold water bring these aspects of you into turbulence, and settle into a stable state by making you take another form.”

“So like, the cold water makes the yin take over, and the other way around with the hot water?” Ranma says, his eyes tracking her with an almost studious closeness.

“Perceptive. That is, indeed, the premise behind what could drive such transformations.”

“Makes sense I guess…what about my old man though? Less you’re trying to tell me he’s a girl panda.” Ranma can hardly suppress a snicker at the thought.

Kelun cackles. “An interesting theory for sure. But no. Just as there are colours, days, seasons, and cardinal directions associated with the Five Phases, there are animals as well. The furred animals are represented by the element of metal, while humans are represented by the element of earth. Altering the balance of this chi could bring about the same effect that occurs with you on the more primordial scale of yin and yang.”

“You seem to know a lot about this stuff, huh.”
“When you are as old as I am, child, you learn a great many things. I have tried to apply my knowledge towards treating the imbalances of chi that bring about ailments for many years, and in those years I have developed an intuition about what could bring about such changes as I see in you and your father.”

Ranma presses onward. “But if it’s that simple, why ain’t curing it just like, changing the chi back to where it oughta be?”

“As you say, under normal circumstances such alteration of chi would be possible,” she replies, before her eyes suddenly display a surprising softness, even vulnerability. “I will be frank, however. The kinds of chi we are talking about in these curses is…beyond any I have encountered. Fevers, wounds, pains—these are minor imbalances and shifts. The shifts in yin and yang in your transformation are so profound as to alter the very nature of your body! To attempt to change or cure this with the tools at my disposal would be like casting a single pail of water onto a forest fire. There may yet be ways of changing this, but they are beyond my own abilities.”

“Figures. Life just really likes throwing this kinda mess at me lately, huh,” Ranma grumbles. As he speaks, he idly traces the outlines of the spilled tea on the table, focusing on the tingling sensation at the edge of his fingers. “So what’s the deal you were gettin’ at earlier? Like with me touching the water?”

“Aha, you remembered. Just as a small amount of water does not trigger your curse, a small amount of the waters of Zhòuquánxiāng should not imbue the curse, but rather impart some alteration in chi, which could be measured. That is my hope in testing it, at least.”

“Right, makes sense. Least as much as any of this stuff can make sense, I guess,” Ranma says, trying to integrate all the knowledge behind Kelun’s years of experience into his own worldview. As a martial artist, he’s always been aware of the use of ki as a metaphor for his own life energy, controllable to some extent through his movements, but to experience its effect in a much more literal, tangible sense, forces him to reckon with something far more profound. “So, uh, I wanted to say thanks for helpin’ my old man and me with this stuff and all. I know it ain’t exactly part of your job description. If there’s anything that I can do to help to pay ya back…”

Kelun’s expression reverts to a small, knowing smile which, as far as Ranma can tell, seems to be its resting state. “Oh, I’m sure I can find a use for you here and there. In the meantime, don’t be a stranger.” Withdrawing her purse, she rummages around in it before withdrawing a business card. She bows to Ranma and offers it. “My phone number, should you need to contact me.”

“Thanks,” Ranma says, feeling vaguely embarrassed over the gesture. “I ain’t got a card or anything right now, I’ll have to get on Ma’s case to get some made. I’ll get one to ya soon, though.”

“Quite alright, Ranma,” Kelun says, nodding with a gentle laugh.

“Alright, well I should probably get goin’.” Glancing briefly out the window, Ranma winces at the ongoing rain. “You uh, mind if I change forms in here? The rain’s kinda screwin’ me over here. Might as well get into some shoes that fit while I can.”

“Be my guest. The restroom is just in the back, to the door left of the kitchen.”

Thanking her, Ranma grabs his duffel bag and slips into the restroom. Now somewhat accustomed to the need to be able to adjust his attire with some frequency, he’s taken to carrying a sports bra and a smaller pair of sneakers sized for his female form everywhere he goes, and he withdraws them from the bag with a small sigh of resignation. A quick turn of the tap later, Ranma slides off
her shoes and peels off her shirt, putting on the bra and her new pair of shoes, before leaving the restroom.

As she exits, she nearly runs face-first into Shanpu, darting between the kitchen and the dining area. “Oh, hey Shanpu,” Ranma blurts out.

Shanpu’s eyes take in Ranma’s form, and though Ranma herself doesn’t quite know what to make of it, Shanpu nevertheless smiles brightly as she answers. “Hi Ranma. Going home?”

“Uh, yeah. Your grandma gave me her phone number though, so I should be able to stay in touch.”

“Good!” Shanpu answers, eyes burning with that vivid excitement that Ranma’s quickly come to associate with her. With a wink, she adds, “Always faster than grandmother, so don’t worry if you prefer to talk with me.”

“I’ll take ya up on that,” Ranma says with a laugh. “Anyway, I’m headin’ out. Talk to you soon, Shanpu.”

Shanpu abruptly brings Ranma into a tight hug. “Bye, cutie.”

As Ranma heads out into the rainy late spring afternoon, her face flushes ruby red, imagination filling involuntarily with thoughts of Shanpu’s body in varying states of undress, pressed against her. “I’m a guy, damn it,” she mutters to herself, as if trying to exorcise the traitorous thoughts from her own head.

On the trip back out to Nerima from Ikebukuro Station, Ranma thinks through the organization of the rest of her week, uncertain just how much relief to feel over the fact that classes at her mother’s dojo are beginning. On one hand, it brings her a much needed respite from her father’s constant haranguing over even the most minor of disputes, especially those relating to the curse. On the other, she knows that spending more time with her mother, now that she’s been more or less railroaded into teaching in her female form, will result in her more or less suspending the social life of her male side—that is, her existing social life up until recently—for large segments of the foreseeable future.

It’s enough to make Ranma heave a sigh as she steps off at Shakujii Station. She has a dim awareness that she’s been doing a lot of sighing lately, but then, she feels she’s probably entitled to it at this point, now that her life has been hopelessly complicated on just about every axis possible.

Certain things are non-negotiable, though, and chief among them is a toothbrush, so she swings by her father’s apartment to pick up her toiletries and some extra clothing, as well as her martial arts gear. Her thinned patience means that Genma’s attempt to strike up ‘conversation’ with a belligerent “Boy, what are you doing prancing around like that?” is silenced with an immediate “Not in the mood, old man.” Soon enough, she’s out the door once again, and headed back to her mother’s home.

The route between her mother’s and father’s residence is well-worn into her mind by now, and she makes the handful of turns by rote, only occasionally glancing up to make sure she isn’t about to run into someone else. The lack of thought needed to make the trip down to Nodoka’s home by Shakujii River just lets her mind wander back to the day’s events, and though she does her best to let her thoughts catch on the signs of the varied corner stores, clinics, and cafés of the small thoroughfare, she can’t keep the recollections of everything that’s happened since the morning from washing over here. The way her father had derided the way her mother treats her, and how she struggled to really pinpoint how she truly felt about it in the moment.
In a way, she almost resents that, plainly speaking, her father is right; it’s impossible for Ranma to ignore that her mother has come to enjoy “having a daughter”, even if it’s something of an illusion. And for the moment, she’s happy enough to sustain that for her mother, if it makes her happy. But in the longer term? Ranma realizes that without a definite end point, the illusion might go on forever, potentially until it isn’t an illusion at all anymore. The idea knocks loose a cascade of ill-defined emotions for her, but more than anything it sharpens the urgency of finding a cure, to rid herself of the instability and insecurity she feels.

After what feels like an eternity of being held captive by her own mind’s wandering, Ranma arrives on the doorstep of her mother’s home, though she can’t decide whether it will bring her deliverance from her imagination or a reckoning. So much has happened over the span of a few days, not least of which the first concrete steps towards lifting her curse, and she isn’t quite sure how her mother will react to the news.

Withdrawing her keys and unlocking the front door, Ranma calls, “I’m home.”

Nodoka emerges from the kitchen, wearing an apron and holding a stirring spoon in her hand.

“Welcome home, son. You’re just in time for dinner; I’m making curry cutlet.”

“Ah, I’m famished,” Ranma says, kicking off her shoes and carrying her bags over to the hallway.

“Want some help with the food?”

“Oh, thank you, Ranma, but there’s no need. Just adding a table setting should be enough.”

Ranma nods, and picks up a tray from the cupboard to bring over her setting. As she does so, the brief silence lets the intrusive reminders she’s been trying to ward off since her walk over begin flooding back.

Hey, Ma, how would you feel if I took away your daughter? Ranma’s thoughts are a whirlwind, as she struggles to articulate what she knows the spectre of a cure might bring up. Yet it isn’t exactly the sort of revelation she can afford to hide from her mother, either.

Wincing pre-emptively, she tries to present it as nonchalantly as possible. Setting her tray by the table, she locks eyes with her mother. “So uh, I’ve been busy for the last couple days, but somethin’ pretty big actually came up over the weekend.”

“Oh? What is that, son?”

“Well, for once the old man seems to have pulled through on something. He got in touch with this old lady who knows about the curse from where she grew up in China. She’s writing home to see if they got any leads on a way to cure it.”

“Ah, that’s wonderful!” Nodoka says, more or less mechanically, but within a few moments she’s already begun to see the problem. “Though…” she begins, hesitation apparent, but Ranma cuts in quickly.

“I get it, I get it,” she replies. A brief lull of silence follows as Ranma tries to find a way of phrasing what she really wants to say. Forcing the words out of her mouth, she continues as gingerly as she can. “Look, I’m just gonna spit it out. Ya…ya like ‘her’, right?”

Nodoka almost flinches, though whether it’s out of offence or surprise, Ranma can’t quite read yet. “I’m not sure I follow, son. You are my son no matter what form you take, and it does not change how I feel about you.”

“You don’t gotta hide it, Ma,” Ranma exhales, an ounce of frustration seeping into her voice. “I
ain’t gonna bite your head off or anything. To tell ya the truth…it’s been kinda nice spendin’ time with you these last few months, even if it’s cause of Pops messing everything up.”

“I mean what I said, Ranma,” Nodoka says, her smile tinged with a streak of sadness, “…but perhaps, just a little, it was sometimes nice to make believe that you were the daughter I never had.”

Ranma laughs self-consciously. Well, at least now I know for sure. “Yanno the curse is kinda taking over my life lately, I don’t want you to think I’m sore with ya, really, more like at my old man for puttin’ me here in the first place. I know ya like it sometimes, havin’ someone to dress up and all, but I gotta get my life back under some kinda control one of these days or I’m gonna lose it.”

Her mother nods, and her eyebrows furrow with consideration. “I understand, son. I know it can be selfish of me, sometimes, but I am proud of your thoughtfulness all the same. I don’t know how much thought you’ve given to the upcoming classes…”

It’s just another reminder for Ranma that her life is circumscribed by the ridiculous plots of her parents, but it’s difficult for her to resist her mother’s face of earnestness. “I ain’t gonna skip out on the dojo or anything, even if it means holding off on taking the cure for a while. Just, when the time comes…I gotta take it, Ma.”

Nodoka doesn’t answer directly, just nods again, but the gravity of the conversation has already changed the atmosphere of the room to a more somber one. She points to the stovetop and says, “The food should be done now, let me bring it over.”

Ranma sighs with relief as it provides her a convenient exit for the conversation. As her mother brings the pot of curry, the cutlets, and some small side dishes to the table, she takes the opportunity to steer matters into safer terrain. “Thanks for the food,” Ranma says, then adjusts her tone. “Say, I had something to ask. I got caught out by the old lady without any business cards when she asked for my number to keep in touch. I figured now I’m gonna be workin’ for you at the dojo, you could get some cards printed for me?”

“Oh, yes, I’m sure I could do that. It will help your students keep in touch as well.”

“Students? Did ya manage to get some more people signed up besides Akane?”

“Yes, actually. There were several young men who expressed some interest in joining the new iaido class. Mostly new faces, although that one friend of yours, Hibiki, expressed interest in returning to the classes as well.”

“Wait, Ryoga? Signed up for iaido? Oh, god, I was right, it is Akari all over again,” Ranma says, holding her head in her hands briefly. “Nobody else I know from way back, right? Ryoga at least knows about this whole mess, but I ain’t out to get any other nasty surprises.”

“Just him. One of the new members even decided to move from Oita in order to sign up. You must have made a rather strong impression,” Nodoka replies, laughing gently.

Ranma thinks back briefly to Ryoga’s mention of someone “overly interested” in her. “Damn it, Ryoga, what have you done…” she mumbles to herself.

“What was that, son?”

“Uh…nothing. Hey, so this dinner is delicious!”
Their conversation continues into the evening, shying away from the unspoken thorn of their prior topics, but when Ranma excuses herself for the night to soak in the bath, the question lingers on her mind, and she sits and stares at the steam rising from the tub, unable to will herself to enter until the plumes of warmth dissipate, and the temperature of the water sits just below what would trigger the transformation.

Sinking into the now-tepid bathwater, the vaguely clammy feeling of the water on her skin serves as a perfect metaphor for her stewing resentment. Towards her father, for putting her in this position in the first place. Towards her mother, for playing along until Ranma found herself in this hopeless tangle of recursive make-believe where her female form had become as real—perhaps more real—than her male form. And towards herself. Both for dwelling on the meaning of this beyond all reason, and for becoming so averse to triggering the transformation at all, even to become male, that she can’t will herself to step into the bath until its contents turn lukewarm.

It’s her only consolation that she feels an unshakeable conviction that Kelun’s search for information on the true nature of the cursed springs of Jusenkyo will yield a cure, so she can put this period of her life behind her once and for all.

The days proceed with an ordinariness that feels almost disturbingly seductive to Ranma. After the awkwardness of bringing up the topic with her mother, they don’t talk about the cure or the curse, and it’s altogether too easy for Ranma to avoid hot water, granting her the longest stretch of time since contracting the curse without changing from one form to another. A small part of her, ancient and ingrained, protests at the injustice and indignity of it, her real self guised under the flimsy ersatz of this petite, redheaded girl. But for the most part, she can’t will herself to feel in such strong terms regarding this version of herself; even in the short time this body has been hers, it’s never been the body itself that has posed problems, but rather the instability of not knowing from day to day how she would be seen by the world, constrained by circumstance to only have relationships with the people she knows in one form or the other.

By the morning of her first class, she’s spent all of four days without a single change in her form, and the most she can say is that it feels normal, reassuring even, that she can be relatively safe in the knowledge that all but the most contrived circumstances will leave her in the same body that she started the day with. Other than avoiding hot tea or hot baths, her life proceeds more or less unimpeded, and it’s unnervingly easy to forget that she’s experiencing a life completely separate from the one that was her only life up until recently. When she thinks on it too closely, she feels a shallow guilt; even as she knows it isn’t her responsibility that she and her father ended up in this state, it’s her father who’s taken the brunt of the punishment; while half of his life has become unlivable, it’s difficult for Ranma to conclude that her own life has done anything other than expand to fit the possibilities of a dual life.

For all the strain it causes, there is an opportunity to it that she cannot deny, so while her father languishes in the perpetual purgatory coming from fear of discovery, Ranma sits in the centre of her mother’s dojo, preparing to lead a class that her male side might never have led, with a group of students her male side might never have met, and a relationship to her mother that just weeks ago seemed out of reach.

Just as Ranma’s putting the finishing touches on a kata, the door to the dojo swings open, and a familiar face appears, quickly giving Ranma the once over.

“Is this your ‘Saotome-sensei’ look? Nice moves.”

Ranma sheathes her sword and walks out to the common area in front of the practice space, eyes trained on Ryoga. “Hey, Ryoga. Ya didn’t tell me you were gonna join the class last time we
talked! What gives?"

“Look, I’ve led a lonely life, man. You go on telling me that not one, but two cute girls are going to be part of this iaido class, and you expect me not to join? What a joke!”

“I’m a guy, dumbass.”

“Oh, please. Saying that when you have such a nice figure…”

“Look, you try on a Chinese curse on for size and then let me know how it feels when you got a bunch of guys perving out on ya.”

“Damn it, Saotome, you aren’t get me to pity you when you look like that. Besides, even without you, there’s the other girl to consider!”

Ranma tries to ignore the fact that Ryoga says other girl as if she qualifies as one herself. “Well, you’re kinda early for that. I can’t remember the last time you weren’t the last person to arrive to something, but you’ve actually managed to make it here before anybody else this time.”

“Well, I did give myself a couple hours of extra time to get here.”

“Hey, that ain’t a bad idea. Maybe you could do that every time from now on, and ya won’t stop showing up late every time we hang out. Or are you just doin’ this for the extra special ‘other girl’ who ya don’t even know her name or what she looks like?”

“Well, I’m sure as hell not gonna put in the effort for you after you hung me out to dry like that at the tournament! My wallet still hasn’t recovered from that, you bastard.”

Ranma and Ryoga continue to exchange playful blows as Ryoga changes into his practice gi and hakama, but before long other members of the class begin to make their way in. Two figures approach the door to the dojo from outside, continuing a conversation they seem to have been having for some time.

One of the two young men seems to be in the midst of lecturing the other. “—telling you, man, the girl they had at the tournament was a total hottie, if she’s at the lesson today you aren’t gonna regret—”

As the two enter the front space of the dojo, the other one of the pair, noticing the presence of a girl with unmistakably red-tinged hair, elbows his companion in the rib. “Dude, pay attention.”

Ranma’s well within earshot, and the sound of the two entering means her full attention is focused on them. By now, she has enough experience with male attention that she doesn’t do anything but cough gently in their direction, though she briefly glares at Ryoga when she hears him snickering.

Looking up abruptly, the first of the pair blushes fiercely as soon as he realizes his mistake. “Uh, that is, I mean—”

Once again, his friend cuts him off. “Let me handle this,” he says, and turns to Ranma. “Hey. Sorry about Dai, he’s kind of a dope. I’m Hiroshi, that’s Daisuke.”

“Ranma Saotome. You’re new to the class?”

Daisuke speaks up again, seemingly trying to atone for his mistakes. “Uh...sorry Saotome. Yeah, I signed up a little after the tournament, but Hiro still needs to sign up.”
“Only cause you dragged me over here and told me I had to!” Hiroshi answers with a huff.

“Well, you weren’t gonna do it otherwise. Besides, you won’t regret it. Say, Saotome,” Daisuke says, turning to Ranma, “your mom’s the head of this dojo, right? She gonna be teaching today?” he asks, seeming like he’s going to go further before Hiroshi whacks him on the head. “Ow, what was that for?”

“For getting your mind outta the gutter before you manage to dig yourself into another hole,” says Hiroshi in a deadpan.

Clearing her throat, Ranma’s chest puffs with more than a little pride as she announces, “Actually, I’m the teacher for this class.”

“Whoa,” Daisuke mumbles, and then whispers something into Hiroshi’s ear.

The awkward atmosphere is thankfully broken when the door to the dojo is opened again, this time by another familiar face. A girl with short black hair, already clad in iaido attire, dashes in. “Sorry to interrupt!” she cries. “I hope I’m not late.”

“Akane, hey,” Ranma says. “Don’t worry, you’re fine for time. Just getting to know some of the new students. You can put your stuff in one of the lockers over there, we should get started with class soon. Same goes to the rest of ya, get your gear on and come in the practice space when you’re ready.”

Ranma nods to herself with satisfaction, running down the checklist of the things she remembers from her mother’s group classes. She bows to the gate separating the practice space from the entranceway, closely followed by Ryoga, while the others assemble their outfits and remove their swords from their bags, when a final student makes his appearance. Blowing through the door with an overwhelming swagger, a tall man in richly embroidered keikogi and hakama strides in confidently, one hand smoothing out a messy mop of brown hair, the other hand resting jauntily on the hilt of his katana, already tucked in and tied firmly into his sash, as if he’s just been walking around town as he appears.

Glancing out at the small group busying themselves preparing for class, his eyes lock onto Ranma’s, and she begins to greet him. “Uh, hey, are you another student?”

He makes a dismissive gesture with one hand, even as his gaze hardens. “The radiant vision of beauty speaks to me. Truly, is it fate that we meet again today? Hath Cupid’s errant arrow struck such that I might so soon be graced with thy presence?”

“So is that a yes, or?” Ranma asks, more confused than anything else by the man’s overtures.

“Fire-haired girl, wilt thou give me the honour of thy name?” he asks, before his expression shifts with revelation. Everyone else in the class looks on with something between transfixed horror and bemusement. “Ah! But it is the custom to give one’s own name first! Very well then, I will introduce myself! I am Tatewaki Kuno, twenty-two years old. Rising star in the world of iaido. Also known by many as the Blue Thunder of Beppu.”

“Blue Thunder?” Ranma asks incredulously. “…You know what, never mind. Class is starting. If ya wanna learn, bow and get in here, otherwise you can take the jidaigeki attitude somewhere else.”

“Nice moves, Teach,” Ryoga says, back to laughing at Ranma’s travails.

“Shaddup, Ryoga. So, Mr. Blue Thunder? You in or out?”
“Ah,” Kuno says, his face returning to contemplation. “I understand now. Thou art as a wildflower, pliant to the breeze, but concealing a hidden strength. For thy sake, I shall honour the consecrated space of this dojo! Nothing less would be expected from the heir to the Kuno clan!” Having said his piece, he steps up to the entrance to the practice area, bows in, and takes a seat besides the other students, whose eyes are by now utterly transfixed on the living anachronism who’s taken a seat beside them.

Ranma resists the overwhelming temptation to roll her eyes, reminding herself that she’s a teacher now, and that she has to set a good example. If not for any of the other weirdos and practical jokers that seem to have populated her new classroom, then at least Akane. “Right. Moving on. I’m Ranma Saotome, and I’m going to be your instructor for this class. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance. Before we begin, let’s start with reiho.”

To Ranma’s pleasure, the class proceeds smoothly enough once Kuno’s theatrics are dealt with. Starting off with the simplest kata to gauge the varying skill levels of her class, she can see that the “Blue Thunder” is actually quite skilled with a sword, his motions smooth but always holding the positions of the kata with taut finality. It’s easy to see that he isn’t merely talented but also versatile, the muscles in his arms well-developed from athleticism in another sport—given his old-school tendencies, Ranma surmises he’s a kendoist as well.

The other two students whom Ranma knows to be kendoists, on the other hand, share Kuno’s fitness, but appear to be at an earlier stage of transferring it into the grace required to draw the sword in iaido. For Ryoga this is more or less as Ranma expected, since she has a sneaking suspicion he only signed up for this class in order to see the antics of Kuno, Hiroshi and Daisuke that he had first alluded to at the tournament. Akane, on the other hand, surprises Ranma; she can see that Akane has brought elements of her own style into her practice of iaido, curious flourishes in her sheathing and striking, though the discipline of her movements is sometimes wanting. But Ranma is most impressed by the plainly visible fact that Akane is immensely strong, the impulsiveness of her strikes more the product of a seeming lack of awareness of her own capabilities than anything else.

Hiroshi and Daisuke, the least experienced of the class, draw her attention periodically, as she guides their arms into the correct positions for basic overhead strikes, analyzes the angle of the drawing of their swords, and playfully reminds them not to cheat when it comes to sitting in seiza, but Ranma finds herself drifting back to Akane, whose idiosyncratic technique piques her curiosity. As Akane finishes a kata, sword returning to its sheath, Ranma circles around to face her.

“Something wrong?” Akane asks, shifting her position to a more casual stance.

Ranma shakes her head. “Just trying to tease apart what’s Tendo School and what’s the stuff you gotta work on. Not bad, but you’re using your strength in the wrong places, and it seems to be knocking ya off balance.”

“Using my strength in the wrong places? I don’t understand.”

“Think about it like this. Draw your sword like for mae,” Ranma says, taking a step back to allow Akane some space to comply.

Akane’s expression remains unsure, but she nods and begins the kata, beginning with the draw into the first horizontal slash.

“There,” Ranma says. “See, you tend to overshoot when you draw. Ya got plenty of muscle there, but instead of usin’ it to slash harder, ya gotta use it to stop yourself from slashing so hard. If you were fighting someone and they dodged your strike, if you’re overstretched like ya are now, then you’re vulnerable to a counterattack.” Ranma mimics the action of an opponent taking advantage
of Akane’s overextension to make their own move.

“Huh,” Akane mumbles, otherwise listening intently as she tries to integrate the advice into her own technique.

“It’s more about control than strength, though. Still, I bet those kinda muscles would get ya some leverage in tsubazeriai. It’d be cool to see how the Tendo School would look in kendo.”

“I could show you sometime. My family has a dojo as well!”

Before Ranma can respond, she hears a heckle from across the room, snapping her out of her conversation with Akane. “Ranma, you casanova, did you forget you’ve got the rest of the class to teach or what?”

Did he just call her a casanova? A traitorous thought, either unearthed from her subconscious or planted there by Ryoga himself, suddenly springs to mind, of Akane, sweating with exertion after a long workout, heading to the bath for a soak, and sliding her gi off her shoulders—she stops herself there, unsure of what just came over her, and regains control of her thoughts with a violently insistent vehemence, all the while fighting the rising pink flush of her skin. For once, she is extremely grateful that she is not in her male form at the moment. “No way to talk to your teacher, Hibiki. Watch it or I’ll see how long you can hold your sword with your teeth.”

Ryoga’s constant teasing aside, as the class comes to a close Ranma feels proud, that she’s proven she can do the job of teaching, and hopeful that she can have some other prospect for this side of her life other than dressing up and getting leered at while she pours drinks. Apart from Ryoga, who she supposes gets a pass, more or less, for being Ryoga, it feels good to be respected as a martial artist; even if the boys in her class seem to have been motivated to join primarily by her looks, Hiroshi and Daisuke already seem to be taking the class more seriously than they were when they first entered, and even Kuno—well, he’s still Kuno, but Ranma holds out a little hope that his antics will tone down, for the sake of keeping another student.

After the ritual of reiho is repeated again, Ranma dismisses class, only to be surprised by the sight of her mother standing by the entrance.

“Uh, hey Ma, didn’t know you when were gonna show up. How long ya been here?”

“Aww, ya don’t gotta say that,” Ranma says with weary resolution, and calls

“Just for a little bit. I’m sorry to be late, but from what I saw you have been a model teacher today, daughter.”

“Uh, hey Ma, didn’t know you when were gonna show up. How long ya been here?”

“Just for a little bit. I’m sorry to be late, but from what I saw you have been a model teacher today, daughter.”

“Waa, ya don’t gotta say that,” Ranma says. Normally she’d never turn down the opportunity to take a compliment, but the way her mother calls her ‘daughter’ without a moment’s hesitation mixes her pride with a queer sense of self-consciousness. “Anyway, what were you doin’ out?”

“Oh, that’s right,” Nodoka says, face lighting up with recollection. “I picked these up from the printers’. I thought you might like to have them before your students leave, in case they would like to contact you.” Pulling a case from her purse, she presents it to Ranma.

Ranma takes the case and flips it open, revealing the cards inside. Almost everything is familiar except the name following ‘Saotome’; while the name still reads out Ranma, the characters used for it, rather than ‘chaotic horse’, now evoke floral notes of orchids and jasmine. “Orchid and jasmine, huh?”

Nodoka just beams.

“Well, I guess this is what I’m gonna be handing out,” Ranma says with weary resolution, and calls
the attention of the students, now packing up their belongings and preparing to leave. “Hey, everyone. If ya need to get ahold of the dojo for any reason, I’ve got some cards here with my number and contact information.”

Ranma feels vaguely like she’s about to regret handing out her telephone number when Kuno approaches, but to her surprise, he just bows deeply, taking the card with a reverence that suggests he’s just been gifted a priceless porcelain heirloom. “Lady Saotome, I am honoured and humbled by your teachings. I shall be tireless in the quest to better myself that I may be worthy in your sight.”

“Right, uh, well…keep at it, buddy,” she says with a shrug.

Daisuke and Hiroshi take a card with a more pedestrian “thanks”, and Ryoga just waves as he takes off, leaving only Akane, a small smile on her lips as she waits her turn to pick up a card from Ranma.

“Hi,” she says shyly.

“Hey, Akane. Sorry about the whole thing with Ryoga, he’s kind of a dumbass sometimes.”

“Don’t worry about it. To be perfectly frank, I was a little more concerned with you having to deal with, uh, the Blue Thunder guy. Men can be such…men sometimes.”

Ranma winces. As much as she wants to offer some kind of defence for her birth gender, her experience doesn’t lend her much evidence in its favour. “Yeah, I dunno. Some guys can be okay, but…”

“I’ve been on the other side of that kind of attention one too many times,” Akane says, shuddering. “Anyway, Ranma, were you serious about what you said before? About wanting to see the dojo?”

“Oh yeah, absolutely,” Ranma replies eagerly. “Ya-ya wouldn’t mind that?”

“Well, I’d need to sort it out in advance with my father, but I was thinking that in the meantime, if you’d like, we could hang out together this weekend. There’s a new mall in Itabashi that I was hoping to visit.”

A mall isn’t exactly Ranma’s first choice when she considers where she’d want to spend her free time, but she figures it’s not a steep price to pay for the chance to get to know Akane better. “Sure, sounds good. I gotta work nights, but Sunday’s fine if that works for you.”

“Sunday? Okay. Shall we meet at Furinkan Station?”

“Yeah, just take it easy on me, not too early.”

“Eleven then?”

Ranma can already feel the regret from the sleepless night mounting in her mind. “Sounds great. I’ll see ya then, Akane.”

Akane smiles sweetly. “It’s a date.”

The nights at Love Star that follow pass quickly enough, as Ranma’s once again half-cajoled, half-shamed by Mariko into admitting that her week, as complicated as it had been by tensions with her parents, has also brought with it more knowledge of the curse, a successful introduction into the world of teaching, and the promise of reprieve from hostessing. And with something to look
forward to on the other side—her date with Akane.

*Not a date*, Ranma reminds herself insistently as she performs her morning routine, trying to exorcise Ryoga’s corrupting influence from her thoughts with every brush of her toothbrush. *Who’s he kidding, anyway? He’s probably just jealous.* But jealous of what, exactly? At least in this case, Ranma forces herself to remember that Akane knows the Ranma of orchids and jasmine, not Ranma the wild horse. Though Ranma knows the lie of it—that the two of them are one and the same—she’s also noticed the difference in the way she’s treated when in one form or another, and she wonders just what it means for the *real* Ranma underneath the maddening division in her life.

Huffing as she tosses on a pair of khaki shorts, a printed T-shirt reading “BANANA SPECIAL”, and her sports jacket, she gives herself a brief glance in the mirror to appraise herself, trying to tamp down the stray thoughts that ask her when this became so normal. *Too early for an identity crisis, Saotome.*

Shrugging and acceding to her inner monologue, she heads into the kitchen. From the practice space, her mother notes her presence. “Good morning, Ranma,” she says, standing and dusting off her hakama as she joins Ranma in the kitchen. “You’re dressed early for a Sunday. Did you have plans to go somewhere?”

“Yeah, I made plans to hang out with Akane some.”

“Oh? She seems like a sweet girl.”

“Well, she ain’t a bad martial artist neither, if she can just get her strength under control. ‘Sides, I was kinda left wantin’ to learn more about her family’s school. Tendo-ryu’s apparently got some of the old school battojutsu swordfighting techniques, and I figure they might give ya the advantage of some unpredictable attacks in kendo, yanno?”

“I see,” Nodoka says, back to her inscrutable tone straddling warmth and sarcasm. “I hope you enjoy your outing with her, then.”

“Thanks, Ma. I’ll be back tonight, but then I’m probably headed off to Pops before he bites my head off.” She takes a spoonful of room-temperature rice from the cooker, and quickly shovels it down, before grabbing her keys and bag and sets out for Furinkan Station.

The walk to Furinkan is a little longer than to the closer Shakujii Station, but it gives Ranma the opportunity to stop by a convenience store and pick up some canned coffee, and having anything—even just a drink in her hands—lets her push away the lingering questions from this morning long enough to reach her meeting spot with Akane. The station is thankfully smaller than Shakujii, so it’s easy enough to find her on the street corner, rifling through the contents of her purse as she leans against the wall of the station building. The first thing Ranma notices about her, as she takes in her first impression of Akane outside of the context of martial arts, is that she’s one of the most fashionable people she’s ever seen. Though Ranma isn’t exactly a fashion connoisseur, she can tell an expert when she sees one, and Akane’s clothing is impeccably styled: a sharp, cropped black jacket over a white shirt with a printed red heart, paired with a short checked skirt and black oxfords.

“Akane, hey,” Ranma calls.

Akane looks up to see Ranma, and her excited smile soon gives way to giggles. “Hi, Ranma.”

Ranma’s expression half-falls, and half-slides toward irritation. “Hey, what’s so funny?”
“Nothing. Just…that look is very you.”

“Yeah, well, I could say the same, ya girly-girl.”

Akane sticks out her tongue. “It’s a compliment, tomboy. I like it. It’s better to dress the way you want and be comfortable in your own skin than to try to fake it, I think.” She starts walking towards the station and motions for Ranma to join her.

Ranma grumbles quietly, cheeks flushing faintly as she follows in tow, unsure of how to feel that Akane sees her as being ‘comfortable in her own skin’, and even unsure of whether she’s really so wrong. “Thanks, y-ya look nice too,” she says. “You sound like ya got some experience. You didn’t always dress this way?”

“Well, you know. Martial artists can be a tough crowd, especially men,” Akane says, sighing. “Daddy always told me that those kinds of things were a distraction from honing your mind and body. And I believed him for a while. You should have seen how I dressed back in junior high.”

“There’s a but there.”

“But I spent so long looking at the way my sisters dressed and wondering why I couldn’t do the same thing as I grew up, and one day I realized I was keeping it from myself for no reason. And I decided I wasn’t going to let what other people say keep me from doing what I wanted.”

Even from Ranma’s position, living most of his life without having given much thought to the restrictions of masculinity, Akane’s recounting of the story of her childhood rings true to her in some ways, not the least of which has been her mother’s recent forays into curating a wardrobe for Ranma’s female side. “Huh,” she says. “Guess we kinda got something else in common then.”

“Guess so,” Akane says brightly. Turning towards the train platform, she catches sight of one pulling in. “Oh, there’s our ride to Itabashi. Let’s go.”

The two of them step onto the train, taking a pair of seats in the corner of the car. It’s busier than normal, and the two mostly give up on conversation as the car fills up with people heading downtown for the day. It’s only after they’ve exchanged trains, reversing course back into western Itabashi, and step out back onto the platform that it quiets down enough to talk again.

“So what’s the deal with this new mall?” Ranma asks, looking around at their environment. For all she’s never been in this area, Itabashi looks more or less the same as much of Nerima, with small built-up commercial sections surrounding residential neighbourhoods.

“Well, I haven’t gotten to go yet, but I’ve read that they’ve opened a Uniqlo store, and I’ve never been to one before, so this is my first chance to see it.”

“A uni-what?”

Akane laughs again airily. “Honestly, Ranma, I’m impressed that you can manage to look so stylish without knowing anything at all about it. Uniqlo is a casual clothing designer, and they’ve gotten to be kind of a big deal recently.”

“Hey, what’s that supposed to mean?!”

“It means you’re a natural. Come on, let’s go in.”

Ranma’s seen her fair share of malls, but there’s something about the way Akane approaches the shopping centre that transfixed her, and she struggles to understand just why initially. She’s never
particularly liked them, often being dragged in by her mother for some undesirable task, like
getting formal clothing for an event, or accompanying her on dreary tasks of domestic importance,
replacing appliances or kitchen utensils or other things that Ranma as a child would have
considered utterly uninteresting. But as she observes Akane’s movements through the stores, the
rhythm and cadence of her stopping before a rack, glancing at a mannequin, and trying out a piece
of clothing, Ranma begins to feel the tug of familiarity, not to childhood shopping trips, but to
martial arts. Suddenly, as Ranma sits in a Uniqlo dressing room, surrounded by a selection of
clothing Akane’s suggested for her, it all comes to her at once: Akane is shopping like it’s a kata.

Ranma emerges from the dressing room, modelling a pair of fitted jeans, and Akane squeals with
delight. “You’ve gotta get those.”

“Hahhh, they’re kinda tight,” Ranma answers, voice wavering with uncertainty. Compared to her
other pair of jeans, decidedly intended for her male side, this pair hugs her curves unambiguously.

“That’s kind of the point, dummy. They look good!”

“Well, if ya say so…”

Akane holds a finger up as if to stop Ranma in her tracks, and returns quickly with a long-sleeved
black shirt, printed with so much English that Ranma can hardly keep her eyes straight. “Try them
with this.” Ranma just smiles as the rhythm of Akane’s behaviour falls back into place, and her
gaze falls back again onto Akane, who notices before too long she’s being observed. “Something
wrong?” she asks.

“Nah, not at all,” Ranma answers, eyes darting away self-consciously for a moment once she
realizes she’s been caught. “I was just thinkin’ about the way we’ve been goin’ through the stores
felt awful familiar. Wasn’t until ya got me in here that I figured out what you’re doin’, but once I
saw it, ya couldn’t miss it.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s like ya went and founded the Shopping School of Martial Arts, is what I mean!” Ranma yells.
Her exuberance takes Akane off guard. “Wait, what?”

“Yeah, see, you’re running through ‘em like a kata. Every store, it’s like ya already know where
the pieces you like are, and instead of gettin’ caught up in the middle of the store by just going
straight in and standing there like a chump looking at all the stuff they’re tryin’ to pawn off to ya,
you find the rack that’s got what you’re after. No aimless wanderin’ or gettin’ lost, just laser focus.
It’s cool, really.”

“Hah, Shopping School of Martial Arts,” Akane muses, before bursting into a fit of laughter. “I
guess when you put it that way, it sounds a lot cooler than it seems to me. My friends Yuka and
Sayuri are always complaining I don’t give them enough time to browse.” As Ranma finishes
modelling Akane’s suggestions, Akane offers a thumbs-up, and the two begin to pack up and head
for the cashier.

“Well, whatever ya do, don’t let my old man in on it. I’m pretty sure he’d find a way to turn
Martial Arts Shopping into Martial Arts Shoplifting in a hot second.”

“Seems like you’ve always got a crazy story about your dad.”

“Ain’t about seems. Sometimes I feel like his life’s just one long crazy story. Well, mine too,
lately. Him specially, though. I know he’s my old man and all, but he can be a certifiable dumbass
Sometimes.

“Well, I guess just because they get older, doesn’t mean boys have to grow up…” Akane says, rolling her eyes.

Ranma starts to protest, then stumbles and overcorrects, cursing to herself as she realizes she’s in no place to go around championing manhood. “Hey, whaddaya—I mean, uh—like how?”

“Well, think about a guy like your new ‘student’, what’s-his-name, Kuno? You can just tell he’s gone through life without anybody ever telling him he can’t just act like everything and everyone belongs to him. I can’t imagine you haven’t had your share of unwanted attention before that either. Especially with uh, your ‘blessings’.”

“Blessings? What are you—oh,” Ranma says, a fierce blush accompanying her realization of Akane’s implication. “Yeah, these things are a real pain. For all she appreciates the boost to her flexibility and speed in this form, especially as it pertains to iaido, her chest is at best an inconvenience, and at worst, well, Akane hits the nail on the head. “Anyway, Black Lightning or whatever he calls himself ain’t so bad. Just kinda puffed up and thinks he’s god’s gift to the world, whatever he does. Ain’t hard to whack those guys down a peg or two.”

“Sure, if they take you seriously enough to care what you think.”

“How do you figure?”

Akane sighs, like she’s telling a story she’s told one too many times before. “I was the captain of the Kendo Club in high school. One day, one of the members got this bright idea that if he could beat me, I’d go on a date with him. I figured no big deal, I indulge him, and just say that if I win he’d leave me be.”

“Oh boy. I’m guessing that ain’t what happened.” Ranma winces sympathetically.

“Within a month the Kendo Club was twice times the size as before, and half the members had sworn to challenge me until they won.” Akane rolls her eyes. “Idiots, all of them.”

“Yeesh. They, uh, yeah, they sound pretty stupid,” Ranma says, boggling faintly at the fact that people like that could exist. She thinks back to her own high school experience, an all-boys affair, and tries to imagine the same situation playing out. But for whose hand? Konatsu, maybe? Or her own? Ranma laughs uncomfortably at the thought, trying to push it back out of her mind.

“What’s so funny?”

“Ah, nothing. Just trying to imagine the same thing happening at my old school.”

“What was it like? Your high school, I mean?”

Ranma strains to think of a way to describe the situation, noting she can’t exactly reveal that it was an all-boys high school at this point. “Let’s just say that the person who probably woulda been most likely to get caught up in a mess like that was a guy.”

“I thought that sort of thing didn’t happen outside of manga,” Akane replies in a deadpan, before she dons an impish grin. “Was he cute at least?”

The gears in Ranma’s mind turn, and her heart skips a beat, as she’s abruptly faced with the beginnings of a psychosexual bramble that she didn’t realize had been laying in wait for longer than she’d like to admit. As long as she’s had this form? Or, more worryingly, even before then?
And what kind of answer can she possibly give to Akane? “Uh, I dunno about that. I was kinda busy with other stuff then.”

“I didn’t take you for the studious type, Ranma!” Akane says, poking Ranma in the shoulder playfully. “So, are you still all work and no play, or do you have a boyfriend now?”

The question hits Ranma like an oncoming train, her attempted deflection leaving her utterly unprepared. If this were a match of Disarming Repartee School of Martial Arts, she figures she’d be out for the count at this point. “Uh, naw, I never gave it all that much thought really,” Ranma stumbles, then puts on her best Akane impression. “‘Sides, boys suck, right?”

Ranma’s answer is met with laughter by Akane, but she spends much of the rest of the afternoon mulling over the idea behind Akane’s line of questioning, and what it means for her—and for him. Her friendships feel increasingly stratified by the form she takes at the time, and she wonders whether she can even say, whatever her relationship is with Shanpu, whether it even transfers to this form. It’s no surprise to Ranma that the world treats her as if she’s two different people; yet, Ranma has to admit that even the people who know about her curse tend to treat her differently depending on how she appears at the time.

Even as Ranma and Akane while away the day joking, trading martial arts tips, trying on clothing, sharing stories of family and friends, and—most importantly—closing out with a pair of elaborate ice cream parfaits, the foremost question in her mind is whether she’s at fault for this division; whether she’s built up a shallow caricature out of the petty distinction in form between her male and female sides, and that she’s only realizing it now that she’s finding friendship on this side. Is Akane is really friends with Ranma, or with an evanescent shade of her, destined to vanish into the mist once she finds a cure? There aren’t any easy answers to be had, and even as they part for the evening with Ranma feeling like she’s made a friend, a small part of her fears that she’s setting herself up for disaster down the road.

Chapter End Notes

Language notes:

五行/Wǔ Xíng (Five Phases): Also known as the 'Five Elements', the Wu Xing describe the five types of chi that compose all matter and all interactions. Used in a variety of Chinese traditional systems, such as cosmology, medicine, and the dynamics of systems in time and space. The five elements themselves are wood, fire, earth, metal, and water.

前/mae: The first and simplest of the seitei (sitting) kata in most schools of iaido, it involves drawing the sword into a forward horizontal slash, and then a downward strike, all done while kneeling.

鍔迫り合い/tsubazeriai: A particular position in kendo where the handguards of each opponent's shinai are right next to each other, leaving both kendoists in close proximity to each other. The goal in this position is to try to push back your opponent so you have the room to make a strike.

蘭茉: Nodoka's preferred reading for Ranma, as compared to the usual 乱馬 (“chaotic horse”). Composed of the characters for orchid (蘭) and jasmine (茉).
What strikes Ranma most as she returns to her father’s apartment after a week’s worth of distance is what she almost forgets about what it means. A week with her mother, to be sure, but also a week with hardly a second thought given to her male form, and every element of the life it carries with it—a life that somehow, despite having been her only life up until recently, had taken a decided back seat to the spectacle of her other half, with a pair of jobs and a new friendship. With even the other side of her life now orbiting around the cosmological constant of her curse, it’s perversely her female side that’s provided her the only respite from it.

She enters Genma’s space suspecting a coming whirlwind of wounded masculine ego likely to erupt from her father, and steeling herself to his anger, actively scheming to pass herself off in this form another week just to spite him, and yet the keys jingle in the lock, she takes a few experimental steps into the hallway, slipping her shoes off at the door, and—nothing.

“'I'm home,'” Ranma calls in a distinctly feminine lilt as she paces into the kitchen, before wincing to herself. Even for her, she feels like she might be putting it on a bit thick.

“Ah, you’re back, boy,” Genma answers. His voice is so quiet Ranma can hardly believe it’s him, and yet she knows that it must be. “You’ve been gone a long while.”

Ranma struggles to place the heavy undertones to his speaking, even as she commits to her vaguely-formed idea to goad him into some kind of reaction. “Yeah, I started teachin’ for Ma this week and got caught up in some stuff. Ended up hangin’ out at the mall in Itabashi and shoppin’ for clothes. Real girly shit. You woulda hated it.”

“I see.” Finally, with a good look at her father’s facial expressions, everything falls into place, and the cadence of his voice is unmistakable. Is he…sad? “So it really is as I had feared. I had hoped to see my son as a man amongst men once more before he succumbed to the terrible degenerating influence of female hormones,” he stresses the words with a witheringly dejected gaze upon her, “but it appears that it is too late. On my honour as the head of the Saotome family, I must take matters into my own hands and atone for my failure. I hope you are not so honourless that you would not serve as my second, boy?”

As her father’s tone slides from moping into bleak lamentation, Ranma panics into a full backpedal. “Whoa, what are ya—I mean, hold on, old man, ya don’t gotta go that far! I was just messin’ with ya, see,” she says, running to the kitchen tap and turning the water on hot as she dunks her hand under it until it warms enough to trigger the transformation.

Genma’s expression doesn’t change, but at least he’s no longer lunging for the honour sword of the Saotomes, so Ranma considers it a half-success as he tugs awkwardly at his now somewhat ill-fitting clothing. “I imagine if my son hoped to rid himself of this ridiculous curse, that he would have something to report about a cure for himself and his father?”

Remorse creeps up on Ranma the more he thinks on it, knowing that he hasn’t seen Kelun for a week. For most of the time he’s given thought to the curse, he’s considered only how a cure would affect his life, but looking around the kitchen and taking in the signs—several takeout bags and Cup Noodle containers, pieces of clothing strewn about the floor—he can see just how much his father’s life has diminished as a result of the curse, even as he himself has taken to spending a
whole week immersed in the life given to him by his curse. “Uh, I haven’t been in the last couple days. Sorry, Pops,” he says sheepishly. “I’ll swing by her place today after lunch.”

“Hmph,” Genma answers, face held high and defiant as if he’s holding back tears. “I can only hope so.”

Ranma spends much of the morning feeling thoroughly chastened, and without any immediate plans before his visit to Kelun, he changes into more comfortable clothing and begins to channel his guilty conscience through housework, cleaning up a week’s worth of dirty dishes, sorting the garbage, and buying some groceries from the nearby convenience store. It does nothing to solve the unease curdling in the pit of Ranma’s stomach, though, and when Ryoga calls proposing to spar later in the day, he gamely accepts, grateful to have something in his plans that isn’t guaranteed to end up landing him in some ridiculous curse-related hijinks.

It’s only after Ranma finally says his farewells and begins his journey downtown that something snaps in him, and he’s confronted with the absurd epiphany that his father’s been playing him since he walked in the door, a classic manoeuvre according to the Saotome School Secret Technique #3, “Your opponent’s emotions are a weakness to exploit,” along with a hefty dose of Saotome School Secret Technique #27: “Never feel guilty, lest it become your fault.” Now that Ranma sees it, he kicks himself for missing it; in retrospect, the obscenely conjured-up veneration of a Saotome clan Ranma’s barely heard mention of, and for the sake of fulfilling some kind of harebrained suicide pact, probably ought to have been a hint. Even as he steps onto the train to Ikebukuro fuming over being so gullible, though, there’s a part of him that sighs with relief, hope fortified that his father’s still got it, after all.

Catching an early off-peak train to West Ikebukuro, Ranma briefly glances out at the other passengers, taking stock of how they look and act, and, as he’s started to do more often in the last few months, implicitly comparing himself to them. In his male form for the first time in a week, he feels faintly disoriented by his own form as he absentmindedly compares himself to the women on the train, only to look down and be reminded that he isn’t the short redhead right now. Even his walk out of the station and into the restaurant feels slightly off, his legs just a little too long, his centre of gravity just a little too high.

This wouldn’t be such a chore if ya just changed again, Saotome.

He knows, even as he hears his own voice utter it in his mind, that it isn’t a real solution—a week away from his male form has left him feeling clunky and out of place in his own skin, but it’s in equal measures a reminder that the longer he goes without a cure, the more he’ll be plagued by this awkward feeling, and serves as the riding crop he needs to push through the strangeness and into the Seito Hanten, where some new task would presumably lay in wait.

“Ah, Ranma,” Kelun says as he walks in the door, a lilt of unexpected pleasure in her voice. “I was hoping you’d show up sooner or later.”

“Oh, yeah. Sorry I ain’t gotten in touch sooner, it’s been a kinda busy week. Oh,” Ranma says, remembering at least one of the reasons he’d needed to visit Kelun, “Ma got these printed. Figured you might want one so you could call to keep in touch.” From his bag, he withdraws a small organizer holding a pack of business cards, and hands one to Kelun with a bow.
She looks over the card and lets out a low cackle. “Lánmò,” she says, reading out the Chinese characters in Ranma’s name, before repeating it again in Japanese. “Ranma. How floral! Not exactly what I was expecting, but interesting nonetheless.”

“Ugh, don’t remind me. Those ain’t actually the characters, just my Ma bein’ weird.”

“Aha, your other form’s ‘name’ then. Ingenious.”

“Devious is the way I’d put it.” Ranma huffs.

“In any case,” Kelun says, back to her usual enigmatic smile. “A martial artist? Interesting. I suppose that explains how naturally you move in either form, though. Compensating for a different centre of gravity must not be a simple affair.”

“It ain’t as complicated as it seems. It’s a pretty quick adjustment to make, long as I don’t go too long without changin’ that is,” Ranma answers, coughing slightly as he recalls his troubles just walking to the restaurant. “Maybe it’s the whole chi thing you mentioned makes it easier. Yanno, kinda like the chi swaps ya when it’s ‘finding balance’, but literally this time.”

“Hmm…an intriguing proposal.” Kelun raps against the table with her fingernails. “There is much to learn yet about the nature of the curse itself. Unfortunately, the tools I have at my disposal have not yet yielded much in the way of information. In fact, I was hoping I might rely on your help to acquire some more things that might allow me to study it in finer detail.” From her purse, Kelun withdraws what appears to be a shopping list.

Ranma gives it a quick glance and his face twists up in confusion. “No offence, but I can’t read half of this. Ya sure ya don’t want Shanpu on the case?”

“Well, the two of you got along so famously last time. I’m sure she wouldn’t mind accompanying you again.”

He tries not to think about the ease with which Kelun mentions the burgeoning (and as-yet undefined) relationship between him and Shanpu, or the plainly audible undertone that her statement carries of a watchful eye on him, waiting for a wrong move to strike. “Yeah, uh, where is she anyway? Ain’t she usually cleaning up at this hour?” he says. Glancing back at the kitchen, though, he sees no sign of Shanpu.

“She has the day off, but she should be returning from lunch any minute. In the mean time, I had some other questions that I thought you might be able to answer.”

Ranma feels a nagging dread that he’ll be asked to change forms once again, only to feel a brief sense of relief when she begins going down a list of questions about the state of his health in both forms, sensation of temperature and pain, quality of sleep, lifestyle habits, appetite, and so forth, and then back to feeling like he might have gotten off more lightly if she’d just overturned a cup of water on him and prodded at his skull, as her questions become increasingly personal and probing, from inquiries about bowel movements to intimate details of sexuality. So it’s more than a small mercy when Shanpu struts in, bursting with such intense, resolute energy that Ranma feels like she could knock over a wall.

“Shanpu,” Ranma says, eager to have someone—anyone—to focus on other than on the old woman who now likely knows more about his personal life than his own mother. Standing up abruptly, he rushes over to her and whispers desperately in her ear. “Save me,” he pleads.

“Grandmother giving you a run for your money?” Shanpu asks, in a tone that would be kind if it
were not also so smug. Turning to her grandmother, she sticks out her tongue. “Be nice, Lǎolao.”

“Hah! Your boy here is a straight-laced little puritan.”

“Just needs some help coming out of his shell. Right, Ranma?” Shanpu says with a wink.

“Well, you’d best get to cracking it! I have some work for the two of you. There are some tools and ingredients I need if I’m to be studying the waters of Zhòuquánxiāng. Shānpú, I trust that you’ll be able to find everything without issue.”

“We can get everything from Yào, right?”

“I think so, but you may need to make it down to Yokohama for some of the more specialized ingredients. Old Yào isn’t so keen on the lycium formulas these days, it seems.”

“Yokohama!? That trip is an hour each way at best!” Ranma cries.

Kelun glances over at the wall clock and smiles. “Best get moving, then. There will be plenty of time for you to chat on the way, eh?”

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Back in a more comfortable position as a passenger on Shanpu’s little white scooter, and finally free to express himself a little more honestly, Ranma shakes his head and laughs gently. “Your grandma’s kinda weird, ya know that?”

“She get you started on answering questions on chi balance, right? No privacy when she gets started on that.”

“Well there’s that too,” Ranma says, coughing, “but I meant more like the whole matchmaker angle she was after. Like I’m gonna talk about that crap with a mummy like her!”

“Hah! That again? Just think yourself lucky that she doesn’t follow traditional Nǚjiézú law, or she would have already knocked you out with moxibustion, dragged you back to Qinghai, and begun to call you ‘son-in-law’.”

“Please tell me that’s not your idea of a proposal.”

“You’re cute, but it’s a little early for that.” Shanpu giggles and pokes Ranma in the cheek. “Maybe a date or two first, yes?”

“T-that’s a little more my speed, yeah,” Ranma answers weakly, embarrassment colouring his cheeks. “Let’s just get your grandma’s errands over with first. If we gotta head over to Yokohama anyway, we could take a walk down by the waterfront or something.”

“Sounds great. First stop Yào Yàodiàn then!” Shanpu starts the engine, and the two take off in the direction of Nerima.

Not too much later, they’re at their destination: Yao’s Pharmacy. It looks the same as ever, if slightly busier than usual, but as they enter a small crowd of old women seem to be crowded around the cash, cooing at the employee and engaging in small talk and chatter.

They’re stopped dead in their tracks when they see just who’s staffing the cashier’s desk.
The long, silky hair. The thick, round coke-bottle glasses. The “eclectic” fashion sense that seems a good ten years out of date. There’s no doubt now that Ranma gets a closer look who the young man before them is.

And they’re right in the line of sight of him.

“Shānpú!” he cries indignantly, springing forward from his position behind the desk right towards the pair. “What are you doing with this man?”

“Aiya, Mùsī!” she answers irately, doing her best to keep him at bay long enough for Ranma to escape. Turning quickly back to Ranma, she cups her own chest and points at him, the implication completely clear, before returning to upbraiding her longtime suitor in Mandarin.

Ranma sighs weakly. After all of the efforts he’s made to avoid changing back and just have a normal day in his male form, scarcely a couple hours pass before some ridiculously contrived scenario now threatens to force him back. To make matters worse, he’s in the middle of a Chinese medicine shop, hardly an ideal location either to find an easily accessible source of cold water, or to change without attracting more attention than the “lovers’ quarrel” now dominating the centre of the store like a vortex.

Hang on …

The attentions of the shop’s handful of patrons are thoroughly fixed on the loud argument. He dodges out of the way into an aisle with a dingy fridge full of sodas and teas, out of sight of the rest of the shop. The shop’s gotten plenty of business from him and his father—surely they won’t miss a cheap little bottle of cold sencha.

Ranma tries not to think about how he’s just talked himself into shoplifting. Well, guess I know how Pops manages it now, at least. Popping the twist top off of the tea, he pours a dollop of it into the palm of his hand, triggering the transformation.

As what Ranma guesses are the chi pathways in her body resuit themselves to her change in form, part of her wonders what she was really so hung up on, when the shattering of glass alerts her that things are escalating in an ugly way.

“Shanpu!” she shouts, making an appearance once again.

Musi squints at Ranma, confounded by her appearance, but Shanpu quickly cuts in to berate him. “Stupid Mùsī! I told you, you need to get your eyes checked again. Does that look like a man to you?”

Ranma tries to ignore the indirect gut punch she feels at the statement. “Uh, hi,” she manages weakly.

Readjusting his glasses, Musi’s demeanour abruptly shifts. Where before he’d been ready to start a fight in the middle of the store, he seems now to be behaving normally—friendly, even. “Oh. Sorry, my eyes must have fooled me. Who’s that, Shānpū?” Musi asks.

“N-new friend, I met making delivery. Her name is, ah, M-mu…” Shanpu stumbles out a half-faked name before trailing off, unsure.

“M-mutsuko,” Ranma finishes the thought, well-versed by now in the art of providing false information, thanks to the Saotome School Secret Technique #10: “If they don’t know your real name, they can’t find you later.”
“Mutsuko!” Musi cries. “What a wonderful name!”

“That’s uh, that’s my name, don’t wear it out.”

“Well, I’m sure Shānpú has told you all about me, but for politeness’ sake, I’m Mūsī, her childhood friend. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Miss Mutsuko.”

“Ahaha, right. Yeah, I’ve heard all aboutcha. Didn’t know ya worked here, though,” Ranma replies, directing the comment almost as much to Shanpu as to Musi.

“What, oh that? I haven’t been working here for too long, but Elder Yào said that I help bring in business. Not sure why, though,” he says, removing his glasses and cleaning them with his shirt. As he does so, a handful of dreamy sighs erupt from the gaggle of old ladies that seem to have reformed into a group in one corner of the store.

“No idea why a silly duck like you would be so popular,” Shanpu says, rolling her eyes. “Now, we’re here for business, Mūsī. Have to buy some ingredients for grandmother.” She prompts Ranma for the list, then thrusts it into Musi’s line of sight.

Musi reads down the list of ingredients, eyes bulging as he gets further and further. “What is your grandmother scheming up with this?”

“Ya gonna doubt the old ghoul don’t know what she’s doing, or can ya do your job and find us what we’re after?” Ranma cuts in, patience running thin as the promise of her date with Shanpu seems to be fading before it’s even begun, chewed up by this obsessive pretty-boy.

“Uh, right. Well, we have most of the ingredients here. You’ll need to go somewhere else for the lycium formula, though. Fù Lóu Pharmacy in Yokohama should carry it.”

Furo Pharmacy!? At this point Ranma is convinced that either the Chinese are playing an elaborate practical joke on the world, or that the world is playing a practical joke on them. Still, it doesn’t change the fact that they’re now committed to an hours-long detour out of Tokyo. As she recovers from the double take, she merely mutters out a grumbled “Well that figures.”

Musi begins to track through the shelves, plucking ingredients one by one as he makes conversation with “Mutsuko”. Ranma mostly demurs and tries to shift away the conversation towards dead ends as she waits tensely for him to finish with his “friendly customer service” routine so she and Shanpu can get back to the date they’re supposed to be having. Finally, after what feels like an eternity, the two of them have all of the ingredients except for the lycium formula purchased. Musi wishes them an apparently sweet farewell—“Have a safe trip to Yokohama!”—but it’s soured by the fact that he seemed willing to stoop to open warfare against Ranma’s male form in a public place, and, as Ranma considers it, that he seems to derive altogether too much delight in knowing exactly where Shanpu is going to be at any given time.

Though they have the rest of the afternoon to themselves in theory, Ranma can’t escape the feeling like they’re being followed, and that if they stop to let her change back into her male form, Musi is going to crash the party once again. As they return to Shanpu’s scooter for the hourlong trek down to Yokohama, Ranma once again plays passenger. But unlike during their short trip from Ikebukuro to Shakujii, where the two chatted and teased each other along the way, the dynamic between her and Shanpu now feels more tense, more distant. Shanpu doesn’t reject it when Ranma wraps her arms around her tightly during some of the turns made at nail-biting g-forces, but her body language isn’t as fluid and easy with Ranma’s female side, something Ranma’s reminded of with aggravating frequency every time her breasts press painfully into Shanpu’s back.
Never thought I’d be wishing I were wearing a bra this much, Ranma thinks to herself drily. Somewhere out there, she thinks, her father’s old instructor, a lingerie-obsessed lecher who she hoped never to meet again in any form, let alone this one, would no doubt be proud.

Her chance at reprieve comes when they arrive in Yokohama. Among the cramped three-story buildings of Yokohama Chinatown, Fù Lóu Pharmacy brings her the mercy of a restroom, where she trades out her oversized shoes for her women’s pair and dons her emergency sports bra.

When Ranma leaves the restroom, among the sterile aisles of the much more well-appointed herbal remedy section, she sees Shanpu, holding a small bottle of dark powder and looking thoroughly unimpressed.

“An hour out to this pharmacy, just to buy this stupid bottle. There has to be a better way of doing this.”

“I swear, If we get back and find out this crap was just for backup or whatever, I’m gonna pour a whole bottle of that Ox-Yeti-whatever down her throat.”

Shanpu laughs. “Big talking! I thought you were scared of her last week.”

“Yeah, that was before she roped me into a trip to Yokohama on the run from Mr. Four Eyes. There better be some dandan noodles of gratitude and triumph outta this, or I’m out.”

“Grandmother’s ceremonial buffet isn’t for just anyone. You should see what she did to the last person to try to steal food!”

“Lemme guess, knocked ‘em out with a pressure point, put ‘em on the first boat back to China, and arranged a marriage for them to repay their debts?”

“Silly Ranma, she hasn’t done that in at least 20 years.”

Ranma narrows her eyes. “So which one was the unlucky bastard, your mom or your dad?”

“Pff, as if. Shānpú is 100% pure Nǚjiézú. Now, Mūsī on the other hand, I think maybe he has something to answer for…”

“Oh god, don’t remind me even more about that weirdo. Hey listen, it’s like a ten-minute walk down to the pier, ya wanna hang out there for a bit? Just relax for a while before we scramble back up to Tokyo?”

“Sounds great!”

Casual conversation comes easily to them, though the nagging sense of distance remains for Ranma; after a while, she notices that Shanpu, typically effusive with touch, and not at all shy about personal space, doesn’t behave the same way with her female form. In her petty frustration, Ranma fixes her eyes out onto the view of the harbour from the waterfront walk—cruise ships dominating the horizon, the distant skyline of central Tokyo dim behind a persistent haze—but it gives her little to focus on that isn’t the nagging thought circling her mind. Finally, a few minutes into their walk along the harbourfront, a lull in the conversation prompts Ranma to lance out with a question.

“It don’t bother you that I’m like this, right?” Ranma asks suddenly. Her eyes, having wandered for much of the last hour, meet Shanpu’s gaze firmly.

“Like, you mean the curse?”
“I know it ain’t really fair. The one day we’re supposed to hang out, and I can’t even make it a full hour before I got some crazy reason why I gotta splash myself with cold water and lose the guy form.”

“Well, you’re still a boy, right?”

“I mean, if this were a normal day—” Ranma stops, reminding herself that a normal day for the past few weeks has involved either being in female form all the time or otherwise changing forms almost every single day, “—never mind, bad example.”

“I mean, in here,” Shanpu says, pressing a finger against Ranma’s heart. Ranma tries not to think about the pliant flesh Shanpu’s delicate finger pushes up against, distracting her from Shanpu’s intended goal.

“Uh, right, yeah,” Ranma answers, but even as she thinks over what Shanpu says, her mind feels a queer unease with any kind of answer. When she’s a guy, sure, she’s a guy, but what does that mean for the other half the time? Is she really a guy even when nobody around her would say otherwise? What would it even mean for her to be a guy ‘on the inside’, even in this form?

Shanpu notices Ranma’s hesitation, and tilts her head slightly in confusion.

“Sorry, it’s nothing.” Ranma shakes her head like she’s knocking loose a stray thought—an uninvited thought. “Just feel like this’ll be easier when I get the cure, you know? Gets old having how my day’s gonna go rest on whether there’s a chance of rain, or a chance of weirdos in coke-bottle glasses who’ll chase ya down if ya look like a guy too close to his childhood crush.”

“Grandmother sent her message to Xiāoméi. If anyone understands the secrets of Zhòuquánxiāng best, I think it would be her.”

“Yeah, I’m probably just gettin’ worked up over it for no good reason. I’m sure her friends back in China are good for it.”

“Shouldn’t take so long to hear from them, but the Chinese post can be pretty slow to get messages to rural areas. Still probably several weeks from hearing an answer.”

“Ugh, that can’t come soon enough. Honestly, just sittin’ around on my ass knowing I can’t do crap makes it a hell of a lot worse. Or, well, whatever this is, doin’ errands for your grandma…I don’t think that really counts as helping towards getting a cure though. Pretty sure my Pop would call this ‘character building’.”

“What would you call it?”

“I’d call it around time ta—” Ranma stops cold when she glances at her watch. “Ah crap, I’m late!”

“Late? For what?”

“I’m supposed to meet a buddy back in Hikarigaoka in a half hour. I know it kinda cuts us off for time, but,” Ranma says gingerly. “I promised him beforehand that I’d hang out with him tonight, and the guy’s kind of an idiot. If I don’t show up, he’ll stay there overnight or something dumb.”

Shanpu pouts. “So, we need to go back now?”

“Probably for the best. Do ya think you could drop me off over in Nerima and take the stuff back to the old ghoul on your own? We can uh, try this again next week. No crazy errands, nothing else
planned. Just us. How’s that sound?”

“I’ll hold you to it,” Shanpu says, back to her usual catlike grin.

After a day of escaping Musi and crisscrossing the city several times over, Ranma’s glad to be back in Nerima, even if it means being alone in Hikarigaoka Park, in her female form, with nothing else to do but stretches and warmups in slightly ill-fitting clothing, and waiting for an overdue Ryoga to show up so she can take her mind off of the day through a little physical combat.

Thankfully, she doesn’t have to wait for too long before a familiar face approaches the clearing from the path to the south.

“Finally showed up, eh? You’re only an hour late this time, though, so I guess that counts as an improvement,” Ranma asks with a smirk. She doesn’t mention the fact that she herself showed up a half-hour later than their assigned meeting, but then, with Ryoga, she never really has to worry about that.

“I thought this was supposed to be an agreement between *men,*” Ryoga answers. “Don’t tell me the curse is getting to your head, Saotome?”

“Oh come off it. Listen, you had the day I did, you’d understand why I’m walkin’ around like this. Yeesh.”

“Well, what happened?”

“I told ya I’ve been kinda seein’ this girl, right?”

“Who, Akane?”

“Shaddup, Ryoga! Yanno she thinks I’m a girl,” Ranma fumes. “Nah, this Chinese girl, real sweet. Real cute too.”

“So you’re two-timing her then? First of all, dude, how is that you’re half-girl and you still get more action than me?”

“It ain’t like that and you know it!”

“Fine, fine,” Ryoga says. “So, uh, does she know about,” he starts, before gesticulating randomly in the direction of Ranma’s body.

“Yeah. It’s uh, complicated though. Her grandma, this old Chinese biddy, she grew up around the place where they got the cursed water in China. Said it’s some kinda chi thing. She’s been helpin’ me look for a way to cure it.”

“Okay,” Ryoga says, nodding as he tries to follow along. “That doesn’t explain why you’re in that form, though. Unless…she doesn’t like you better that way, right?”

“No!” Ranma yells, her voice straining at the accusation. “Look, don’t go throwin’ around wild accusations like that. It’s just…Shanpu’s got—”

“Wait, *Shampoo*?”
“—It’s her name, dumbass. Some Chinese thing, it don’t mean what ya think. Now quiet, lemme tell the damn story.”

Though confusion still reigns in Ryoga’s expression, he nods and lets Ranma continue.

“Anyway, she’s got this crazy ex-boyfriend who’s so jealous if he sees her with a guy, he’ll try and chase her down. Course it’s my luck we run into him when we’re off doin’ an errand for her grandma, but we can’t just run off cause we gotta buy this crap from the store, so I gotta end up dodging the perv long enough to change forms. Coulda changed back after I guess, but it’s the second time the guy shows up in the middle of us hangin’ out, an’ I didn’t wanna risk him showin’ up again, so, there goes the day,” Ranma grumbles, rolling her eyes.

“How do you even get into these situations, Ranma?” Ryoga asks, so incredulously he sounds like he’s halfway sympathetic.

“Yeah, I ask myself that every day. I didn’t even end up scorin’ any grub outta the deal. The old ghoul oughta be payin’ me my weight in mapo tofu for all the bullshit errands I’ve been runnin’ for her!”

“Don’t get any ideas, I’m not buying you dinner again. Even as a girl, it’s like you’re a bottomless pit.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Ranma grouses. “Look, I’ll pay my way tonight, promise, but we gotta get somethin’ to eat first if ya wanna spar any, I’m famished.”

“I could really go for some monjayaki. You’re the one who knows where the hell we are, Saotome. Any places nearby we could go to?”

“Uh, sure, we’re just a couple blocks from Tagara, there’s uh—” Ranma starts, before the words die in her mouth.

“What?”

“Uh, never mind. I kinda forgot for a second that Ucchan’s still pissed at me.”

Ryoga sighs. “You didn’t tell her, did you?”

“Well it ain’t exactly easy, man! Ya think you can just up and ask someone to believe in magic like that?”

“Well, then it isn’t a problem, right? She’s only upset with Ranma, not you.”

“Well, she kinda is too. She thinks I’ve been cheating on her with, uh, myself,” Ranma answers, emphasizing her bust to represent her female form.

“I swear, Ranma…” Ryoga mutters, kicking idly at the ground as he mulls over the situation. “Look, maybe there’s a way you can explain it without having to talk about the curse.”

“Whaddaya mean?”

“Well, you know, you look kind of like your own sister, or maybe cousin. It’s totally normal for family to visit once in a while, right?”

The substance of a plan begins to crystallize in Ranma’s mind. “I dunno, Ryoga. Ya think she’d buy it? This sounds like the sorta half-baked idea Pops would come up with.”
“Not that you need more girl problems or anything, Saotome, but I’m trying to look out for you here. Isn’t it better if the two of you get along? Besides, if what you’re saying about that old Chinese lady is right, then you’ll be cured before too long.”

“I guess…but I swear, if this is all some scheme just so you can throw me under the bus long enough to get your monjayaki, I’m gonna turn you into barbecue.”

Ryoga shudders, though he can’t exactly place why. “Don’t even joke about that, man.”

When Ranma enters the small dining space of Okonomiyaki Ucchan’s, she’s immediately hit with a wave of nostalgia that’s hard to resist, even as it mixes with the insecurity of feeling like she’s just walked into a lion’s den. The restaurant is as popular as ever, with a handful of middle-aged men lined up at the bar with beers and steaming servings of okonomiyaki, and families taking up most of the tables, just as Ranma remembers it. She’s fondly reminded of the many times she had slid in near closing time, picked up a pair of okonomiyaki and wandered into the snowy nights with Ukyo, even as her memories mix with pangs of regret, both for the painful, abrupt way in which their relationship was severed, and the feelings of unease she’s plagued by for following along with this plan.

It’s around this time Ranma remembers that her time with Ryoga was supposed to have ended in an uncomplicated sparring match, a way to have a simple, “normal” way to decompress after a week deep in another life, and the hours of frustration that her outing with Shanpu ended up being. The bastard could at least look a little more sorry for ropin’ me into this instead of slobbering like a pig, Ranma grumbles to herself, but she doesn’t have long to think of all the ways she’s going to make good on her threat of making him into Hibiki barbecue before a familiar figure glides over from the back of the restaurant right up to the entrance.

The androgynous young woman, clad in a vivid blue jinsei adorned with a pattern of “好” characters, wears a bright grin as she approaches the pair, but her first glance lands squarely on the taller of the two. “Ryoga, buddy! Good to see ya, it’s been too long,” she says, laughing and clapping him on the shoulder. Her eyes shifting briefly—too briefly to recognize her—over to Ranma, she raises an eyebrow at Ryoga. “Didja finally manage to get over that crush and get yourself a girlfriend?”

“No, that, er, well—” Ryoga starts, clearly not having expected this of all things to happen.

By this point, however, Ukyo manages another look at Ranma, and between the reddish hair and the guilty expression in those blue eyes, her expression lights up with recognition—angry, angry recognition. “You,” she sputters, “What, you decided it wasn’t enough to have Ran-chan, and now you’re two-timing him with Ryoga? You shameless little homewrecker!”

“No, that, er, well—” Ryoga starts, clearly not having expected this of all things to happen.

Instead, it’s Ranma that manages to break through, voice taking on the cutest, smallest, and most penitent tone that she can possibly manage, something so unlike Ranma’s typical demeanour that Ryoga visibly recoils. “I’m sorry Ukyo but Ranma wasn’t unfaithful to you! This has all been a huge misunderstanding!” she squeaks out, the words spilling out so quickly they run together into a barely-comprehensible soup.
Ukyo’s building, foaming fury seems to grind to a halt, first as she tries to understand Ranma among the din of the customers, then as she seems to realize she might have had it wrong all along. “Hold on. Don’t go anywhere,” she says, eyes narrowing, and she turns around and back into the kitchen.

“Whaddaya think, ‘buddy’?” Ranma says, eyes lolling over to Ryoga and locking on with a withering glare. “I got a couple great recipes for slow-roasted Hibiki on the brain.”

“R-relax, Ranma!” Ryoga says, looking as far from relaxed as he possibly could be. “It’s going to be fine, she hasn’t done anything drastic yet.”

“Your funeral, lost boy,” Ranma says as she heaves a sigh, rolling her shoulders as her eyes turn back towards the curtain separating the kitchen from the dining area.

Soon enough a steely-gazed Ukyo marches back up to Ranma and Ryoga. “Alright, I’m on break. You’ve got fifteen minutes to explain yourself.”

Taking a table in the quietest corner, the three of them sit and Ranma begins to spin together a story, held together by the power of two of the most fabled of the Saotome School’s secret techniques, #2: “It isn’t a lie if you don’t get caught,” and #8: “If you’re going to bullshit, commit to it.” He picks out a few stray ideas from his environment and memories: a name kanji from Ryoga here (Mutsuko was too weird by half to hear from Musi’s lips for her to use again), a hometown from Kuno there, and fills in the details with trademark Saotome embellishment.

“I’m Yoiko Saotome, and I’m Ranma’s cousin,” Ranma stresses, letting her face tell the story of family resemblance for her. “I was living in Oita Prefecture up until recently, where I grew up with my parents. Unfortunately they died a few months ago in a car accident, and even though my father was estranged from his brother, my uncle was generous enough to offer me a place to stay until I got my bearings here in Tokyo.”

“Generous? Well that doesn’t sound like Ranma’s dad,” Ukyo says suspiciously, before shaking her head in confusion as she tries to sort through what Ranma says. “I’m sorry to hear about your parents, though. But, let me get this totally straight here…you’re not dating Ranma.”

“No!” Ranma yells, her voice once again taking on a girlish intonation. “He’s family, I wouldn’t do that kind of thing with him!”

“Right, right,” Ukyo answers half-apologetically, her look of anger or at least suspicion finally dissipating, though the confusion reigning on her face makes it clear that she’s not quite sure what to feel yet. “How’d you get to know this dope then?” Ukyo points to Ryoga, who makes a face of dismayed objection.

Oh, you are gonna pay for this one, man, Ranma thinks, and she becomes every bit her father as she twists the knife against her friend for plotting this. “Well, I met Ryo-chan here,” Ranma starts, placing a hand around Ryoga’s waist and gripping him tightly, as all the blood drains from his face, “a few weeks after Uncle Genma took me in, when he was training with Ranma, and I thought he was really handsome, not to mention too cute for words!”

As she says it, she pinches his cheek, and Ryoga looks like he’s on the verge of death, and he just pastes on a rictus smile and nods weakly.

Ranma continues, apparently unfazed. “He’s still pretty shy about it though. I’m his first girlfriend, after all.”
“Well he’s a lucky dog, then. If a little bashful,” Ukyo says with a smirk. After taking a look at the ‘happy couple’, seemingly satisfied by Ranma’s playful and giddy first girlfriend act, and Ryoga’s cheek-burning embarrassment non-act, she turns back to Ranma, as if scrutinizing her face to verify her identity. “Hah, you really do look like him. Got the little Saotome nose and the blue eyes and everything. Sure you aren’t his sister?”

Ranma scrunches her nose in self-consciousness. *My guy form’s nose ain’t “little”, is it?*

She stops as she realizes there’s something much more pertinent to address.

*Hang on, did she just accuse my old man of sleepin’ around?*

Then, in agonizing finality:

*Well, given all the other crap he’s been up to, that ain’t exactly outta the realm of possibility.*

Her aimless thoughts are nothing but trouble now, so before another one can derail her further, she snaps back to reality and shakes her head trying to do her best impression of wounded feminine pride. “Did you just…accuse my uncle of being my real father?” Sounding out the words aloud, it’s easy to imbue them with the incredulity that they merit.

*Or at least if me an’ Ryoga weren’t pulling a long con on Ucchan, they would,* a guilty voice reminds her.

Ukyo opens her mouth to say something, and then shuts it again. “Sorry,” she finally manages, and her expression finally seems to have shifted to repentant kindness. “That sounded less weird in my head. And sorry for the misunderstanding, Saotome. I’m sure you know that Ranma can keep his cards close sometimes, but I shouldn’t have assumed the worst about him, and the same goes for you especially, since I don’t even know you. I can’t say that everything will go back to the way it was, but I’ll apologize to Ranma. It’s the least he deserves.”

“Well, you’re sure he’ll be understanding,” Ranma replies with utter conviction.

“Good. Thanks for stopping by, honey. Now,” Ukyo says, standing up and slapping her hands on the table. “I gotta get back to work. What can I bring round for you to eat?”

Ryoga and Ranma return to the safety of Hikarigaoka Park after a couple of filling pancakes and some beer, but it’s not too long before they’re out of earshot of customers from Okonomiyaki Ucchan’s when Ryoga huffs, whirls around and faces Ranma.

“So what the hell was that, Saotome?”

“What was what? Ya mean me saving both our asses with that quality improv?” Ranma smirks to herself, feeling more than a little pride over her handling of the situation.

“I mean you deciding the best thing to do in order to play up your little act was treating me like your boyfriend!” Ryoga says, a vein in his forehead pulsing as he sits down a long a park bench.

Ranma rolls her eyes. “Who cares? She bought it hook, line, and sinker. I even got apology okonomiyaki! It ain’t my fault I can get what I want like it’s nothing when I’m in this form.”
Ryoga sputters in disbelief, far beyond what Ranma thinks is deserved. With the way he’s reacting, he might as well have been responding to her saying that she was the rightful Empress of Japan. “But—just—you were acting so different. Not like any kind of Ranma I’ve ever known. It was weird!”

“Ain’t any weirder than you talkin’ me into pretending I’m my own cousin. Besides, that’s why it’s called ‘acting’, dumbass. How do ya think I was supposed to get Ucchan to believe me if I just sounded like a girl version of myself? She’d think I was sleepin’ around with him for sure if I’d tried that.” The retort comes easily to Ranma’s lips, but even as she says it, she knows the lie of it. At least part of why it comes so easily is because it isn’t acting, because it’s all too easy to put on the “charade” so long, that when she emerges, she’s not even sure which one is the charade and which one is the real Ranma. And is it really any better than the rest of the world, where the reality that she isn’t, and can’t be just one person, is reinforced on a daily basis?

Ryoga’s grumbling brings her back to reality. “Well, whatever. Just give me some advance warning before the next time you pull a stunt like that. You’re the one who’s always complaining about our vows of brotherhood every time I don’t buy you dinner, but I’m pretty sure pretending to be my girlfriend is higher up on the list of things not to do if you value our agreement between men.”

“Relax, buddy, you’re making it sound like we’re married or something. Unless, don’t tell me…” Ranma says, the ghost of a mischievous smile forming on her face, “Aww, does Ryoga have a crush on Yoiko-chan?”

Ryoga’s cheeks flare a deep ruby-red. “Shut up, Saotome! I’m not the one who draped himself shamelessly over a guy over nothing! Don’t you have any pride as a man?”

Spontaneously, she’s reminded of Shanpu’s question earlier in the day, but either a pint’s worth of disinhibition or a part of her she didn’t know existed surfaces before she can answer with her trademark swagger. “Well, not when I’m toting these around at least,” Ranma says, holding up her bust with her hands.

The casual ease with which she draws attention to her breasts is a step too far for Ryoga, and he stifles a ragged huff of exasperation, even as Ranma breaks down into fits of laughter. Even after all of today’s chaos, she feels satisfied that she was able to begin the process of repairing the breach with Ucchan, and tease her new “boyfriend” for as many laughs as she could get. A quiet, insistent voice in the back of her head is left questioning how much of tonight was Ranma and how much was Yoiko, or Mutsuko, or even her mother’s little floral princess Ranma, but a much louder voice reminds her that they’re all just an act that she’s uniquely suited to, a small silver lining to the confusion of the curse.

The little voice pipes down for most of the rest of the night as she and Ryoga part ways, and Ranma returns to her father’s apartment, taking a quick soak before bed and returning to male form. But as he lies awake hours later, it returns, troubling him with a simple, but inescapable question:

Yeah, sure. But how much of Ranma is just an act you’re uniquely suited to, too?

Chapter End Notes

Language notes:
Lycium formula (還少丹/Huánshàodān) is a particular mixture of traditional Chinese medicinal herbs and ingredients. It is primarily targeted towards the kidney, a yīn organ whose primary association in the Wǔ Xíng is the element of water—hence its relevance in Kelun's endeavours to understand the Jusenkyo curse.

藥藥店/Yào Yàodiàn: Yao's Pharmacy.

睦子/Mutsuko: "Intimate/affectionate child."

福蓼藥店/Fúlòu Yàodiàn: Fu Lou Pharmacy, lit. "Fortunate bonds".

もんじゃ焼き/Monjyaki: A pancake similar to okonomiyaki, but the batter is runnier; often served at restaurants that will make both kinds.
Friday morning rolls around, and the first signs of Tokyo’s rainy season are beginning to manifest, with intermittent showers forecast throughout the day.

*How goddamn appropriate.*

It’s bad enough that a cascade of improbable coincidences or the consequences of her mother’s bright idea to misrepresent her at the iaido tournament are constantly conspiring to orient Ranma’s social life more and more around this new side of her life, but the omnipresence of cold water definitely doesn’t help matters. If it isn’t a broken water heater for the tap of a sink or a heat wave that leaves her desperate for a cold drink, the rain does its part to box her in even further. Even the three days of mostly-normal interactions out in the world in her male form that she’s managed to scrape out of the week seem to pale to the frequency with which any plans at socializing turn out repeatedly foiled by the curse.

And now it’s the day she returns to the dojo, to play the role of Nodoka Saotome’s daughter, Ranma of the Flowers, herself playing the role of instructor to a group of people who, with a single exception, consider her only on those terms. This far into her double life, it’s fitting that she’s of two minds about it: It isn’t so bad, in the moment, to let her own preconceptions of who that person could have been to melt away, to just be the best teacher, the best proxy daughter, the best new friend to Akane she can be. Ranma of the Flowers has a fanclub, a handful of students who joined her mother’s dojo on the strength of her skill—and, okay, maybe her looks too, but she’s never seen the problem with a little pride in her appearance, so why should it be any different as a girl?

But then at once the line of thinking feels dangerous. Like if she accepts that this life isn’t so bad, that it means it’s no less valid than the life she’s led thus far—that a life that took her twenty years to build could be supplanted by another one in the span of weeks. That the identity that life carries might be just as replaceable. Most frighteningly, that a little redheaded girl could be slotted into the space his life once occupied, with none the wiser, least of all Ranma Saotome herself, and become so entangled that there would be no way to extricate her from him.

So it’s poetic, really, that these hazardous thoughts, a lasting hangover from her outing with Ryoga, begin to overwhelm their spillways just as Ranma returns to her mother’s home to prepare for her class. What better topic to have weighing on her mind than the one that led to their last tense standoff?

“I’m back, Ma.”

*Well, it’s a start.* As long as she can avoid stumbling backwards into the topic, she’s in the clear.

“Wellcome home, son. How has your week been so far?” Nodoka turns from her task in the kitchen chopping up a radish, her eyes meeting Ranma’s with motherly warmth.

Ranma doesn’t even know where to begin. In the span of a few days, just removed from the normalcy of last week, nothing more complicated than a trip to the mall and a meal together, she’s divulged more personal information to Kelun than she cared to, faced the risk of transforming in public to avoid the wrath of Shanpu’s childhood friend, and impersonated her own cousin and Ryoga’s girlfriend in an attempt to earn the forgiveness of her own ex-girlfriend. Compared to last
week’s ‘teaching a iaido lesson with a couple of infatuated students’ and ‘buying a pair of jeans and a parfait in Itabashi’, well, there isn’t really an appropriate comparison. One side of her life is flatly unbelievable, not to mention completely ridiculous, and the other side—the one where nobody knows about her curse, but only because they think she’s a woman—is the “normal” one.

“Uh, not too bad, I guess. A little hectic. Went down to Yokohama for an errand, hung out with Ryoga for a while. He actually talked me into tryin’ to patch things up with Ucchan, but I dunno how that’s gonna go.”

“Miss Kuonji? Ah, I worry about her sometimes. She is a sweet young woman, although she seems to lack a proper feminine influence in her life.” Nodoka says, looking conflicted over whether to be wistful about her manly son’s erstwhile girlfriend or confused by her stubborn resistance to the trappings of femininity. Now that Ranma thinks on it, she’s not quite sure herself what it means that she’s more gamely taken to indulging her mother’s impulse for a proxy daughter than Ukyo.

“Well, you know her mom died pretty young. Anyway, I ain’t bothered about that kinda stuff.”

“Nonsense, Ranma.” Nodoka’s response is matter-of-fact, like she’s dispelling a child’s misconceptions. The echoing of her knife as it chops clean through a head of cabbage sends a chill down Ranma’s spine. “A wife must have the appropriate knowledge to care for the household. Dressing and speaking like a man is no kind of proper behaviour.”

“Aw, Ma, she don’t speak like a guy just cause she talks a bit different. It’s probably just some weird dialect stuff from growin’ up in Kyoto. A-and besides that, what’s wife gotta do with it! I ain’t lookin’ to marry anyone, it’s way too early to think about that kinda thing. I just wanna see if we can be friends again.”

“Well, son, I hope you aren’t thinking of waiting too long. I expect to have some grandchildren before I’m too old to see them grow up.”

“Jeeze, okay, okay! Look,” Ranma says, worn down by her mother’s insistence. She pulls a seat from the kitchen table and sits atop it casually as she prepares an explanation. “If ya promise not to get too weird about it or set up an omiai behind my back or anything, I’ll tell ya. You know the Chinese lady who’s been researching the curse for me?”

“Yes, you told me about her…last week,” Nodoka answers hesitantly.

So she ain’t forgotten so easily, huh. Ranma mentally chides herself for skirting so close to the topic, but she doesn’t see much else in the way of options. “Well, she’s got a granddaughter around my age, Shanpu. She’s been helpin’ me out for some of the errands I’ve done for her grandma, since she needs a lot of this weird chi stuff to look into a cure. We’ve been hangin’ out some since then.”

“I see…” Nodoka begins, even more hesitantly. “Shampoo, you say? A Chinese girl?”

“It ain’t what ya think, alright? She’s lived here a while. Sure, her Japanese can get a little loopy once in a while, but she ain’t dumb.”

Her mother sighs, ceasing her work for a moment as she places the knife on the counter, and she adjusts her position, as if reading herself for a speech. “Oh, son. I know that the past few months have been difficult for you, and I know that I have sometimes let my own selfish desires get in the way of that. For that I apologize. But I am concerned that your little search for the cure is leading you to lose sight of what is most important.”
“Most important!? What could be more important than getting my life outta the ridiculous mess it’s
turned into?”

“Ridiculous mess!” Nodoka’s tone shifts abruptly from maternal concern to indignation. “I’ve done
everything I can to be a good mother, Ranma. Is it really such a burden? Am I?”

“Wha—no! Ya got it all wrong! Ma, you ain’t a burden. But,” Ranma scrambles to explain herself.
“Like, look at my life, Ma. You got me this job teaching, and I know it’s just started and all. It’s
been great, but…now I’m stuck in place. What kinda life do I even have outside the curse? I got
Shanpu, but the only times I’ve even seen her has been when we’re tryin’ to help her grandma
figure out the curse. Ryoga, hell, half the time I even hang out with him some crap has happened so
I gotta change forms,” she says, laughing coldly. “The whole mess with Ucchan ended up with me
pretending to be my own cousin. And what kinda life is that, really? I feel like I’m coming apart at
the seams here, like I don’t even know who ‘Ranma’ is supposed to be anymore.”

Nodoka’s expression weathers Ranma’s escalating monologue, though her tone of voice in
answering evinces the emotional conflict in hearing it. “You don’t have to be different, son. To me,
both of your forms are still you, and that is what is important.”

“But they ain’t, Ma. Not to the world, less I wanna spill my guts about the secret and have the
whole world come crashin’ down on me. And not even to you. Ya really think you’da bought me
those fancy outfits and crap unless I looked like this half the time? Or didja notice ya didn’t start
doing that till you had a daughter to play dress-up with?”

Nodoka’s eyes tell the story Ranma expects: surprise that she herself would have been guilty of the
same kind of psychological division that Ranma herself has just been chiding others for, and more
than a little guilt for having engaged in it so blithely, and for so long, without truly realizing how it
has been affecting her child.

“Yeah, figures.” Ranma stands up, shaking her head in resignation. “I’m gonna go get some
practice in before class, Ma,” she says, and heads to her room to pick up her equipment.

Least if I’m on my own there ain’t someone there to treat me different, she adds to herself darkly.

For all Ranma’s exploits of the past few weeks, she’s rarely lacked for company, and when she
arrives at the dojo, unlit but for the diffuse grey of the outdoors streaming in from the floor-to-
celling windows, the inky knot of stress tensing up her stomach into frantic knots seems to
relinquish its vise-grip on her, if only slightly. Since her preparation for her performance and
examination at the Tokyo Budokan, she’s had few opportunities to just practise martial arts for an
extended period on her own, meditate away the day’s worries—the whole damn month’s worries,
more like—and decompress. Heaving her bags over a chair, she withdraws her sword, hakama,
sash, and embroidered gi, and retreats to the back room to change.

Flicking the light on, she strips off her T-shirt and jeans, letting them pool on the ground before
her. As she eyes the neatly-folded hakama and gi she’s set aside—the same set she used for her
testing, her mother’s elegant hand-me-downs—she catches a glimpse of herself in the mirror, half-
dressed and unlike most mornings, wholly awake. Even after some time with her curse, she’s not
half as used to her reflection as she is to the body itself. Her father’s training comes to mind
unbidden: “the mind and body must be inseparable”. In the heat of a kata she can find herself in
this body—a kind of peace she hasn’t known for months, since her father bringing the curse down on her head upended her life in the first place—but she wonders faintly if she might find that same comfort with this reflection.

Ranma takes stock of the woman before her in the mirror. It’s hardly the first time she’s done so—there was certainly time enough in the immediate aftermath of contracting the curse to become well-acquainted with the reality of her new existence—but she does so now more accustomed to herself, more acclimated to the idea that she could be any kind of woman at all. The shock of reddish hair, hanging loose for the moment over her trim shoulders, frames a pretty, elfin face. Her frame is small, but well-proportioned, and though they’re hardly as much to look at in her female form, she nevertheless feels a spark of pride as her eyes wander over her toned muscles borne of years of training in martial arts.

*Careful ya don’t swell your head about how ya look as a girl just as bad,* a voice taunts.

“Aw, shaddup, I look great and you know it,” Ranma answers the mirror out loud with a small, self-conscious laugh. It’s a brief distraction, but it points her back in the direction of her goal. Not ogling herself in the mirror, but integrating this image into her own sense of self, of what it means to be Ranma Saotome. Briefly, she blushes as she wonders if she might not do that just as well fully-dressed.

She plucks the gi out from the pile, tossing it over her shoulders, threading her arms through the sleeves, and tying it into place, with the kaku-obi and hakama quickly following suit, and then returns to her place in front of the mirror. In full practice attire, she cuts quite a different figure, a more familiar one: a martial artist.

A stray thought comes to her in the moment, small and ill-formed at first, but the more she lets it tumble about in her head, the more it feels like a revelation. She slips into the dojo’s small bathroom and turns the tap of the sink to hot, loosening her sash and hakama as the water warms. At the first sign of the water’s steaming, she thrusts her hands under the water, letting the transformation take hold.

*Wow, Saotome, ya look…*

He doesn’t need to finish the thought. No matter how he looks at it, his mother’s old hakama and gi are a few sizes too small for his larger male frame, and even the loosened sash cinches at his stomach painfully. But the kernel of the thought remains with him. The control he needs to wield rests in something other than the shape of his body, outside the curse, but in the life he drapes atop it. And for moment, until a cure can come along and right the ship of his life, control rests in being Ranma of the Flowers. Even casting away his original life for the time being, by continuing along in this life of *hers,* it gives him the sort of control that rests in *choosing* it. He turns the tap back to cool, and she emerges a few minutes later, clothing once again readjusted, sword in her arms, and a confident expression on her face, and steps into the dojo to begin her workout.

*The mind and body must be inseparable,* she reminds herself with every stretch, each thrust of an arm or leg, as she works through a series of warmups, shifting her headspace into more deeply inhabiting her body. Concluding her routine, she takes her sword, bows, and knots it to her sash, completing the rhythmic ritual of reiho. Now, she thinks, free for at least a few hours from the swirling anxiety of feeling incapable of knitting together the two broken halves of her life, Ranma of the Flowers is ready to take on the day.
Several katas later, Ranma’s first two students make an appearance, bringing with them a brewing cacophony.

“You—you pervert!” A woman’s voice, strained and high, cries out as she storms into the dojo. Ranma quickly recognizes Akane within the irate whirlwind of hakama, rolling her shoulders forward and tossing her bags angrily against a chair.

A tall, brown-haired man follows suit, somehow managing to articulate a fully-formed monologue, laced with archaism, despite his hustle into the room. “You misunderstand, gentle Tendo-kun. Though there may be those in our world who ministrate in forms most unseemly to you, my speech is motivated by nothing but the purest of sentiments.”

“And what sentiment is that, you weirdo?”

“My clarity of wit does not reach through? No, it must not be so, for my sister understands me in all things. Yet, if I must explain it so bluntly, I shall: it is love.”

Akane squints incredulously. “Oh yeah? You seemed awfully smitten with Ranma before the last class.”

“Ah yes, the beauteous Saotome!” Kuno exclaims, turning to face Ranma like he’s just been struck by a lightning bolt of realization. “I cannot deny what you say. Truly I am twice-blest to find my passions stoked by two warrior maidens. The fair Tendo, holding the power of a cresting wave. The fiery Saotome, elegant as a dancing flame.” As if thinking out loud, he briefly turns to face away from the two. “Surely it is the custom for a man of great standing such as I, Tatewaki Kuno, not to limit himself to a single love,” he mutters, before turning back to face Akane and Ranma. “Very well then, it is thus! I must date both of you.”

Akane rolls her eyes and fumes, but Ranma just laughs. “Okaaay, settle down, Nobunaga,” Ranma says, drawling it out as an idea strikes her. Batting her lashes and putting on doe eyes, she goes in for the kill. “Kuno? You know what I would just love?”

“If you just bowed in and started doing your kata in the corner over there, and didn’t say anything until the lesson starts, that would be real romantic,” she says sweetly.

Kuno flushes momentarily, then springs into action. Once again arriving fully-dressed and with his sword already tucked into his sash, he strides confidently to the entrance of the practice space, bows, and begins a sequence of iaido kata.

Free for the moment from Kuno’s attention, Ranma and Akane face each other finally, each one suppressing a quiet laugh.

“So, uh,” Ranma starts, “was he walkin’ around on the street like that, too? With the sword out and everything?”

“For as long as I saw him, yes,” Akane answers. “I don’t know why he does it. Isn’t that illegal or something?”

“Or something. I’m sorry he hassled ya, by the way,” Ranma continues, doing her best impression of a teacher. “I’ll try and have a talk with him later. No good havin’ him here if he keeps flirting like that, or…whatever that was.”
Akane shivers. “Eurgh. I’m getting flashbacks to Kendo Club. He’s got a few screws loose for sure.”

“Least he seems to be under control for the moment.”

“For now,” Akane nods. She looks away in thought, muttering to herself before her face lights up. “Oh! I managed to talk to Daddy about a visit to the dojo. We don’t have anything going on Sunday, so if you’re free then I could show you around.”

“Sunday? Yeah, that should work. Same time, same place?”

“Furinkan Station at eleven? Sure, I can take you back from there.”

“Great,” Ranma says. “It’ll be cool to see how ya look—I mean, uh, the T-tendo school looks in combat.”

Unbidden, an image of Akane in the role of a chanbara protagonist, driving away a crowd of goons from her dojo with a scream, comes to Ranma. The brief foray into her imagination yields her a shy smile; she’s always had kind of a thing for strong women. Not helping, Saotome! she chides herself, unable to keep it from filling her with a fuzzy warmth.

Akane wavers, a faint blush also filling her cheeks. “You too, Ranma. You’re so graceful in iaido, but I haven’t seen you doing any kendo yet.”

“Um, thanks. I’ll bring my gear and we can get some sparring in.”

Ranma’s rescued from further embarrassment when the remainder of the class slips in, first Daisuke and Hiroshi, who chat to themselves as they tie together their sashes and hakama, and then Ryoga, who slips in at the last moment, just as class is about to begin.

The lesson continues much like the previous one, almost down to the beat. Kuno’s sword work continues to be the best in the class, though Ranma won’t dare admit it, for fear of prompting another extended soliloquy on the “beauteous Saotome”. Hiroshi and Daisuke appear to at least be making progress, though their status as beginners puts them well behind the other students. After her imagination has betrayed her more than once, she forces her eyes to flit away quickly from Akane before she gets herself in trouble once again. That leaves only one student, who earns her focus for much of the rest of the class, much as she wishes otherwise.

“Your form’s sloppy, Hibiki.”

“Always a critic, Yoiko.”

“Still got my little cousin on your mind, huh? No wonder your katas are crap today. She’s pretty cute, after all.”

“Shut up, Saotome! Because of you I’ve seen hell!”

“Lemme get this straight, Ryoga. By ‘hell’ you mean ‘got a pretty girl to hang out with you, willingly, for more than ten minutes’? Somehow I don’t think we’re workin’ with the same definitions of ‘hell’ here.”
“As if!” Ryoga replies, turning up his nose in indignation. “What use is some petty crap like that when it’s all built on a lie?”

“I dunno, man. You’re the one who wouldn’t stop going on about my figure the other day. Seems to me ya cared a little more about that than anything else.”

“I care when I’m getting roped into your weird schemes, you pervert!”

“Yeesh, quiet down! We’re in the middle of a class here, dude, ya wanna show a little respect to your teacher?” Ranma exhales, rolling her eyes. When Ryoga’s expression doesn’t waver, she finally relents. “Okay, okay, okay! Fine. Sorry for pulling that whole routine on you without warning. It was probably not my proudest moment. Now get up, let’s see your nukiuchi kata,” she adds, kicking at his shins impatiently.

Ryoga grumbles but doesn’t say anything as he stands, steps back to give himself some space, and begins the form, backstepping and drawing his sword immediately into a lightning-fast downward strike, before flicking the sword to the side and sheathing it just as rapidly. He concludes the manoeuvre and bows, but almost immediately snaps out of focus, pointing a finger towards Ranma. “You…” He extends it accusingly towards her, aiming straight for the solar plexus, but seems to think better of it at the last moment, and the finger veers off course from her chest and awkwardly migrates up to her shoulder, where it lands harmlessly.

Ranma doesn’t do anything to stop him, just observing as Ryoga spontaneously loses his nerve around touching her chest, and after a few moments she bursts into laughter. “Oh man, you are a hopeless case. Keep it up with the kata, buddy.”

“You said it, pervert-sensei,” Ryoga answers, his voice halfway between biting and teasing.

Though their exchange earns a few eyebrows from Daisuke and Hiroshi, the class returns to its usual rhythm soon enough, and before long the rest of the class is collecting its belongings, preparing to depart, leaving only a single student, still practising katas with fanatical concentration.

“Class is over, buddy. Everyone else has already bowed out.”

Kuno’s single-minded focus snaps abruptly out of his kata, and onto her. “Ah, the fire-haired girl, my fated love.”

Ranma rolls her eyes. “I got a name, you know.”

“Indeed, the fair Saotome.”

Her patience wears thin, teeth threatening to gnash together and grind down as she seeks a way to answer Kuno in a way that will get through to him. “Look, I don’t care about the formal crap, feels weird enough gettin’ called teacher, but I don’t think it’s a lot to ask for to just talk to me like a normal person. ‘Saotome’. ‘Ranma’. Skip the honorific if ya gotta. I don’t know if you’re doin’ this cause ya think it’s funny or cause you’re dumber than a box of rocks, I don’t care, but this whole ‘radiant goddess’ routine is creepy. Ya gotta stop. And not just with me, ‘Kane too.”

“Indeed?” Kuno’s expression is genuinely confused, and Ranma’s beginning to worry that he really does have a few screws loose. “Why is it that a woman would not be pleased to be reminded of her
beauty and radiance?”

“God, I am really gonna have to do this,” Ranma mumbles, running her fingers through her hair nervously. “Okay, Kuno, bear with me. What would you say if I was a guy?”

Kuno shifts nervously. “No…does such sorcery truly exist?”

If only you knew. Ranma tries to imagine what this guy would do with knowledge of the curse, and then shivers. Actually, scratch that. It’s better this way.

“No, dumbass. I’m saying what if. If ya called me the ‘radiant goddess’ like that, and I was a guy, that’d be weird, right?”

“Naturally, such a term would not befit a man.”

“So? Why’s it gotta be different one way or another? I can’t believe I’m the one that’s gotta tell ya this, but girls ain’t exactly another species. I’m kinda speakin’ from experience here.”

“It is true, perhaps my sister’s perspectives have been…limited,” Kuno replies, eyes flicking to the ground, face etched with deep conflict as he tries to make sense of what seems to be a sea change to his philosophy. “You mean to say, then, that such language would vex even a lady such as the dazzling Tendo?”

“Ugh, it’s just—listen,” Ranma exhales, her patience running thin. “Ya don’t—ya don’t even know us, and right outta the gate you’re sayin’ crap like ‘I must date you.’ This ain’t some kinda samurai drama. If ya don’t even ask a girl what she thinks, why the hell’s she gonna give you the time of day?”

Hang on, how did I end up being this guy’s dating expert!?

“Ah, I understand now.” Kuno nods sagely and clears his throat, before his eyes, awash with blazing determination, meet Ranma’s. “Ranma Saotome, will you date with me?”

Ranma begins to wish that this were a samurai drama, because then at least she’d be able to duel Kuno and end this parade of mortifying conversational topics that Kuno appears intent to pursue by leaving at least one of the two of them dead. “Wh—no, you gotta—ugh, no. I’m not gonna teach you to flirt, for god’s sake. Just…go home, Kuno. I got enough crap on my plate right now. Just tone it down, alright?”

“Hmm. I must meditate on this,” Kuno says. Without warning, he stands up, and marches straight out of the dojo and into the street, sword still at his hip, leaving Ranma to contemplate the strange direction her attempt to talk some sense into Kuno has taken.

“…I can’t tell if I just made things better or worse,” Ranma mutters to herself as she packs up her belongings.

When Ranma arrives back at her mother’s house, still faintly disoriented from Kuno’s ridiculous pursuit, she’s expecting to have to jump right back to the unfinished fight over her life that seems to have strained their relationship, but after a cursory glance through the rooms in the house, she’s surprised—and more than a little relieved—to find it empty save for a small note sitting on the
Ranma,

—it’s a small mercy that the note is properly addressed to her real name, she thinks—

I have been thinking of what you said to me earlier in the day, and I have realized that in my excitement for a new opportunity to spend time with my child, I have been thoughtless of how they might have affected you.

I imagine that you may want some space to yourself for the time being, so I will be spending a few nights with relatives in Ichikawa. I hope that when I return, I will better be able to understand your troubles.

With love,

Mother

Attached to the small note is an envelope filled with bills. Labelled “instructor’s salary”, she quickly notes that the money is more than enough to replace her weekly take at Café Love Star. If that isn’t enough to entirely forgive her mother, it at least softens her heart somewhat, and rather than lingering resentment, she feels faintly foolish for having lost her temper earlier.

Like so many things lately, her feelings are divided; some part of her feels righteous indignation that her form dictates how she’s treated to such a degree that even those who know her best are inescapably drawn to the distinctions, but another, growing part worries that she herself is the source of the distinction. That her inability to integrate the two halves of herself into a whole is the reason why her mother treats her like a daughter, why Ryoga recoils at the false ‘flirtation’ of Yoiko, and why Shanpu holds her female form at arm’s length. That she can only be treated as two people because she herself is not one person.

Ranma tries to remind herself of the day’s mantra: “the mind and body must be inseparable.” As long as she lives purely in the moment, excluding thoughts of body-switching curses and the billowing identity crisis it’s beginning to breed in her, her motions are seamless. But now, all alone and tired out from a full day’s workout, she gives over the evening to brooding over the problem. After all, how can you have a mind that’s inseparable from two different bodies?

Among the busy tangle of confusion even her mother’s small act of penitence has been able to spark, Ranma assembles her belongings for a night in Shinjuku: the gaudy dress, the makeup bag, the flippant persona. It isn’t much, but the mindless rhythm of getting ready for work, even a job that fills her with faint distaste, is an improvement over letting the weight of the world overwhelm her, and she lets that determination propel her the last step of the way, out of the house and onto the train downtown.

By the time Ranma opens the door into the back room of Café Love Star, her mind is already exhausted, having actively sought for hours to ward away the unwelcome rumination that seems to define her existence in recent days. Her mental defences are meant to keep out martial arts opponents, and, well, her own mind plays dirty.

Guess that’s what I get from learning the Saotome School Secret Techniques, huh.

She pushes open the back door to the dressing room. She’s the first to arrive, and checking her watch, she realizes that she’s rather early. Blowing her bangs out of her face, Ranma tosses her bag over onto the counter and sits down at the stool with a thump. Right now, she wants nothing more
than to sleep, and try to forget the overwhelming cascade of events that seem to follow her wherever she goes, but instead she’s slipping into an excessively sequined cocktail dress, drenching her eyelids in vivid purple eyeshadow, and staring back into a reflection even more unfamiliar to her than the redheaded martial artist. It’s hard for her not to separate her mind from her body when she looks like this, and harder still not to want to. Still, of everything that’s happened today, she can at least grant herself the unmitigated relief of being free of this soon enough, now that her mother’s pay will more than make up for it.

The door to the dressing room swings open, with a familiar face behind it.

“Oh, you’re early,” Mariko says brightly. “And looking on top of your game, too! You sure have changed from when Akemi first reeled you in.”

*Change.* There’s that word again. Ranma can’t mask the grimace that seeps into her expression, though she does at least manage a greeting. “Hey, Mariko. Yeah, figured no sense in dawdling about it. It’s been a kinda long day so…”

“Bah,” Mariko exhales sharply as she strides into the room, unzipping her bag and preparing herself for the evening. “Back to this dog and pony show again, huh? Well, I guess if that’s the way things are, out with it, honey. What have you got to mope about this week?”

“Alright, alright, jeeze, no need to get on my case about it,” Ranma grumbles. “Well, I kinda got into a fight with Ma, but…well, it might be okay. I got my first paycheck for teaching at the dojo. More’n enough so I don’t gotta work here anymore.”

Mariko jumps giddily. “Aw, congratulations, honey. I know you’ve been wanting to get out of here, not that I can blame you or anything,” she says, her eyes flitting away darkly. “I’ll be sorry to see you go, though.”

“Aw, I’ll still be around if ya want to catch up,” Ranma replies. Much as she hates to admit it, Mariko’s upbeat attitude is infectious, and the corners of her lips turn up at her response. Figuring she deserves to at least return the favour, she prompts Mariko for a response of her own. “Say, uh, I feel like all this time, ya never say anything about how you’re doing. Got anything ya wanna mope about yourself?”

“Hmm.” Mariko pauses. “Well, I just broke up with my boyfriend this week,” she says evenly, shrugging slightly, but her focus remains on applying her makeup.

“Aw, that sucks. Though, ya don’t seem too down about it either.”

Mariko sighs, putting down her eyeliner pencil and looking Ranma in the eyes. “I keep telling you, honey, you don’t smile because you’re happy. You smile because it makes you happy. It’s psychology. Mind over matter, you know?”

“Huh. Sounds like a martial arts thing when ya put it that way.”

“Right. I keep forgetting you’re really a jock. Well, you caught me too. I did do a little aikido when I was younger, but that one I picked up from cheerleading. It’s the same thing. Like, you don’t cheer because your team is winning, right? You cheer on your team so they win.”

Ranma blinks. “Cheerleading, huh? Well, maybe it can all be a martial arts thing if ya turn it on its side, think about it from another angle.”

“Well, anything goes, right? Turn it the other way, martial arts is just psychology.”
“Sounds kinda weird, but I can see it. Knowing your opponent, knowing yourself.”

A grin flashes across Mariko’s face. “There, you’re catching on. I’m sure you told me before, but remind me, what do you teach again?”

“Probably ain’t quite what you’re thinkin’. I teach iaido. Probably woulda done kendo if I had my pick, cause sometimes it’s nice to beat the stuffing outta people, but iaido ain’t bad. Kinda makes me feel a little more grounded, in control.”

“I can see that,” Mariko utters with finality. There’s a brief lull in the conversation, as Mariko puts the finishing touches on her makeup, before she finally speaks up again, with a little more hesitation. “You know…”

Ranma raises an eyebrow. “What’s up?”

“I was just thinking, especially if you’re going to be quitting here, maybe I’d try out one of your classes.”

The thought of Mariko wielding a sword comes about as far from naturally as it gets, and Ranma takes a moment as she struggles to visualize it. “Um, no offence, but ya don’t really strike me as the iaido type. What gives?”

“Well, you said it yourself. Giving yourself an opportunity to have that feeling of control, even if your life around you is a disaster. Remember that day you asked me about the same thing? How you felt like you’d gotten your life into this mess you didn’t know how you’d get out of?”

Ranma nods with a wavering “Uh-huh,” but doesn’t answer otherwise.

“And?” Mariko asks expectantly. “You’re getting out of the business. You have a new job in a field you like. Aren’t you more in control than you were?”

She has to admit that Mariko’s reasoning is sound. Beyond what she’s already said, in the weeks since Ranma confided in Mariko about her worries, she’s also gone from the loneliness of a breakup into having a constellation of new friendships, including—now that she considers it—Mariko herself. And yet…does she truly feel any more in control than before?

*Well, that’s why I’m stickin’ to my girl side for now, right?*

It’s not an entirely comforting reminder, as her male form—a part of her—now feels frustratingly distant, but it’s better than the alternative of utter, unrestrained pandemonium. “Yeah,” Ranma says finally. “I guess so.”

“There’s your answer. You aren’t the only one who’d like to take charge of her life a little more, Ranma. Now come on,” Mariko lilts, sticking her tongue out teasingly, “let’s score a little food before the salarymen show up.”

Ranma’s stomach growls, and the two share a laugh as they head out to the bar.

The act of dissociation from her hostess routine that night and the following is more difficult for Ranma than in previous weeks. As she’s started to take more seriously the idea of applying the
mantra of understanding her mind and body as united in a more broad sense than through martial arts, but within her personal life as well, the off-colour comments, grabby hands, and boozy breath of the middle-aged salarymen haunting Café Love Star are more discomfiting for her, the small slights against her dignity and personal space striking just a little closer to home than usual. Now that she’s beginning to think of this body not just as a body she has but her body, the feeling is only magnified.

So when Sunday comes, she wakes to—well, a hangover, as she often does despite her best efforts to water down and pour away as many of the drinks bought for her as she can, but also the overwhelming relief of knowing that she won’t have to do it anymore. Adding to the fact that her plan for the day includes a day with Akane—and thus won’t inevitably result in some transformation-related mess, as seems to be the norm—a glass of water and some lukewarm tea and chazuke later, Ranma feels ready—even excited—to take on the day.

After all too long standing in front of her wardrobe—*Can you relax, Saotome? It ain’t a date*—Ranma settles on a graphic T-shirt with a smiling ice cream cone, and the jeans that Akane recommended she buy on their last outing. Assembling the rest of her necessities—a fresh blue hakama and white gi to change into, her well-worn shinai, and a backpack with her mother’s bogu (there’s no way her own will fit her in this form)—she strikes out in the direction of Furinkan Station.

“Hi, Ranma!” Especially after fifteen minutes lugging around a heavy set of kendo armour, Akane’s voice is sharp, bright and chipper, another jolt of lucidity and energy for Ranma.

“Mornin’, ‘Kane,” Ranma replies, still trying to shake the last vestiges of exhaustion away. “So where to?”

“Not so far. We live just a couple blocks from the station.” Akane points down a street bordered on one side by a stand of cypresses, and on the other side by a series of small row houses. Ranma glances idly at the passing residences, wondering which of them might be the Tendos’, but it isn’t until Akane rounds the corner and motions towards a long, tall gabled wall that Ranma realizes just what she’s walking into.

The Tendo home is nothing like what Ranma expected. Standing apart from its close neighbours, which seem to have adopted a more modern aesthetic, Akane’s residence is a sprawling classically-styled compound, encircled by a high palisade; an imposing gatehouse inscribed with the family’s name and martial arts school frames the entryway. Akane pushes aside one of the wooden doors, leading them into a spacious courtyard, with one path leading to a traditional Japanese garden and pond, and the other to a pair of buildings. Ranma quietly marvels at the scale of her home; though Akane hadn’t seemed shy about spending money on their shopping trip, it’s entirely different to see just how well-off her family is quantified.

“Well, here we are,” Akane says as she opens the door.

Beyond the genkan and the small alcove for their shoes, the entrance is relatively simple, with a long hardwood hallway leading away towards the rest of the house. After the two remove their shoes, Akane leads Ranma in, only to stop in the kitchen when she notices an evidently familiar face.

“Oh, Nabiki, you’re still here?”

“Please, Akane, that’s no way to greet your loving older sister. And what, you don’t really think I’m the type to catch an *early morning* train out of here, do you? No, I’ll probably be taking the 6:00 to Kunitachi.”
“Well, point taken,” Akane shrugs, before glancing back at Ranma. “Ah, I guess I should introduce you. Ranma, this is my sister Nabiki, who’s visiting for the weekend. Nabiki, this is my friend, Ranma Saotome.”

“Yo. Nice to meet you, Saotome,” Nabiki answers. Her eyes narrow as she says it, like she’s appraising Ranma’s worthiness.

“Uh, likewise,” Ranma answers, her eyes flitting briefly to the older girl before snapping right back to Akane. “Alright, ‘Kane, what’s the plan?”

“Oh, um, why don’t I get the dojo set up for us while you wait?”

“Ya sure? I can help out if you want.”

Akane shakes her head sharply. “No, no, it’s fine! Don’t worry about it.” She turns towards Nabiki, rolling her eyes, “You know, I know you’re no Kasumi, but maybe you could show a little hospitality and make Ranma some tea or something,” she utters in a deadpan, before marching out via a side door.

“I don’t even remember where the tea was the last time I lived here, let alone now,” Nabiki snorts as she watches Akane leaving the room.

“It’s fine, really, ya don’t gotta put yourself out or anything. I ain’t thirsty.”

“Well thank god for that.” Nabiki wipes her forehead in mock-relief. Peering out the door Akane just exited from, she turns back to face Ranma. “So. My little sister, huh?”

Ranma blinks. “Sorry, what?”

“Oh, please, don’t play dumb, Saotome. She has a habit of bringing pretty girls with a boyish streak back home with her, and she doesn’t exactly have the best history with men either. It doesn’t take a genius to put together the pieces here. I know it’s not exactly a topic of polite company, but when it concerns my sister, it becomes my business.”

The implication isn’t immediately clear to Ranma, who’s reminded in the moment that her badly-suppressed attraction for the strong and pretty girl she’s become fast friends with is interpreted quite differently in this form—to say nothing of the uneasy burble in her stomach that comes of being described as a “pretty girl with a boyish streak”. Trying to resist Nabiki’s quick read, she demurs. “It ain’t what you think. We’re just friends.”

“Uh-huh,” Nabiki says, utterly unconvinced. “Listen, I don’t think my sister would ever admit it on her own, but I’ve had my time to come to terms with it. And while there are probably plenty of people out there who might judge you for it, I’m not one of them. Maybe it works out, maybe it doesn’t. Just treat her right, or I’ll have to break your kneecaps.” She pauses in thought. “Or, well, hire someone to break them for me, but the point stands.”

Something about Nabiki’s voice makes it chillingly clear that she wouldn’t hesitate to follow through on the promise, but Ranma isn’t given the opportunity to answer before a series of loud thunking sounds come from the dojo. “Uh, is she alright in there?”

“Who, my sister? She’s fine, probably just hauling some fitness machine or lead weights or some other random jock thing out of the room.”

“Oka—hang on, hauling a fitness machine?”
“I’m not sure why you’re so surprised, Saotome. This is the same girl that bench presses for fun.”

“She’s pretty strong, huh?” Yeah. Really... strong.

“Oh for the love of—you’re almost as bad as her.”

As if summoned, Akane pops her head back in the door. “I’ve gotten everything set up for us. We can get changed now.”

“Go on ahead, Akane. I’m going to hold onto this one for a couple more minutes,” Nabiki replies drily, pinching Ranma’s shirt.

“Suit yourself,” Akane shrugs, and heads upstairs.

Ranma’s eyes loll over to Nabiki with a mix of confusion and irritation. “What was all that about?”

“Knowing my little sister, protecting the both of you from yourselves. You can change over in the bathroom.” Nabiki tugs at Ranma’s shirt, and drags her down a hallway into the spacious furo, where she deposits her.

“Fine, fine, ya don’t gotta treat me like I can’t be a gentleman about it or anything,” Ranma murmurs, briefly forgetting her own relationship to ‘manhood’ in the moment is rather more tenuous.

“Gentleman indeed.” A small smile dances on Nabiki’s lips. “Okay, Lady Oscar, I’ll leave you to it. Be good,” she says, and shuts the door to the bathroom.

Ranma changes into her hakama and gi quickly and in silence, though her mind races as it replays through the conversation she’s just had with Nabiki. Akane’s older sister can read her with a transparent ease, which is unnerving enough on its own—it’s hard for her to deny the infatuation at this point, but Ranma’s trying her best to perceive her as a friend, in what she’s assumed up until now Akane feels about her. No, what’s setting her mind to unravel is that Nabiki suggests that Akane’s intentions might be romantic to begin with. And more to the point, romantic not towards the male Ranma—a person she’s never even met to know to be attracted to, but towards Ranma of the Flowers. A woman.

The irony isn’t lost on Ranma. Try as she might to bring together the two parts of her life, something new always seems to rise to challenge it, to upset the control she’s trying to wrest out of her tumultuous existence. And now, for the male side of her life and its relationship with Shanpu, her other half now has a foil in Akane Tendo. The task that rests just before Ranma is daunting, but no more or less demanding than her quest for control: how can she live in this limbo, so long as she doesn’t take the cure? How can she live after the cure, if it means this life of hers ceases to exist?

“Ranma?” Akane’s voice is followed by a gentle knock on the door.

“Oh, yeah, coming,” Ranma calls out. Akane’s return disrupts her from her train of thought, but it isn’t necessarily a bad thing—after all the broody thinking about the huge problems in her life with no easy solutions that has dominated the entirety of her weekend, she’s nothing if not thoroughly thoughted out. Maybe a high-impact kendo session will do her a little good.

Ranma emerges from the bathroom in her kendo clothing, papering over the conflict in her head with a small smile. Akane reciprocates with a smile of her own, and leads the two of them out of the household proper back to the separate, detached building that holds a roomy, twenty-tatami dojo lined with hardwood floors. A hanging scroll on one wall features the characters of the Tendo surname done up in artful calligraphy, and several swords, naginata, and other traditional weapons
sit mounted on another wall. In the corner, a series of extremely heavy-looking and imposing metal weights sit ominously. Is this what Akane was moving out of the way? Well, she had to get those muscles somewhere.

Ranma tries not to think about how often she’s been admiring Akane’s fitness. Searching her environment to find something else to talk about—and trying to excise the reminders of Nabiki’s romantic diagnosis before she embarrasses herself—she gazes around at the construction of the room itself. “Damn, this is a nice place,” Ranma says, quietly marvelling at the antique, immaculately kept interior. “Your family’s had the school for a long time, right?”

“Almost 500 years, yes.”

Ranma whistles. “Ya get a lot of students?”

Akane winces faintly. “Well, after the war classes never started up again. It’s always been Daddy’s dream to reopen the dojo and hold lessons, but for one reason or another, it’s never worked out. I think that’s part of the reason he was so insistent about passing on what he knows to me, in the hopes that I would do what he couldn’t.”

The weight of being the ‘chosen heir’ is a familiar one for Ranma, and she nods sympathetically. “Sounds like something my old man would try. Well, at least if he didn’t keep gettin’ banned from teaching…”

“You mentioned that before. Just how did he manage that?”

“Well, turns out they don’t take it so great if ya steal from your own students and tell ‘em it’s training, and if they can’t get their crap back then they don’t deserve to have it.”

Akane slaps her forehead with an open palm. “No offence, Ranma, but your father’s an idiot.”

“I think I’d be more offended if ya told me he wasn’t,” Ranma snorts. Setting her sword bag and armour in the corner, she begins to unpack it and put the pieces on, glancing over as Akane hauls out her armour from a closet. “So... how do you wanna do this? Sparring’s fun and all, but where’s the challenge?”

“Hm.” Akane nods thoughtfully as she withdraws her own bogu and shinai, before her eyes light up, an idea coming to mind. Adopting Kuno’s air of supreme arrogance, Akane points her shinai towards Ranma and puffs out her chest. “Fire-haired girl,” she shouts, “I make my challenge. If I do vanquish thee, then thy heart will be mine, and I shall date with thee!”

Ranma suppresses a snicker, trying to keep a straight face, resting her own shinai casually against her shoulder. “Oh yeah?” she replies. “And let’s say I win, Little Miss Blue Thunder. What then?”

“Why, beauteous Saotome,” Akane answers, like it’s the most natural thing in the world, “I would allow you to date with me.”

Unable to resist the temptation any longer, the two burst out into laughter. As the two continue to put on the separate pieces of their kendo armour, Ranma shakes her head and grins. “That was a nice line, ya pick that up somewhere?”

Akane nods, shivering slightly. “Remember the Kendo Club guys I told you about? This was their ‘bright idea’ about how they figured they’d get a date with me.”

Ranma feels a faint collective shame for the existence of men as a whole, but can’t exactly put it into words. “I’m gonna guess none of them got their wishes, huh.”
“Yeah, most of them got a date with the school nurse instead,” Akane says, her voice riding a fine line between ruefulness and pride.

“What’d I tell ya,” Ranma tuts in a schoolteacher’s tone, “It’s about control. Can’t go whackin’ everyone ya meet at full force or you’ll put ’em in the hospital.”

_Specially not with those muscles of yours_, her brain helpfully adds, threatening to redirect her attention to thinking about Akane’s muscles again. Though she suspects her male form would still edge out Akane in strength, Ranma’s experience with the sheer differential in strength in her two forms makes Akane’s fitness all the more impressive in her eyes.

At this point, other parts of her mind offer their own opinion on the situation. _Stop thinking about her muscles, damn it_!

Thankfully, Akane answers before Ranma’s imagination manages to get her in too much more trouble. “Yeah, well, I think these guys probably could have used a lesson on control themselves…” she grumbles.

“Hey, there’s a reason ya kicked their asses, right?” Ranma teases. “Anyway, you about ready? I wanna get a sense for your kendo moves, see how the technique is different between kendo and iaido.”

“Just about,” Akane nods, and after a few moments of teasing apart a knot, she places her face mask over her head, ties it back into place stretches her neck briefly, and after a moment of loosening up, calls out to Ranma. “Ready?”

Ranma, following suit and donning her own face protector, nods after a few moments, and the match begins.

With a loud kiai, Akane advances to make the first attack, a sharp, swift, overhead strike. Ranma plants her feet and thrusts her sword upwards to block, but Akane’s overwhelming momentum forces her backwards, and she’s forced to reanalyze her options. While Ranma’s never been particularly tall as a man, she’s shorter still in this form, and her arms’ short reach limits her options for attacks.

Briefly yielding her position in the crossing of their swords, Ranma notices an out, and ducks under Akane as she targets Akane’s chestguard with a long horizontal slash. Akane folds, but immediately whirls around and lands a quick strike against Ranma’s headguard. Ranma winces faintly—Akane hits _hard_—but rallies, as she lunges in to get closer again. With a shorter reach than Akane, she quickly realizes that landing head strikes will be more difficult, and any moment where Akane is out of striking distance is a moment where Akane has the advantage.

The aggressive style is slightly foreign to Ranma, who’s typically more happy to let others walk into the traps that she sets for them, but if there’s anything that defines a Saotome, it’s adaptability, and after taking a few blows from Akane’s mean headshots, she starts to fall into a rhythm, weaving and dodging the taller girl’s slower strikes, and using her own agility to land light, but insistent arm and chest strikes.

This rhythm continues, with Akane striking less often but harder, and Ranma striking more often, until one last wind-up on the part of Akane offers an uncommon target, but one that suits Ranma’s new technique. As Akane’s sword comes down, Ranma dashes in, extending her shinai with one hand and thrusting straight for the throat.

The blow stops Akane in her tracks, and she laughs as her body language loosens, signalling an end.
to the spar. She nods in respect towards Ranma, then begins to undo the ties to her wristguards, face mask, and breastplate, sighing in satisfaction. “Well, I’m glad the Kendo Club wasn’t there to see that,” Akane says with a small smile.

Ranma follows suit, lifting off the heavy, sweaty mask. “Aw, who are you kiddin’, ‘Kane? That was good. Not sure how many more knocks to the head I was gonna take, at any rate.”

“Well, yeah, but you got in a lot of points on the wrist and chest that I wasn’t looking out for. In a real match you’d have racked up twice my score.”

“Only cause I’m such a runt I can’t do a proper head strike,” Ranma laments. For all the increased speed she feels in this form, her short stature and reach are a definitive disadvantage in the more competitive martial art of kendo. “Plus, if we’d been fighting with live blades, you woulda whacked me with one of those before I got any of those points in.”

Akane giggles. “Well, I’d say you won either way. That’s okay, though. It doesn’t feel bad losing sometimes,” she pauses, then adds, “well, as long as it’s not to a guy.”

Well, ya kinda did, Ranma grumbles to herself. Still, it sets her mind to wandering once again: she wonders how the match might have gone differently in her male form—or even if Akane might have dismissed him as too reminiscent of her high school antagonists to even bother getting to know, let alone inviting her over to spar. A pang of—guilt? confusion? fear?—settles deep in her gut, not so much for deceiving Akane of the truth, but because she doesn’t even know if, in this moment, it really even is true. “Bah, a loss is a loss, no matter who beats ya,” Ranma concludes finally.

Returning to a more pedagogic mode, she thinks back to points in the fight where Akane’s strengths and shortcomings were most on display. “Hmm. Your zanshin is good, ya ain’t sloppy about committing like a lotta people. But if anything you’re overcommitting. Hang on, come at me with a men strike.” Ranma quickly puts on her helmet, though she neglects to tie it back up.

Akane hesitates, but accedes, charging and winding up a downward strike. As her shinai arcs downwards, Ranma adeptly dodges out of the way, leaving Akane jerking to regain balance, faltering in mid-lunge. With the object lesson taught, Ranma removes the helmet and continues. “Yeah, see? The strike is good, but ya gotta know when to stop feedin’ power into your strikes so ya don’t lose your balance like that.”

“Control.” Akane nods and gazes thoughtfully at her shinai, before her eyes fall once again on Ranma’s. “How do you do it?”

Her steady, earnest eye contact as she says it unnerves Ranma slightly, if only because she now sees Ranma as a model for control, of all things. Ranma laughs suddenly as she answers. “My old man would always say your mind and your body have to be inseparable. And if ya get there, well, you stop exactly when you wanna stop.”

“Well? And what do you say?”

“I mean, he ain’t wrong, sorta. But I say he kinda forgot to mention the part where you gotta practise for a solid ten years to get there.”

Akane laughs weakly. “Well, maybe one day at a time, huh?”
The rest of the day with Akane, given over to talking about martial arts techniques, family life, and simple trifles, is a welcome respite from the typical complexities and aggravations of Ranma’s daily existence. But the intermittent exchange of glances with Nabiki reminds Ranma that the picture is not nearly so simple by half; what Ranma has up until recently thought of as an uncomplicated friendship is now so obviously not, and she’s now at a total loss of what to do with it. The rational part of her mind reminds her that she’s already got a girlfriend, and that she needs to let Akane down easy, to find a way of gently disentangling herself from the growing roots she holds in the life of Ranma of the Flowers, so her attempts at controlling her life through the consistency of this form don’t become another kind of chain leaving her in an impossible bind when the time comes for her to take the cure.

But the straightforward logic of these considerations is hard for her to remember, as the moments Ranma spends in Akane’s presence feel warmer and safer than anything else, a constant among a rising tide of volatility. The two competing narratives of her life duel for the rest of the night, and even after Ranma returns home and takes a hot soak, he feels he’s back where he started a week ago, treading water as he reckons with the impossible question of just who Ranma Saotome really is. Can he really say that his father’s dream—of Ranma Saotome, Man among Men—holds much relevance to him anymore, when half the time it’s Nabiki’s analysis, of a “pretty girl with a boyish streak”, that would identify him to the world?

Ranma drifts to sleep among a thousand questions with no answers, and dreams of another life.

Chapter End Notes

Language notes:

お見合い-omiai: A formal meeting used to introduce two people/families for the possibility of an arranged marriage.

抜き打ち-nukiuchi: One of the twelve basic seitei iaido kata, responding to a sudden attack from the front.

防具-bōgu: The general term for the armour used in kendo.
Ranma's perhaps more surprised than he should be that the curse has begun to follow him into his dreams. In the first few months after being cursed, most of his dreams had scarcely involved the constant daily transformations, as if they hadn't yet gotten the message about the new state of his life. But now that the regular changing back and forth into a short red-haired woman is blending into the tapestry of his life, a supernatural inflection point that is, if not normal, then at least normalized in his own mind, his sleeping self's imagination offers an alternative vision of how his life might have unfolded. Ranma drifts away, not altogether unhappily, into the dreamlike illogic and absurdism of the world's indifference to magic, and heightened, almost cinematographic melodrama.

"Our dojo sign is gone?" Akane yells, altogether too loudly for the confined space that Ranma identifies easily as the Tendo living area.

A mustachioed man that Ranma somehow understands instinctively as Akane's father rises from slumber. "Alas, yes. It seems to be the doing of," he pauses with histrionic affect before speaking in a harsh whisper, "the dojo destroyer."

"No problem!" Akane replies confidently, still answering in a low bellow. "I'll challenge him and take it right back."

"Holy crap, 'Kane, can you tone it down?" Ranma says, wincing as he covers his ears. "Ya don't gotta shout everything like you're some kinda shonen anime protagonist."

Akane growls with indignation. "What do you mean, Ranma!? I'm talking normally, idiot! Can't you find something better to do with your time than criticize me like you always do?"

"Whaddaya mean, like I usually do! I don't—gah!" Ranma says as he realizes he's in his male form, and yet Akane seems to know who he is. "Hang on, what the heck is going on here?"

Just as he says this, the screen door onto the engawa opens, revealing Genma, sopping wet and in panda form, with a sequence of signs scrawled out in messy handwriting. Although he doesn't speak, the signs themselves boom with Genma's voice. "Boy, what are you thinking? Where is your sense of honour and manhood? Are you just going to let your fiancée assume this challenge and sit back like a woman?" As if to stress the point, he takes a bucket of water and pelts Ranma with it, causing him to transform.

"What." Ranma says flatly, tossing aside the bucket in aggravation. "What are you talking about, fiancée?"

"Shanpu here!" a cutesy, baby-talking voice proclaims from within the rubble. "Ranma want cure, right?"

Looking around nervously, Ranma nods. "Hell yes!"

"Shanpu have water from Nánníquán, Spring of Drowned Man. Just have to come on date!"
Her broken Japanese is slightly disturbing to Ranma, but nothing else in these circumstances is remotely normal, so Ranma simply shrugs and follows Shanpu out of the hole in the wall. *Anything is better than this clown car.*

They're scarcely a few blocks removed from the Tendo home before another familiar voice enters the fray. "Ranma Saotome! Prepare to die!"

Ranma glances around for a few moments, before the image of a furious Ryoga Hibiki descends from the sky, swinging an enormous umbrella with murderous intent. "Ryoga, what is your problem?"

"Shut up, Saotome! You've ruined my life, I won't let you ruin Akane's too!"

"Ruin…she's just my friend, man!" Ranma yells panicked. Between dodging Ryoga's lunges and thrusts with the umbrella, she babbles out retort after retort. "And dude, I dunno how to tell you this, but play-acting your cute girlfriend for one lousy night ain't 'ruining your life'!"

The fight between the two of them continues for what seems like forever. Ryoga's strikes become more and more erratic and aggressive, and he starts throwing punches that cause the ground under them to crumble and explode. *Bakusai Tenketsu!*

*What the fuck?*

Ryoga gives relentless chase, and corners them in a side street, with Shanpu tagging along all the way. Just when Ryoga seems to be powering up some kind of all-powerful energy attack—*what the fuck*—an old woman on the stoop of her home throws some water from her uchimizu ladle, catching Ryoga and Shanpu in its arc. Both of them suddenly disappear in their clothing, leaving in their places a small black piglet and a mewling kitten.

"*What the fuck.*"

Suddenly a primordial fear overtakes all of Ranma's rational thought, as the mere sight of a cat sends her spiraling into utter panic. "C-C-C-C-C-C-CAAAAAATTTTT!" She goes from standing still to a full sprint in a matter of moments—nothing else matters but getting away from the terrifying animal.

After she regains her senses, she notices she's in an unfamiliar part of town, but is only allowed to briefly reorient herself before she notes a crowd of people—varying between furious, lustful, indignant, longing, and vengeful—clamor for her in sequence.

"Fire-haired girl!"

"Ranma's got it goin' on, ain't she Hiro?"

"Ranma marry Shanpu and come home to China!"

"Sugar, let's talk about the engagement…"

"Fight me like a *man*, Ranma!"

"Son, for failing to be manly, you must commit seppuku!"

Ranma runs as fast as she can, but the crowd gains on her with every passing second, until at last the throng of humanity crushes her under its fanatical pursuit.
"GYAAAAHHHH!" Ranma screams, waking up in a cold sweat.

As Ranma reorients himself to the real world, he rises from his futon, silently thankful that his mother wasn't there to hear that shriek (not to mention thankful for the fact that however complicated his life might be, it doesn't hold a candle to that nightmare). Shuffling off to the bathroom in the dim, early-morning light, he starts his typical morning routine. A splash of water to the face, a transformation, brushing her teeth, teasing out the knots in her hair, and braiding it into a manageable queue.

Staring back at her reflection briefly, Ranma shakes her head, trying to clear her mind of the contents of the nightmare. She can't shake the sense, though, that the dream's moral ties back not so much to the curse itself, but to the snare of responsibilities that have come with it. Maybe…

Maybe I oughta make good on that, Ranma ponders. Stop lettin' myself get tied up in this crap, getting back to the life that I oughta have. She turns the water back to hot, and places her hands under them until her transformation triggers once again.

Shivering with slight discomfort at changing back in such a short timeframe, Ranma assembles a plan for the day as he assembles a breakfast for himself.

Oughta go see Pops, I guess. Maybe swing by the old ghoul's place, see if she's got news, and catch up with Shanpu.

Satisfied with his goals for the day, Ranma withdraws an instant miso soup packet from the pantry and some leftover rice from the refrigerator, places the rice in the microwave, and sets some water to boil for some tea and the water for his soup. The rest of the assembly is relatively straightforward, and after finishing his breakfast Ranma quickly dresses and walks briskly into the warm summer morning.

When he returns to his father's apartment, he thinks of calling his father on his laziness, but everything he sees leeches away his willingness to engage. The apartment feels like a slob's bachelor pad, with even the tatami room falling victim to the mess, and at the sight of his father hunched over the television with a bag of crackers, Ranma can't will himself to do anything other than heave a sigh and return to his usual routine for his father's apartment—cleaning up the most egregious trash, tidying up the kitchen, and buying groceries. He manages to stew in his own room for a couple hours, passing the time rereading some old manga, but somehow the activity seems pointless, and when enough time has passed that he can reach the Seito Hanten during his more-or-less traditional visiting time, he eagerly takes the opportunity to leave, catching the train to Ikebukuro.

Ranma arrives to the almost equally messy Seito Hanten, with most tables still needing to be cleaned. Shanpu holds a tray, clearing a table of leftover plates, utensils, and glasses. As she turns to face him, her smile grows wide and bright. "Ranma!"

"Hey Shanpu. How was the lunch rush?"
"Bo-ring," she replies with a sing-song lilt. "You here for a special treat?" she asks, winking.

Ranma turns crimson, overwhelmed by the fear that the two of them aren't alone in the room. Thankfully, a cursory glance at the rest of the dining area shows that Kelun hasn't been listening in on the conversation. "U-uh, well maybe later. I was kinda wonderin' if the old ghoul was around though, I wanted to talk to her about some stuff first."

"She's in the back office," Shanpu answers. "I'm sure she won't mind if you go back there yourself." Setting down her tray, she strides over to the curtain separating the kitchen, and leads him back to a door that opens up onto a cramped, closet-like office.

"Hello, Ranma," Kelun says, her tone uncharacteristically flat. She gives a cursory nod to her granddaughter, but doesn't speak further.

"Hey. What's up? Kinda been hopin' you'd call, 'less ya needed me for the stuff you were gonna do to test the curses on?" Ranma asks, slightly disoriented by Kelun's change in attitude. "Course, I guess you'da called if ya needed that too…"

"No, no, you are quite right, child," Kelun answers with an audibly frustrated sigh. "I had hoped to call you when I came to a greater understanding of what it was in the waters of the cursed springs that triggers your transformation. It is not so easy for me to say, but I have made discouragingly little headway. The changes to the balance in chi that they bring are measurable, but in some cases so minor as to be trivial. Nothing even close enough to the point where they would trigger a transformation."

"Even the two Pops and I gave you?"

"Indeed. Shānpú, if you wouldn't mind demonstrating?"

She exhales dramatically in annoyance, but nods dutifully and extends her hands. Kelun stands, draws out one of the bottles from a nearby cabinet, and uncorks it. Ranma grits his teeth as he awaits the outcome nervously, but Kelun just proceeds to pour the entirety of the bottle into Shanpu's hands, to no apparently ill effect.

"You see?" she says. "An entire bottle of this water. It will yield an increase to her metal chi, surely, but nothing of a level that cannot be balanced out through some treatments. And nothing even close to a level that would trigger the kind of transformation of you and your father."

Ranma nods, but his expression indicates a lack of understanding. "I don't get it. Why'd ya pour it onto her?"

"As opposed to what, exactly?"

"Uh, drinkin' it, obviously?"

Kelun simply stares straight ahead at Ranma for a few seconds, squinting at him. "Could he—no, but surely not," she mutters to herself.

"Uh, Kelun?" The name is unfamiliar on his lips, and saying it just adds to his nervy expression as he bites his lip in uncertainty.

"I think you broke her," Shanpu remarks. "Lǎolao?" she asks, prodding her grandmother.

"Ranma," Kelun says, quietly, tense as a tightrope, like someone's thought to test her eternal patience to the limits. "You wouldn't have happened to drink the Zhòuquán water, would you?"
With the realization already dawning on him, he quickly transitions from confusion to embarrassment to full-throated anger. "That stupid old man," he growls. "I'm gonna skin him alive and make him into a fur coat."

"Well," she exhales, her expression shifting to one of relief as she laughs. "I suppose that could easily explain why the transformations have occurred." Kelun puts down the bottle, briefly glancing at the label. "These waters have never been intended for consumption, though I imagine your father is hardly the type to heed such cautions…"

"Knowing him, even if he bothered to read it he'd just figure it would toughen me up," Ranma says, scoffing. "So drinking it makes it stronger?"

"Well, it would follow, given your experiences. Ingested substances come into contact with the hollow fǔ organs more closely, and thus cause stronger shifts in chi than balms or treatments administered to the skin. Though I cannot know for sure, I would strongly suspect the waters of Zhòuquánxiāng function in a similar way. Still, that the possibility of inflicting a transformation such as this even exists is cause for concern."

"Yeah, if there's anyone half as dumb as my old man out there, ya probably want to keep them away from this or the secret'll get out before too long."

"Indeed. If it is true that consuming even a small amount of the cursed waters could cause this, I'll need to contact Xiǎoméi again, and I'll be sure to advise Old Yào to pull it from the shelves of her pharmacy as well. It isn't safe for such a tool to be available if it can so easily be misused." Kelun takes a pen and begins writing a note to herself. "For your part, we can at least now say more or less for certain why the waters afflicted you with a curse. I know that it does not change the problems you currently face, but I hope the knowledge is some measure of reassurance."

"Reassurance I'm gonna gut Pops like a fish," Ranma rumbles. "So, any other terrible secret I need to know? Or can I go back and start sharpening my knives?"

"There's nothing else for now, child," Kelun says. "It will unfortunately still be some time before I hear back from my acquaintances in Qinghai, but you have my word that I will contact you as soon as I have information from them."

"Right, guess I'm off then. Thanks for the uh, heads up, Kelun." Ranma nods to her, and exits the back office, followed quickly by Shanpu.

Shutting the door, Shanpu ducks into the kitchen briefly, rinsing the water Kelun had poured over her off her hands and returning with a towel. "Stupid grandmother," she mumbles, wiping away the remaining water. "So fixed on this idea to show off the Zhòuquán waters she decides to pour it on me."

"Yeah, that kinda freaked me out too. The hell's her angle, pouring that crap all over ya? It's like playing like fire, if ya ask me."

Shanpu shudders and shakes slightly. "I still feel a little out of my own skin. If she accidentally curses me, I'm going to use yeti form to kill her."

"Yeah, I uh, try not to think about the fact that it's all just lying around for someone to use it again. Wouldn't exactly be hard for it to happen again. Anyway," Ranma says, his eyes flicking back to the exit, 'I'm gonna get goin' back to the old panda. God knows I should wring his neck for this whole joke. But let's get together this week, just the two of us, no weird crap gettin' in the way. Maybe skip outta town if that's what it takes. What's your day off this week?"
"Thursday, unless Liu skips out."

"If she skips out, the old ghoul can go stuff it. I'll call ahead, alright?"

"I'll be waiting," Shanpu says.

Flush with confidence, Ranma grins and leans in for a kiss, happy that the chaos of his life seems to have found something for once to settle in his favour. Shanpu gamely reciprocates, pressing her tongue against his, and pushes for more, wrapping her arms around his back and guiding him against the wall. Her short qipao slides up her leg as she grinds into him, and the last shred of resistance is about to drain from his mind, emptied but for thoughts of the beautiful woman before him, when the creak of a door reminds him of an extremely disconcerting fact.

"Shanpu!" he whispers, jerking away with a small measure of panic. "Your grandma's office is right there!"

She grins slyly. "I don't think she minds. She likes you."

"Yeah, well I do! Ya think I want her knockin' me out and haulin' me back to China?" Ranma says, uncomfortably reminded of last night's absurd dream sequence. "Listen, I like ya and all, but we got plenty of time for that on Thursday."

Shanpu pouts, but finally her arms loosen their grip around Ranma, and she flashes a brief catlike smile. "Well, I think you're just going to have to owe me."

Beyond feeling more than a little bit sexually frustrated, Ranma's mood quickly deteriorates after leaving the Seito Hanten. Even though he supposes it would have been a lost cause for his father to have read the back of the label if he couldn't even have been bothered to decipher the obvious warning signs on the front of the bottles containing the cursed water, after all of the worry over the potential for the curses to spread, Ranma feels a certain impotent fury that the water could have just slid harmlessly off of him in the same way that it did for Shanpu if his father hadn't decided on his own that drinking it would be a great idea.

Ranma doesn't even get to challenge his father on that, though, because he returns to find the apartment's condition and cleanliness has deteriorated to the point where almost everything he did earlier in the morning had come undone.

"Ugh!" Ranma yells abruptly. "I'm gone a couple hours and it's already like a damn pigsty in here again, old man!"

"It's been raining a lot lately, boy. What am I supposed to do if I can't go outside?" Genma growls indignantly, motioning towards the various garbage bags.

"I ain't talkin' about goin' outside! I know ya can't all that much, but would it kill ya to do something else?"

"I'm not going to risk discovery just to placate you! You're beginning to sound like your mother!"

"Why, cause I won't let ya get away with your usual bullshit, ya lazy good-for-nothing old bag?"
"Because you seem more concerned about tidying up like a housewife than you do with your own manhood!"

Ranma's eye twitches, his control on his temper failing him. "Look, this morning the whole kitchen was crammed to the gills with takeout boxes and ramen containers, ya didn't even bother to do the dishes for whatever crap ya just ate, ya won't work for crap, all cause of something that's your fault, and you got the guts to lecture me about my manhood?"

"It's for your own good, son! If you won't fight for it yourself, who else but your father will try to defend it?"

As Genma raves on about the importance of manhood from his state of seclusion, so lost from the context of Ranma's life—or even his own—that even washing the dishes constitutes a symbol of Ranma's abrogation of duty to manhood, something within him begins to crack. He has grown up under his father deeply valuing his commitment to the martial arts, intertwining its philosophy into himself and his conception of how a man should be. For so long, he's idolized his father, held up his goals for him in his mind as unshakable pillars along the righteous path he needed to tread.

But now, it feels as though the wool is being lifted from his eyes. The vague stench of old garbage and rancid slicks of cooking oil caked to the bottom of takeout containers wafts insistently from every corner of the room, and with a nauseating snap the truth strikes him all at once. His father isn't challenging his manhood out of some kind of concern that the curse will cause Ranma to become unmanly. At least, not really. Ranma recalls easily that on more than one occasion in the past few weeks, his father had looked on approvingly as he had spent an entire morning doing the exact same thing—cleaning up after him, all for the sake of proving the very opposite thing. His father's longtime personal motto (or, well, his personal motto any time it helped his point) had been "manliness in all things". But as his memories finally converge on this moment, they conspire to tell a very different story, one that threatens the very bedrock of Ranma's values. "Manliness in all things" was long a way of extracting filial piety out of Ranma: a manly son obeys his father, Genma would say, and places absolute trust in his teaching. A manly son must show determination and devote himself to his goals, he repeated, but whenever those goals contravened his father's wishes, they were no longer in the service of manhood, something Genma assured Ranma he would understand when he was older. A manly son swears himself to martial perfection through the relentless training of his body and mind, and allows no distraction from the practice of the Art; but, of course, his own distractions from the Art were different.

In retrospect, it feels all a farce to Ranma; now that he looks back with clear eyes he understands that his slapdash code of honour to practise "manliness in all things" is an illusion, an evanescent, unreachable ideal that can never be reached not simply because perfection is a direction and not a destination, but because the ideal itself does not exist. And now that he realizes that this pillar inside himself is empty, his father's lecture feels like a betrayal, a lifelong lie made at his expense. If there truly is such a thing as manhood, and it is anything like his father and his sick philosophy, anything like the grime and the grease-stained emptiness within this room, he thinks, at the moment he wants no part of it.

"You stupid old man," he spits, "do you even know what you're fighting for anymore? You're goin' on about what's manly like bein' a girl half the time makes me weak, but you've got no clue, do ya? Look around! Ya really think bein' a man is about this? Bein' a slob who can't even cook or clean after himself? Who mooches off his own kid cause he fucked up their lives and can't do a damn thing to fix it?"

"You insolent child," Genma roars, standing from his place in the common room and lumbering over to Ranma, his face bright red with wounded pride.
Ranma stands his ground. If there's one thing his father has taught him well, it's sheer fearlessness, to say nothing of the Saotome School's endless parade of Secret Techniques, most of which, now that he thinks of it, are just a codified list of ways to fight dirty. But he's had it with his father, and fighting dirty, even against his own father, no longer feels like it's off the table after everything Genma's done to wrong him. After all, as Mariko reminded him this weekend, anything goes.

"And don't think I ain't noticed how you've been lettin' it go on your eating, either, so don't try and give me any bullshit that you're gonna prove me wrong."

"Feh, I don't need *words* to prove you wrong, boy." Genma assumes a chudan-gamae stance, and Ranma just smirks, knowing he's already won.

He dances across the room like a bullfighter, his grin growing wider with each time Genma lunges and misses. If there's one thing that training in his female form has taught him, it's that raw strength isn't always the most useful technique, and his more recent emphasis on speed yields him a substantial advantage against Genma.

"You've gotten slow, old man!"

He's answered by a low growl and a swing to the face. "Stand still and *fight* me, boy!"

Ranma ducks and weaves around the room, every dance-like move only serving to stoke his father's ire further. "Psh, why, cause you've spent so long leechin' off me ya can't even remember how to use your own damn martial art?"

Genma's breaths begin to go ragged, and as his technique begins to waver, his stances becoming sloppier and sloppier, defences disregarded to try to land a hit, it isn't long before Ranma finds an opening. Yielding to his father's charge, he lets the larger man's momentum carry him forward further, channeling it into a throw that causes Genma to hurtle towards the wall, splaying him out with a groan as Ranma just shakes his head in disappointment.

"What a waste. What's the *point*, Pops? God, I'd rather deal with Ma's crap tryin' to make me her daughter than *this*."

Having said his piece, Ranma turns his back, slinging his bag over his shoulders, and sets off back in the direction of his mother's home.

His mother's house is as dark as when he left it earlier in the day, and Ranma breathes a sigh of relief. Even given Nodoka's letter of apology, the prospect of a long, tense conversation with his mother hasn't exactly been filling him with excitement, and so Ranma's just as glad to pass the time engaged in the hypnotic activity of preparing a meal, trying to push out the volatile wash of conflicted feelings over everything that's just happened with her father.

It's nothing fancy, but Ranma finds a curry roux mix in the pantry and a few vegetables in the refrigerator, and sets to work preparing the simple dish, rinsing the rice (a sigh of resignation accompanies the cold water that triggers the curse) and pouring it into the cooker, chopping the vegetables, and letting the chunks of potato and carrot simmer in the aromatic roux.

Just as she turns off the heat and begins to serve out a portion for herself, Ranma hears the jingling of keys, quickly followed by the creaking of the front door.
"I'm back," Nodoka's voice calls out.

"Welcome back, Ma," Ranma replies automatically. Putting down her plate, she steps out to the hallway as her mother walks in. "How was your, uh, visit? That's aunt Shizuka that lives out in Ichikawa, right?"

"She's doing well, but I am glad to be back," Nodoka answers. Inhaling deeply, she glances back at Ranma. "Oh, are you cooking something?"

"Just some box curry. There's some extra if ya haven't eaten yet."

Nodoka hums in thought, then laughs gently. "Well, this is a bit of a reversal from the usual, isn't it?"

Ranma grins. "Guess so, huh?"

After a few minutes, once Nodoka's put all of her things away, the two of them move over to the dining room table, and settle into dinner. Hoping, at least for a while, for the conversations with her mother to remain simple and not stray too close to serious topics related to the curse, Ranma tries to steer them in the direction of levity. Yet, guarding the rawness and emotional weight of her dramatic break with her father proves harder than she's anticipated.

"This is quite good, son, thank you. I didn't know you'd learned to cook."

"Yeah, well, kinda had to after a while. I mean, what with Pops—" Ranma freezes. On one level she knows that bringing him into the conversation is a risk, but as she stumbles over the word and her expression shifts into pained grimace, she realizes there's no easy recovery, either.

"Ranma?" Nodoka asks. "Are you alright?"

"I, uh," Ranma falters. "I dunno, Ma. To tell ya the truth, I just got in a fight with him. Pops. " She breathes deeply. "At first I thought it was just like all the other times, yanno, I tell him he's a lazy old bag, he tells me I'm goin' soft in the head, maybe insults my manhood, the usual."

"Oh, my son," Nodoka mumbles, heartbreak painted on her face.

"I dunno if it was even anything all that different this time, I was just... tired." Ranma's shoulders droop, as the barriers holding her emotions close to her chest weaken. "Tired of him treating me like crap for something that's his own damn fault. Tired of him carping on me just for trying to make the most of it. Tired of getting fed all these lies that he said were parta bein' a man, but now that I get, they were all just about him lookin' out for number one."

Her mother just shakes her head, her lip quavering as she utters a ragged, harsh reply. "As much as it pains me to say, I suppose it is inevitable that, one day, you would see the same thing in your father that I saw so many years ago."

"Ma?" Ranma's eyes widen. She knows that her mother left her father, but up until now she had never made the connection between the way her father treats her, and how he might have treated her mother.

"I had hoped it wouldn't be the case, for many years. That he would see in you his son, someone he could not or would not behave towards in the same manner. But then, well, you are no longer really only my son now, are you?"

A curious knot forms at the pit of her stomach as Nodoka all but calls her 'daughter'. It isn't that
itself which is painful, though, but rather the implication that comes with it—that her father looks at her and sees someone inherently inferior in worth and status in his eyes, someone unfit to carry on the Saotome family name, someone for whom all his longtime invectives about women—*they're a distraction, boy, weak-willed, foolish, petty trifles good for nothing but chatter and children*—now apply to her.

*Oh*, Ranma thinks, and the knot twists and twists and twists, pulling until it tears at the fringes of her heart. The impulse to throw herself into her mother's arms overtakes her, not just for herself but for her mother, who she knows now must have suffered every indignity she herself has suffered, and in all likelihood a fair few more. Arresting the instinct to cry—old habits die hard—she hugs her mother, wrapping her short arms around her as tightly as she can, and not letting go.

And yet, even in the emotional vulnerability she finds herself in, something about the affection and the human contact soothes the raw psychic wounds of seeing the real man behind her father. If it isn't a cure-all, the warmth of her mother's embrace is a balm nonetheless, and it fades out into something small and forgettable, if only for the time being. Even if she wonders how long this crisis can on without a solution, the feeling of having someone in her corner is more than she's felt in a long time.

The morning of his planned date with Shanpu, Ranma wakes to a grey sky flooding through the window to his bedroom, and whatever faint hopes he might have had of a *dry* cloudy day are dashed as he rises from his futon, gazing out onto a light but persistent rain pattering against the glass.

"I just have the worst damn luck, don't I." Ranma says with a lopsided smile, knocking his head in annoyance against the windowpane a couple times.

*Well, no point in puttin' it off.* Ranma goes to the bathroom and sticks his hands briefly under the cool tap, then washes her face, brushes her teeth, and braids her hair loosely, before padding out into the kitchen and facing the day.

"Morning, Ma," Ranma mumbles, waving half-heartedly over to her mother, who seems to be deeply focused on a flower arrangement project.

"Oh? Good morning, Ranma," she says. "There's some breakfast ready. The kettle should still be warm, if you like."

"Huh? Naw, it's rainin' so there ain't much point anyways…"

Nodoka glances out the window. "So it is. I suppose the rainy season has begun in earnest."

"Aw, man, it's probably gonna be like this for another month! Well, there goes that plan," Ranma groans. "Say, Ma, ya mind if I borrow the phone a moment? I gotta make a call to someone."

"That's fine, son, as long as it's a local call," Nodoka replies. "Were you planning to see one of your friends today?"

"Well, I was gonna spend the day with Shanpu, but with the rain, I dunno."

Nodoka seems to wince faintly at the mention of Shanpu, but just nods and returns to her work,
leaving Ranma free to make the phone call. Ranma returns to her bedroom briefly and rifles through her bag before finding the card Kelun had given her.

Punching the digits into her mother's telephone, the dialtone quickly gives way to a familiar voice. "This is Seito Hanten."

"Hey, I thought you were off today."

"Ranma!" Shanpu answers excitedly. "Told you, I always get to the phone first. Getting ready for our date, right?"

"Um, Shanpu, I dunno if ya noticed but it's lookin' kinda wet outside today. It kinda sucks, but maybe today ain't the best day to go out."

"Why, because of the curse?"

"Well, yeah. With it raining like this, no way I'm gonna be able to go out as a guy."

"That's okay. We can still go, right?"

"Uh…ya don't mind? Are you sure?"

Shanpu tuts dismissively. "Of course, Ranma, rather have a day of fun with you than not, right?"

When Shanpu phrases it that way, it's hard for Ranma to say no. Even if a small voice in her head is reminding her of the way their last date ended, Shanpu's logic seems to be irresistibly convincing—it does sound better than spending all day moping around at home, or having Ryoga tease her over lunch. "I guess you're right. You got any ideas of where to go? I'd been thinkin' of more outdoor stuff, but that don't sound all that great anymore with the weather."

"Hmm, I think I have an idea. Can we meet at Ikebukuro Station in an hour?"

Ranma heaves a conflicted sigh. "I guess if we're doing this, might as well. Just hang out by the north entrance or something, if I gotta go guessin' where you ended up it'd take an hour for me to find ya. Anyway, what's your bright idea?"

"It's a secret," Shanpu lilts. "See you soon, okay?"


By the time Ranma arrives in Ikebukuro Station, she's had almost an hour to mull over the outcome of the day. For all she had made up her mind just last week that staying in her female form and riding out the remainder of the time before the cure would be a safer option, her relationship with Shanpu doesn't really fit that paradigm, and the brief moment they shared on Monday only amplifies that feeling, that her being male when she's with Shanpu is right. Forced by the whims of the weather and this implacable curse back into the role just as she thinks she's managed to set aside a day to spend a day with Shanpu on her own terms, it's hard for her not to shake a vague resentment with the world for being all too eager to remind her that only one way of being gives her any kind of control.

As she steps off the train and onto the platform, she takes the raincoat draped over her duffel bag
and slips back into it, trying to put her disappointment over the weather aside and focusing instead on the thought of spending the day with Shanpu, trying to guess at what idea she might have for spending time together, and—probably just as likely—what kind of precautions they're going to have to take in order to avoid the attentions of Shanpu's sometime-stalker. Fighting her way through the crowds, she hustles through the narrow tiled hall and up the staircase until she reaches the entrance, opening out onto the busy street corner of Mizukidori.

Ranma finds Shanpu in the crowd just soon enough that she isn't taken off-guard by the girl's enthusiastic hug. "Turn around, Ranma, we're going back on the train."

"Huh?" Ranma says, though she accedes and follows when Shanpu tugs at her arm. "This some kinda plot to dodge Four-Eyes or something?"

Shanpu laughs lightly. "Not a bad idea, now that you say it, but no. I heard of an ice rink they just opened down around Shin-Okubo. I thought with how humid the weather has been, it might be nice to go to a place like that."

"A skating rink, huh? I dunno…I've never been skating before."

"It'll be fun! You'll see. Now come on!"

Shanpu leads them back into the station and onto the platform for the Yamanote Line, where they soon pick up a train leading south into Shinjuku. Along the way to the rink, they stop at a small Korean restaurant, where Ranma's tried-and-true cutesy routine earns them an extra serving of dumplings and banchan on the house. All in all, it marks a much better start from their previous occasions spending time together. When the two of them take off in the direction of the skating rink, however, Ranma feels a strange emptiness, like even though every box has been ticked—free food, a day with the girl that she likes, some peace and quiet away from her parents' machinations—that the same thrill she felt when Shanpu last kissed her feels absent.

It isn't until Ranma's standing shaky-kneed in the centre of the rink, following Shanpu in her careful lead along the carved ruts in the ice, that the telltale reminder of the gulf that emerges between the two of them when she's in her female form becomes viscerally apparent. Shanpu's guidance is kind, friendly, perhaps even intimate—but it isn't romantic. Worse, though a small flutter in her heart still wishes that the Chinese girl before her would take her into her arms, another part of her heart is elsewhere, longing for an entirely different friendship to flourish into romance. The thought of the short-haired girl and her warm brown eyes, her face and muscular arms glowing with a light sheen of sweat. Before she's even realized it, of all the girls in her life, she's gone and started to fall for the girl who thinks she's a girl.

God damn it!

Ranma's eyes lose their focus as she tries to look at something—anything, that isn't Shanpu's smiling face, a smiling face glad to be hanging out not with her boyfriend, but with a glorified gal pal.

Noting Ranma's attentions have gone elsewhere, Shanpu waves in front of her eyes. "Ranma? What are you thinking about?"

*I'm thinkin' I dunno what the hell I got myself into.*

Ranma wishes she could say that so easily. But there's no easy way to admit that even a date that's supposed to be textbook on paper is so easily knocked out of balance by her form, and harder still to think that her attentions are distracted by an impossible infatuation with the girl.
who's supposed to be her platonic friend. In the end, she blows a stray lock of hair out of her eyes and hedges. "I'm thinkin' I could probably use a second off the ice. Kinda had enough of fallin' on my ass for the moment."

Shanpu laughs. "Not so bad for a beginner, I think. You're getting better."

"Yeah, well, it ain't exactly fun to go back to bein' a beginner. I got a reputation to keep up here!"

"Might be martial arts master, but here I'm sensei," Shanpu nods sagely, as if congratulating herself for her skill. "Okay, let's take a break for a few minutes. I could use something to drink."

As Shanpu glides to the edge and heads over to a nearby concession stand, Ranma's left to her own devices for the moment. She skates as carefully as she can to the edge of the rink, trying not to fall over again, and gingerly rubbing at her thigh, which aches with a soreness she hasn't felt since Ryoga had bet her that she couldn't break a boulder with her bare fists by finding its hidden weak spot.

(Shanpu couldn't, but then again, neither could he. Either way, it isn't exactly a memory she takes pride in.)

Finally free from the ice for the moment, Ranma finds a nearby bench and hobbles across the torn rinkside carpet. "Hahhh," she sighs to herself, slumping over. "Well, I guess at least it ain't as embarrassing lookin' like a damn amateur when I look like this. Still, some date this is turnin' out to be…"

As if summoned by Ranma's words, a tall young man with sleek, voluminous brown hair and a patterned scarf glides up to the bench where Ranma sits, his expression filled with smarmy concern. "Excuse me, miss, I couldn't help but overhear you as I was walking by. I simply cannot believe that your date would abandon a beautiful girl like you here so callously."

"Um," Ranma blinks, looking at the man now gazing into her eyes with worrisome intentness. "Uh, sorry buddy, I think ya got the wrong idea. I'm just waiting for a friend to get a drink."

"Nonsense," he answers. "If I had the good fortune of dating someone so breathtaking, I would never let go."

"Dude, I think you better—"

"Allow me to show you how a proper man should behave. Come, I'll teach you how to skate."

"—can you stop—"

The man's arms seem impossibly broad from this position, and move quickly and with alarming purpose, sweeping her off the bench and pressing her into him, leaving her legs dangling perilously and forcing her to cling to him if she doesn't want to tip over. Ranma tries to navigate an escape route, but the man's reflexes are swift enough to pre-empt any obvious outs. Gripping Ranma tightly, the man looks down on her with an unnerving gravity, and all at once the thought strikes her: *First Kuno, now this? Oh man, Akane was right. They are all perverts.* Ranma hardly has time to ask herself when exactly she's decided that men are a "them" to her, when the man's head dives in and plants a messy kiss onto her lips.

Something in Ranma's mind shatters, and the matrix of acceptable options narrows to the only recourse she has remaining: Saotome School Secret Technique #21, "The groin is always a legal target."
Twisting her body to grant her as much leverage and distance as she can manage, she thrusts one skate-clad foot straight up and in between the legs of the man holding her with savage intention. Within moments of the skate's sharp edge coming into contact with him, he goes limp, releasing Ranma and letting loose a pained bellow. For her own part, Ranma topples over onto the ground, her footwear providing her no opportunity to recover her footing. She scampers backwards from her would-be suitor in a crab-walk, but doesn't dare try to wobble away with the thin blades attached to her feet.

The commotion quickly attracts attention, but although a fair number of heads turn, only two people approach. On one side Shanpu, blissfully ignorant of the events of the last few minutes, returns holding a steaming mug; on the other, a woman with cascading ringlets and excessive numbers of ribbons on her hair and clothing marches up swiftly—on skates, no less.

The unknown woman berates the man, "Ugh, Mikado, can you stop skirt-chasing for just one minute! Honestly!" She tugs at his sweater insistently until he slowly climbs to his feet, wincing with pain. "And you!" she addresses Ranma. "What do you think you're doing with him, huh? Think just because you've got a cute smile and a nice body, you can have any man you want? He's mine!"

Ranma erupts with indignation. "Your boyfriend was the one who came at me, ya psycho!"

Shanpu tilts her head in confusion. "Ranma, what's going on?"

"Nothing. It's—ugh—I'm just done. I'm gettin' outta here." Ranma swiftly unties the laces to her skates, and yanks them off, stalking off in the direction of the skate rental, visibly fuming with unconcealed rage.

As quickly as she can while still wearing skates, Shanpu lopes after Ranma. "Wait, Ranma! Let's talk about this."

"What's there to talk about?"

Shanpu shakes her head. "You're right. We can go somewhere else. It'll be alright."

Ranma just stares at Shanpu a moment, then laughs bitterly. The combined stresses of the preceding days are simply too much, and Ranma finds herself overwhelmed, as all of the compartmentalization she engaged in to get to this point crumples.

*What's the point of this? Why am I here? Why do I even fuckin' bother, when it always turns out like this?*

She takes a deep breath, and hands down her final judgment. "Alright? No, it won't. *None* of this is right, Shanpu. It wasn't supposed to be like this, but...when has it ever turned out any different? No," she shakes her head. "I'm just—this was a mistake. I'm gonna go. Bye, Shanpu."

Shanpu's expression wilts into crestfallen heartache, and she can only watch as Ranma runs, out of the rink, into the rain and the howling winds, and away from her.
We're getting close to endgame here; two chapters and then an epilogue and that'll be all for this story. Thanks for following along so far!

For some context, a little familiarity with the story of Tanabata is helpful in this chapter. If you've never heard it, here's a quick summary:

Orihime, the Weaving Princess, was the daughter of the King of the Universe, and wove beautiful fabric on the banks of the river of the Milky Way. She was such a hard worker that her father was worried she'd never find love, so he introduced her to a boy who lived across the river, Hikoboshi (the Cowherd Star). The two fell in love quickly and married, but Orihime's father soon realized the problem: Orihime stopped weaving for her father, and Hikoboshi let his cows begin to stray, so her father angrily forbade them from meeting again, preventing either from crossing the river. Orihime, left in grief after being separated from her husband, asked her father to let them meet again, and moved by her tears, her father allowed them to meet on the seventh day of the seventh month. When they first tried to meet, however, there was no bridge over the river; a group of magpies lent their wings to Orihime so she could cross.

Rain stalks the city for days and days after her disastrous outing with Shanpu, never quite breaking out into a thunderstorm, but never relenting for more than a few hours at a time. Ranma fulfills her basic obligations for her mother at the dojo and teaches another class with subdued commitment, but other than that, the lull in events and activities give her the excuse to culture a prolonged sulk for the rest of the time; the closest she gets to socializing is taking up her mother's offer to make dinner together, and going out to the grocery store to pick up the necessary ingredients.

A week of seclusion seems not to sit well with Ranma's acquaintances, though, and soon she finds a parade of phone calls that prompt her out for one reason or another. The first, as it happens, is one that Ranma's forgotten to be expecting:

"This is Saotome."

"Hi!" the voice on the other line utters brightly. "Ranma, right?"

"Um, yeah, who is—" Ranma begins, trying to identify the grainy voice over the speaker, "—hang on, Mariko?"

"The one and only!"

"Oh," Ranma silently kicks herself as she realizes the reason for the call. "So…you really were serious about signing up for the lessons, huh?"

"Well, I asked for your number, right? You didn't think I was just doing it out of some sense of misguided pity or something, did you?"
"Uh, I guess not," Ranma answers, half-chastened. "So what's up? I mean I could get ya officially signed up and everything, but it ain't exactly complicated. We can just do that after the first lesson."

"Well, unless you want me showing up to your class in sweatpants or a cocktail dress, I don't exactly have the right gear for this. I haven't done any kind of martial arts stuff since I was a teenager. I figured you being like, the big shot here, you'd know where we could go to pick up what I'd need for the class."

"We? Ya mean…"

"It means we're going shopping, honey! Name a time and place, I'll be there!"

*Oh boy. Well, you asked for this, didn't ya?* "Alright, uh, the next class is on Friday, so there ain't a whole lotta time. You doing anything later today?"

"Umm," Mariko pauses, "I have a dinner shift at my other job starting at 5, but nothing going on until then."

Ranma glances at her watch—eleven—and then shrugs. "You're in—hang on, where are you living again? I know you're more in the sticks than me, cause ya stay on the train after I get off."

"It's not *that* much further. My place is in Houya."

"Aw, that's hardly anymore in the sticks 'n Nerima. Okay, can you be at Asaka Station in an hour and a half or so? There's a big martial arts supply store at the mall there. Shouldn't be any problem gettin' what ya need there, and maybe picking up some lunch after."

"Sounds good! See you soon, Ranma."

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The bus to Asaka deposits Ranma at the entrance to the station, which opens out onto a main square of featureless suburbia. For the middle of the day on a weekday, the station itself—and the stores surrounding it—are less busy than usual, though many of the nearby restaurants are filled to the brim with lunch rush customers. Ranma steps off the bus and into the fusty, soupy humidity of July; clad mostly in athletic gear to combat the heat, she's slightly surprised to see Mariko—who she associates primarily with the slinky ballgowns of the hostess club—dressed in much the same as her, with athletic shorts, a light windbreaker and a pair of headphones snaking out from under it, kicking her feet against the wall of the station as her eyes cast around the area.

When Mariko's eyes catch on Ranma, she slides her headphones off and waves.

"Yo," Ranma replies. "Hope ya didn't wait too long."

"Nah, I've only been here like, a minute," Mariko says. "Nice look, by the way."

Ranma, still not used to having her appearance be appraised, stumbles over an "Um, thanks."

"So, you ready? Where are we headed?"

Back in more familiar terrain, Ranma's response is more confident. "Yeah, let's go. Mall's just around the corner, we can cut through the station."
The pair of them walk up the stairs into the station and over the tracks along a sequence of convenience stories, cafés, and florists, depositing them in another section of the building more like a traditional mall, with a few dozen shops arranged around a wide, spacious arcade. The one Ranma's looking for is in the corner—a modern fitness supply store with a variety of martial arts equipment.

A few minutes of searching leads them to a corner of the store with a rack holding a variety of training swords—some with all the trappings of a real sword, but advertising their lightweight aluminum alloy blades, and others composed of nothing more than a simple carved wooden stock. Mariko's eyes flick over each of them, pausing to appreciate them but clearly without much understanding. "So, Ranma, what am I looking for here?"

Ranma scrutinizes Mariko, then walks over up to her and measures from the top of her head. "Damn it, it ain't fair..." she mutters under her breath. "Right, well, ya probably got a good 10 centimetres on me. For a total beginner, even if it's a bit shorter than usual, 2.2 shaku is probably the way to go. If ya stick with it, you can pick up an actual blade, and maybe go for something a little longer, but for now one of the wooden swords is fine."

Mariko glances at the price tags of the different swords, and breathes a sigh of relief. "Yeah, a wooden sword seems fine for now." Picking up one of the shorter ones, her eyes drift to another section of the store. "Now for the most important part, of course. Fashion!"

As Mariko wanders over to the selection of gis, Ranma guides her away from the first one she picks out. "You're probably gonna want something a little lighter. They make a buncha these thick-woven keikogi for karate and kempo and kendo and stuff, but it looks a little off with a hakama." Picking up a neatly folded hakama from one table, Ranma places it beside the thickly woven gi on display, illustrating the point for Mariko.

Mariko, for her part, nods somberly. "Huh. Didn't realize the style really was such a big deal for iaido. Guess I'll have to like, keep my eyes out for the pretty boys, huh?" she says, with the flash of a faintly wistful, starry-eyed expression crossing her features.

*Hang on, when did I start carin' about matchin' gis? Ma's habits must be rubbin' off on me…* Ranma bites her lip bashfully, deflecting as best she can. "Yeah, I mean, it's a big deal to Ma. She's got all these fancy ones she's given me with embroidery and stuff. I ain't gonna complain or anything, they look nice and all, but ya really don't need anything that showy."

A rack of gis attracts Mariko's attention, and she flicks through them idly, periodically taking one out and holding it against her body. "Well?" she says finally, nodding towards the multiple colours she's picked out.

"It ain't that big a deal, but uh, white on black seems like it's traditional for girls," Ranma shrugs.

"Fuck tradition," Mariko says, pulling out a bright red hakama that makes even Ranma's hair look like a faded brown.

"Yeah, well don't fuck it too much," Ranma quips. "Ya wear that, people are gonna think you're some kinda shrine maiden or something."

In the end, Mariko settles on a burgundy gi and a grey hakama; "Tradition won't know what hit
her," Ranma concludes with a grin. With their purchases at the martial arts store complete, Ranma and Mariko head up to the food court to pick up lunch. Ranma's hunger doesn't brook much in the way of dawdling over the various choices the mall offers them, so the moment she sees a pasta restaurant advertising a lunch set that includes an ice cream dessert, any thought of eating anywhere else immediately fades from view.

"Aw man, they have cod roe spaghetti and parfaits!" Ranma exclaims giddily. "Come on, come on, we gotta eat here," she says, practically dragging Mariko in.

The two place their orders and carry on with small talk until their food arrives, but as Ranma demolishes her plate of spicy mentaiko pasta, her brief glimpses back to Mariko, who fiddles with her own serving of spaghetti in between wistful stolen glances out at the world, knocks loose a memory in Ranma's mind—their last conversation, when Mariko mentioned she had recently gone through a breakup.

"Hey, Mariko?"

"Yeah?"

"You can uh, ignore me if this is weird or somethin', but why'd ya break up with your boyfriend?"

Mariko stops in her tracks, and Ranma thinks she's going to snap at her for a moment, but instead she grins like Ranma's told a good joke. "So, like, you're asking for yourself now, right?"

"Naw—" Ranma starts, but it's no use trying to keep up the charade for long. "I mean, I dunno. I wanna know, but I kinda wanna understand for myself too."

"Oh, nice save, Ranma." A puckish smile flashes across Mariko's features, only to sigh dramatically when Ranma doesn't take the bait. "Okay, okay. So you know, there's always the stories of the boyfriends that learn their girlfriends work at the clubs and get all jealous, right?"

It isn't a familiar story to Ranma, but she nods blankly, feigning familiarity nonetheless.

"Well, Shun wasn't really all that bothered when I first told him, just took it kind of in stride like anything else. But I sorta noticed that things like, changed after that. Not a lot, at least not a lot at once. But by the end it felt like I was talking to a stranger, like…I guess all it took for him to change how he saw me, even whether he liked me, was just knowing about it. Kind of like the reverse of the smiling thing, you know?"

"He didn't think it was right for him to like you, so he stopped liking you?"

"Just like that. And even if he didn't have the guts to say it, what's it worth to let something like that drag out?"

"Maaan." Ranma heaves an exhausted sigh, trying not think about how close to home Mariko's story strikes her, and her eyes search for something less troublesome to occupy her mind. They land on a brightly coloured dessert menu that sits at the edge of the tabletop. Picking it up, she flicks through the pages, and her gaze falls on a deluxe parfait.

"Well, if anything's gonna get me outta this damn mood…"

Fancy ice cream has always been something of a guilty pleasure for Ranma, but she's noticed she doesn't get nearly the same number of odd looks ordering it in this form. When the server comes around with a pair of desserts, rather than the look of vague judgment or skepticism she's used to receiving, she gets a bright smile. Ranma's eyes drift back to Mariko, who has the same expression,
like she and the server have teamed up.

Between bites, Mariko finally speaks again. "Alright, you got to hear my story. Now spill!"

"Huh?"

She flicks Ranma playfully on the nose. "This wasn't just some fantasy thought experiment, honey. You're thinking of leaving your man."

Ranma grimaces uncomfortably and hedges. "Enh…something like that."

"So? Why?"

"Well, it ain't all that different, now that I think about it. The whole 'double life' thing. Except…it ain't quite about that, cause it's not a secret. The problem…well I can't tell if it's that, or me."

"Thought you were like, out of the business for good?"

"Jeeze, Mariko, ya think there ain't any other kinda secrets you can keep?" Ranma deadpans. "Nah, it ain't about that, honest. More like…lemme put it this way. Say you could let your life go these two different ways, if ya managed to split them up so they can never run into each other…two names, two jobs, two friend groups. You could get away with a lot, right?"

"Two…" Mariko trails off as she prompts herself, before squealing. "Two boyfriends? Ranma, you absolute man-eater!"

"No! It ain't like that!" Ranma retorts angrily. "I ain't two-timing or anything. I wouldn't do that," Ranma huffs. After all, it ain't two-timing just to fall for two people, right? Only to act on it. And, well, isn't she trying to set things right? To understand what makes a relationship end, so she can properly give an answer to the people in her life left hanging by circumstance—herself included?

"If it isn't like that, how is it?"

"It's just…well…the more time ya spend like that, the easier it is to really be two different people. And you can keep doin' that for a while, but eventually it starts to mess with your head. Start actin' like two different people without even meaning to, and it's hard to keep track of who you're supposed to be. They start treatin' ya like you got split personalities or something straight outta some day drama. And after that, hell, it makes me feel like I'm half-crazy myself. And maybe I am."

"No," Mariko scoffs. "Listen, honey. I don't know what kind of 'dark secret' you're hiding or anything, but you've got a good head on your shoulders. You don't always have to share every part of your life with someone, but if you do show another side of yourself, and he won't make time for it, then he never really liked you for the you that you chose to share, did he?"

An uncomfortable chill lances through Ranma as she stops to mull over Mariko's judgment. She might not have the same relationship with Shanpu in each form, but Shanpu at least knows about them both. What does it mean for her that Akane's never even seen her male form? More pressingly, is her double life really about her body? Or is it about the expectations people have about her in each form?

Ranma tests the waters with her question. "How do ya tell which side is the real one, though? What's just something you're putting on, and what's really you?"

"Now who sounds like they're coming straight out of a day drama?" Mariko giggles. "Like, Ranma.
There's no such thing as the 'real side' and the 'fake side'. They're both just parts of your life. Maybe there's one you like better, maybe there's one that feels easier, but none of them are any less real because of that. At the end of the day, you're making the decisions, right? Not, like, some Jekyll-and-Hyde evil twin, you."

Yeah, well, that'd be a whole lot simpler if I had half a clue what 'me' means these days, Ranma thinks. But then, maybe that's Mariko's point. Ranma Saotome, Man among Men. Ranma of the Flowers. The "pretty girl with a boyish streak". The boy Shanpu wants, and the girl she leaves cold. All of them are a part of her. As long as this curse is a part of her—and even maybe after it's gone, they'll always be some small part of who she once was.

The thought pricks at her nerves, and she papers over the uncertainty and insecurity with a trademark smirk. "Yeah, well, how do ya know I ain't got the Jekyll-and-Hyde thing going on? Could be ya just met me on my good days."

"Oh, those were the good days, huh?" Mariko raises an eyebrow, suppressing a giggle.

"Yeah, yeah, laugh it up. It don't count as a bad day just cause ya got sore about my mood. Coulda brought in my sword and gone medieval on the damn letches," Ranma smirks.

"Okay, point taken," Mariko laughs. "You'll have to show me how you would have done it in class, huh?"

"First things first, maybe learn how to draw the sword, alright?"

As expected, Mariko joins the class as a total beginner, although Ranma can tell from the way she moves that she has a greater awareness of her body than most novices—certainly than those jokers Hiroshi and Daisuke, at least. Huh, maybe cheerleading really is a martial art after all, Ranma muses.

Most of her individual focus is devoted to Mariko as a new student, though both of them seem to have their minds elsewhere at times; to say nothing of the sly wink Mariko shoots Ryoga when she catches his eyes drifting towards her, Ranma hears her muttering things under her breath about Kuno's physique more than once.

"What I wouldn't do to a slab of man like that in a back alley." Mariko's eyes glaze faintly, and—is that a hint of drool at the corner of her mouth?

"Easy there," Ranma mumbles back. "Ya might like how he looks, but just wait until ya hear him open his mouth. Sounds like he ate a book of Tokugawa poetry and all he figured out what to do with it is ask girls out."

"Well, that doesn't sound so bad. Almost charming, actually."

"I dunno about that. See how you feel when he says 'I must date with you both.' Like he wants some kinda harem."

Mariko shrugs off the concern. "Eh, I can live with that. I mean, if it's just for one night, who gives a crap, right?"
"He don't look like the 'one-night' kinda guy to me, but good luck with that."

Mariko raises an eyebrow, but doesn't respond as she goes back to practising and sneaking the occasional look in the direction of Kuno. And as for Ranma herself, well, she's just grateful that enough attention is drawn away by the lively girl's general coquettishness that nobody scrutinizes her furtive glances towards Akane too closely.

The rest of the class passes uneventfully, but after the other students have already packed up their things and gone, two surprising faces hang back, talking amongst themselves for a few minutes as Ranma puts away some equipment. When she finishes and notices the two boys haven't left, she approaches them.

"Hey Hiroshi, Daisuke. What's up? Everything alright?"

"You got it bad, don't you, Teach?" Daisuke grins widely and raises an eyebrow suggestively.

Hiroshi buries his face into his palms. "Oh god Daisuke, you huge dork. Why can't you just let me do this, again?"

"Cause you'd have been too stick-up-your-ass about it, is why!"

"Uh, guys?" Ranma says, more than a little confused. "Are you like, doing a routine or something here? I don't get it."

Daisuke begins to speak, but Hiroshi cuts him off quickly. "Dai here thought it'd be a great idea for the two of us to give you some dating advice, since you seem to be having some trouble getting past the 'awkwardly looking at each other and blushing' phase."

"Wait, w-what are you talking about?"

"Look, Teach," Daisuke sighs, "You know Hiroshi and I aren't exactly iaido pros yet. There's a lot of downtime to see what's happening in class, even with a cute new girl to check out. All we're trying to say is it's kind of obvious that you've got a thing for Tendo."

Ranma looks away, cheeks flushing. "Wh—It ain't like that, we're just friends…I mean between two girls it's just—I mean, aww damn it," she says, tugging at the collar of her gi. "Alright, fine, so maybe I like her, but ain't it, I dunno, a little creepy or something to make a move?"

"Nah, it ain't creepy at all," Hiroshi replies. "I can't say if it's all that common or normal or whatever, but who cares about that? If it's the two of you…if anything, it's more like it's kinda adorable."

"Not to mention kinda hot."

"…yeah that too. Now shut up, Dai."

"I mean, if ya say so…" Ranma says, uncertain how to feel about their eagerness.

Daisuke nods confidently. "The point is, we figured that you know, you being a girl and all, you might not know the right way to get a girl."

"Um, Daisuke, have you even had a girlfriend yet?" Hiroshi narrows his eyes skeptically.

"That's not important, Hiro! What's important is that we've gotta help our cute teacher land the cute girl of her dreams."
Ranma can't suppress a small laugh at the earnestness of the pair. Even if she doesn't exactly need advice on how to complicate her love life even further, their efforts to do their best to help their teacher get a girlfriend are almost as sweet as they seem to find her own interest in Akane.

"Anyway, look," Hiroshi coughs. "Tanabata's coming up soon, Saotome. I don't know if you're into that sort of thing, but girls usually love dressing up for that stuff and going out with a date. I bet if you asked Tendo, she'd go with you for sure."

"Huh," Ranma finally says. With so much of her life wrapped up in one thing or another related to the curse, she's hardly given any thought to the passage of time, and the upcoming festival hadn't even crossed her mind until now. Almost as quickly, the vague warmth that comes from the idea of spending an afternoon at the festival with Akane freezes in place, her mind locking up as a cascade of reminders throw cold water on the simple fantasy.

Damn it, Saotome, you're not supposed to want this, a voice cuts in. What's the point of this, any of this, if you're just gonna get the cure?

"Um, Teach?" Daisuke leans in, looking slightly concerned. "Still here with us?"

Ranma shakes her head sharply. "Uh, yeah, sorry. Just realized I'd kinda forgotten it was coming up so soon. Thanks for the suggestion, guys."

Hiroshi nods, the corners of his lips tugging into a smile. "Alright, well…if you do manage to work up the nerve, good luck, Teach."

Daisuke follows suit, a huge grin plastered on his face. "And if it doesn't work out, you know, I'd make a great boyfriend."

"Daisuke, you idiot." Hiroshi rolls his eyes and drags his friend out by the shoulder. "Okay, sorry for keeping you waiting, Saotome. Remember, we're rooting for you!"

"This is Saotome."

Another day, another phone call. While the last one ended in a productive outing, however, from the moment she hears the voice on the other side of the line, she can tell that things won't end so well. It's a familiar voice this time, but not one Ranma's in a particular mood to hear after everything that happened.

"Ranma…"

"Shanpu." It isn't often that she thinks of it, but Ranma hates how her voice sounds in this form when she's with Shanpu. It feels strained, tight, and unnatural, always leaving her wishing to change back, wishing for the rich tones of her male voice to complement Shanpu's mezzo. Yet with how often the last few days have brought rain, it hardly seems worth it just to squeeze out a couple of hours, if circumstances will just demand a change sooner or later.

"You haven't been by the restaurant lately. Are you…are you avoiding me?"

Yes.
"No." The answer is obvious to Ranma's heart, but her mind isn't so willing to accede to it. "Just…it seems like a bad idea right now. It's just supposed to keep raining on and off for a couple weeks, and it never seems to work out right like this."

Shanpu sighs audibly into the receiver. "I don't care about that stuff, Ranma. We can do something else."

Her earnestness should excite Ranma, but the only thing that wells up in Ranma's heart is a reluctant guilt. "Look, I wish it wasn't like this, but this ain't how it should be. Let's just make it through the rainy season, and then we can talk."

And then what? The deflection might be enough for Shanpu, but her own thoughts don't let her get away so easily. For the time being, Ranma can get away with indulging in the ease of putting aside the responsibilities of one life in favour of another. But soon enough—at least, she hopes—Kelun will hear of a cure from her acquaintances in Qinghai; will things really return to normal after that?

More to the point, Ranma asks herself, do I even want that?

She squelches the stray thought. "Listen, Shanpu, we'll, uh, we'll talk soon. The rain's gotta let up sooner or later, but until then…it's better this way."

Ranma hangs up the receiver, feeling less and less sure what the future brings, and more and more like she needs a break from it all. So she draws inspiration from her dream, and old memories of a life that scarcely seems like her own anymore, and punches in the number of an old friend.

"Ryoga Hibiki," she speaks into the phone with a grin, "prepare to die."

One of the best things that growing closer to her mother has earned her is free use of the dojo outside of the normal hours of her or her mother's classes. A day without any classes offers her the opportunity to practise unimpeded; or, on a day like today, where having the space to herself would just give her an excuse to stew over her troubles, to engage in the longstanding tradition of all-out unarmed combat with Ryoga Hibiki.

When Ryoga arrives, Ranma's been warming up with stretches for several minutes, but she doesn't realize right away that Ryoga's staring at her with a look of confusion on his face.

"Okay, what's with the look today?"

Ranma looks down at herself. "Whaddaya mean?"

"I mean, uh," Ryoga coughs, and cups his own chest.

"Oh, that?" Ranma replies, almost innocently. "Well, with the rain it's just…" Ranma trails off as her eyes drift out the window of the dojo, meeting clear sky and bright rays of sunshine. "Aw, damn it."

Ryoga raises an eyebrow. "Are you okay, man? You've been like…that a lot lately."

Figures he'd pick up on that sooner or later. "Ugh, don't get any ideas, you weirdo. Sometimes it's easier not to have to change back and forth all the time is all."
"Well, hurry up and change now. I'm not fighting you like this."

"Hey, hang on, why not?"

"Look, it just wouldn't be right to hit a girl! How am I gonna throw a punch at a cute face like that?"

"It's the same damn face, Hibiki!" Ranma huffs indignantly, but doesn't protest any further, marching back to the bathroom, loosening her gi and pants, and using some hot water from the tap to transform.

When he comes back, Ryoga laughs slightly, but nods in approval. "Your gi looks like it comes out of the juniors section, but this should be a little better."

"Shaddup, Ryoga. Now, we gonna spar or what?"

Ryoga smirks, and assumes a defensive position, as Ranma follows suit.

Still trying to rebalance himself in this body, Ranma allows Ryoga to make the first move; Ryoga steps forward and rotates his body into a strong roundhouse kick. Ranma's quick skip to the side to dodge pushes him further than he wants; *gotta remember my legs are longer like this*, Ranma reminds himself.

Ryoga sighs at the distance Ranma's created once again, but pursues his opponent once again, this time with a series of punches. Ranma bobs and weaves around them, forcing himself to remember to account for his higher centre of gravity, and extends his leg for a low sweep. Ryoga hops backward, though Ranma's leg goes out further than he intended, and he clips the edge of Ranma's foot on the landing.

Ranma holds back a pained shout, and with Ryoga close up, he queues up a full-force punch to the solar plexus. Ryoga parries it, and with Ranma distracted, lands a quick offhanded counterpunch on Ranma's shoulder, causing him to reel backward and rebalance himself. "Bah," Ranma growls and lunges in as soon as he's gotten his footing again, while Ryoga takes the opportunity to catch Ranma in a throw, letting the momentum take them both to the ground.

Bracing himself against the fall, Ranma lets the tumble continue further, twisting over to allow him to end up on top, and then jumping away when Ryoga goes for a quick knee thrust. Ryoga quickly gets to his feet again, and moves in for another strike, when Ranma responds with a lightning-fast butterfly kick, aimed squarely for Ryoga's jaw.

Or, at least it would have been if he had properly calculated his reach. As it is, the bony protrusion of Ranma's ankle is what meets Ryoga's jaw, causing Ryoga to yelp in pain and Ranma to tumble over.

"Ow, dammit," Ryoga seethes. "Maybe I should have let you fight as a girl. Your aim is crap today."

Ranma sighs, running a finger through his hair contritely. "Sorry. Man, it's weird to think, but I'm kinda outta practice in this form. I keep forgetting I got way better reach."

"I'm trying not to think about how disturbing the implications of that are, Saotome. Just how much time are you spending like that, anyway?"

"Will ya give it a rest already? It ain't always as simple as ya think. I mean, the rainy season besides, I gotta be like that if I wanna hang out with Akane, or like, half the people I know at this
Ryoga's eyes narrow as he scoffs dismissively. "I knew it, you do have a thing for her! What, you think just because you have two bodies, you can have two girlfriends? Kuonji was right, you are a two-timing bastard."

"Oh, can it, P-chan."

"Really? You're going to stoop to the grade school crap now? I thought we agreed in junior high that wasn't funny anymore."

"Look, if you're going for the low blows, anything goes. Ain't my fault you wanted your English name in Shinonome-sensei's class to be Pizza—"

"—For about five damn minutes, Saotome," Ryoga growls.

"—Okay, okay, okay, whatever. Fine. Too far," Ranma laughs for a moment, but then sighs, slumping over into a seated position on the dojo floor. "Look, man, I just don't know what I'm gonna do. Every time I hang out with Shanpu, some crap reminds me, hey, this is a curse, remember? And fucks up whatever plans we got to have a good time. And maybe she doesn't realize it, but I do, cause the more she sees me like a girl, the less she sees me like a boyfriend."

"And? What's that got to do with Akane?"

"Well, it ain't got to do with her directly. But look, the old ghoul's got a cure in the pipes, right? I got it reckoned right, she'll probably be hearin' back real soon, next week maybe. Then I don't haveta worry about the curse gettin' in the way with Shanpu anymore, and Akane, well...I can figure something out I guess."

"What about teaching this class, though?"

Ranma pauses, then buries his face in his palms. "Right. Kinda forgot about that for a minute, I dunno," he says, letting out a noise of exasperation. "I'm just...sick of this, dude. All the back and forth, the crazy bullshit I keep getting from everyone who wants me to act some way or be someone. I just wanna be me and not have this crap haveta matter so damn much."

"Typical. You want it not to matter, but you want to have it both ways anyway," Ryoga rolls his eyes. "Look, you've been dodging the truth because it's not exactly easy to talk about, I get it. And I may not get it entirely, but if you're somehow okay with some girl liking your girl side better, fine. But now you're stringing two people along—I mean, hell, three if you count Kuonji. You want my advice? Quit dancing around the issue, be a man and just tell them about the curse."

"Yeah," Ranma starts, nodding with a weary resignation. "I really should. Goin' on for another year like this or something...bein' honest with myself, that ain't gonna work out. This half-and-half crap ain't gonna cut it with Shanpu. And if I'm gonna try it like with 'Kane...then she oughta know what she's gettin' into."

Ryoga shakes his head and laughs. "As usual, your life is ridiculous, Saotome. But you're right, I guess. As weird as it sounds, if you aren't compatible in your uh, girl form, then it probably isn't going to work out."

The thought sends Ryoga into a flush, and Ranma smirks. "Oy, mind out of the gutter, you pig."

"Yeah, yeah," Ryoga swats away Ranma's accusations. "Well, after that half-assed cheap shot of yours, I'm going to have to put my jaw on ice. Good luck with your girlfriend crisis." With a wave
of his arm, he gathers his belongings, leaving Ranma to ponder his next moves.

For all that he was somewhat readily able to admit to Ryoga that he needs to come clean, it's easier said than done. He spends much of the evening ruminating over the beef bowl his mother makes for dinner, putting off a bath or preparing for bed until he can sort out how he's going to approach talking to Ukyo and Akane. The clock passes 10:30, and in a flash of realization Ranma figures that Ukyo will be closing the restaurant soon; on impulse, he picks up his well-worn windbreaker and catches the quickest bus to Tagara.

It's just past 11 when Ranma arrives; his heart feels about ready to leap out of his chest, and a nervy expression clings to his features as he walks into Okonomiyaki Ucchan's. Once again he's confronted by a wall of nostalgia, threatening to throw his emotions into greater turmoil, but now that he's committed, he doesn't let himself turn and run. After all, Ranma Saotome wouldn't back down from a challenge, right?

Ukyo initially doesn't glance up as he enters, focused on wiping down the bar. "Sorry, we're just closing up now."

Ranma approaches her cautiously, searching for a way to start the conversation. Finally, he settles on a bland greeting to test the waters. "Hey, Ucchan."

His voice seems to startle her, and when she looks up, her eyes narrow as she appraises Ranma. He's surprised himself, though, when her tone remains somewhat even, masking whatever emotions she might be feeling. "I wasn't sure whether I expected you to come around, Ran-chan."

"Yeah, well, maybe I got a couple regrets about that. Thinkin' back, I probably coulda done this all without jerkin' ya around for so long, if I'd just had the guts to talk to ya to begin with."

"Well…I guess you aren't the only one with regrets," Ukyo sighs. "It was easier for me to believe something neat and tidy, even if it made me hate you. And that wasn't fair either."

Ranma nods his head. "It ain't ever that neat though, is it?"

"Hah, I never thought I'd hear something like that coming from you, sugar. Thought you were all about 'no problem you can't solve with a little martial arts'," Ukyo laughs, and her face settles into a smile as she motions toward the bar. "Here, take a seat, Ran-chan."

"Well, it stands to reason, my biggest problem at the time was just that Ken guy who kept stealing my kendo routine," Ranma grumbles, walking over to the bar and dropping his bag as he sits down. "Still, maybe I've done a little growin' up since then."

Ukyo raises an eyebrow. "Oh?"

Taking a deep breath, Ranma grits his teeth and unseals the truth. "Well, it's kinda got to do with why I've been so scarce lately, but probably not in the way ya think. Some stuff's, uh, changed."

"What's that?"

"You're right, I have been hidin' something from ya, and that ain't been fair either. But maybe when you see it in person, it'll make sense why. Could you get some water?"
"Water?" Ukyo's face shifts quickly from apprehension into puzzlement.

"Just regular cold water. You'll uh, you'll see why in a moment."

She shrugs, but heads back to the kitchen to pick up a glass of water, and hands it to Ranma.

With a theatrical flick of the wrist, Ranma takes the glass, and in one smooth motion pours it over his hand, triggering the transformation into a short redhead.


"...are the same person. Sorry 'bout this," Ranma mutters sheepishly, one hand rubbing the hair on the back of her head.

"You—y-you lied to me!" Ukyo suddenly erupts in anger. "All this time, you were just playing at—hold on, who are you really? A girl, a boy? Was anything you told me even true? Was anything you ever told me true?"

Ranma cringes, trying to find the words to describe the truth, as ridiculous as it sounds to say aloud. "It was true. I'm—I'm Ranma, really. This whole thing didn't happen until a few months ago. Right before we split up. My old man bought some weird medicine that ended up having an ancient Chinese curse, and now when I get splashed with water I end up like, uh," she gestures down to herself, "this."

"An 'ancient Chinese curse'? You really expect me to believe that, sugar?"

"It sounds crazy, but damn it, isn't this crazy?" Ranma almost yells. "Look, it ain't normal. I know, I get it. My whole life's gone sideways since then, I swap around so damn often I hardly got any idea who I really am anymore. I didn't mean to dupe ya, honest."

"Well, you sure seemed to mean it when you showed up draped around fucking Hibiki of all people! Telling me some stupid sob story about your dead parents from Kyushu or something! I even brought you okonomiyaki on the house, you—you—ugh, I don't even know whether to call you a bitch or a bastard!"

"I—ugh, I knew that was a mistake…"

"No shit, Saotome! So you can forgive me for not taking everything you say at face value after getting suckered like that. You didn't just lie to me, you made me feel like a damn fool."

"I know. I know! I feel like an idiot too, alright? But put yourself in my shoes here a moment? What was I supposed to do, just bust down your door and be like, hey, magic is real!"

Ukyo's temper flares further, and she barks out a bitter laugh. "Put myself in your shoes? You ever think of doing the same, sugar? I try to be understanding when some girl tells me I've been wrong about my boyfriend, and he isn't really dishonest, when you're lying through your teeth the whole time!" She scoffs and looks away. "I mean, really. How hard would it have been to say 'Please trust me, you're my girlfriend, I need your help' instead of leading me on for a month and a half, then cooking up some crazy scheme sluting it up with Ryoga and pretending to be your own cousin?"

Ranma's shoulders droop. "I'm sorry. Look, it was a stupid stupid plan, I didn't realize how long I'd be caught up in this mess, I was scared about talkin' about this curse, and I didn't wanna hurt your feelings either."

"My feelings? Is that all you cared about, or did you ever stop to think about me? I thought…I
thought," Ukyo's fury begins to fade, giving way to a quieter, more morose answer. "I thought I could trust you."

The unexpected pathos at the end sparks a twinge somewhere in Ranma's heart, and she snorts bitterly as her eyes lose focus. "God, Ucchan, I ain't even sure I trust me right now. I'm a total mess. And I treated ya like someone to try to dodge long enough for the truth not to catch up with me. I could come up with excuses till I lose my voice, and they might even be honest, but at the end of the day that's all they are, excuses. So for whatever it's worth, for that, I'm sorry. I really am." Her eyes drift back to Ukyo, whose anger has weakened to a dejected sulk, though her expression indicates she's still listening to every word Ranma says. "Ya ever wake up one day and…" Her voice cuts out.

And what, Saotome? And realize the apple don't fall too far from the tree? That you're more like you're old man than ya wish ya were?

She shivers and starts again, trying to exorcise that voice and say something, not to herself but to Ukyo. "Ya ever wake up one day and realize you've been livin' a lie? And I don't mean like this one thing that happened, but like you've been livin' with these little lies as long as you can figure. And it's too many to count, like they worm their way into everything till ya can't tell the difference between what was true and what was a lie to begin with, and you can try and try to tell them apart, but in the end ya think, well, what's the point anymore if it's gonna tear me up tryin' to get at the truth? So why not just go with the easy damn lie?"

Ukyo's expression perks up as she listens to Ranma. At first she's ready to reject it, throw it out with all the rest of the excuses, but something about it rings truer than the rest. "What do you mean?"

"I mean like, I ain't done right by you. I know it. And that ain't an excuse for it. But I've been kinda lost myself these last couple months and I'm tryin' to figure out who I even am, and how to be me again, how not to…do what I did, basically. So if you're willin' to give it another shot, like, as a friend…I don't wanna lose ya, Ucchan."

"Okay, Ran-chan." Despite herself, Ukyo shakes her head, her expression softening. "Look, I'll be honest, I'm upset with you. Angry, even. You violated my trust. That's not something that just goes away overnight, but…" She searches for words. "I don't want you out of my life."

"Well," Ranma says, a small huff of satisfaction, "that's a start. I'll try not to let ya down this time."

"You better not, sugar," Ukyo quips, in a tone somewhere between lighthearted and annoyed. Knowing Ukyo, Ranma thinks it's probably both. "Augh, if I stop to think about this stupid thing too hard, it makes me feel like I'm going insane. I didn't hallucinate you transforming earlier, right? I mean, Chinese curse magic? I really must be losing it…"

"Welcome to my world," Ranma replies with a weak smile. "Ya get me some hot water, I'll show it to ya in reverse."

Ukyo glances back at the clock, hesitating. "Much as my brain is probably ready to melt from learning magic is real, if I don't get home soon I'm going to pass out right here in the restaurant. Don't think you're not still on the hook, Ran-chan. I'm going to have more questions about," she gestures vaguely, "whatever this is."

"You got it, Ucchan." Ranma picks up her bag, rifling through it to find the shoes sized for her smaller feet, and shuffles over to the door to readjust them. Ukyo, meanwhile, goes back to cleaning up the restaurant. Just as she's about to dash back behind the curtain separating the
kitchen, she calls back.  "Oh, and Ranma, just to be clear…you're not really dating Ryoga, right?"

Ranma snorts, then degenerates into a fit of giggles, and then a belly laugh. After a moment, Ukyo's serious expression cracks as well, and the two of them are joined in laughter. "Oh, man, you shoulda seen his face after that night."

"Well, I'll sleep a little easier imagining it. Night, Ran-chan."

Ranma waves back in response, and walks back out into the night.

The following morning, Ranma stands in the bathroom, toothbrush in his hand, staring at his own reflection as his mind, still shaking off sleep, begins racing, overwhelmed by confusion in the aftermath of revealing his curse to Ukyo.

On one hand, the truth is finally out, and there's something both reassuring and terrifying to that—one more person for whom an untimely reveal could result in the downfall of her closely-guarded secrecy, and yet also one more person for which he doesn't have to engage in a billowing nest of half-truths.

He splashes his face with water, shaking as the transformation triggers. Then, after another glimpse in the mirror, she begins brushing her teeth.

It was more simple with Ukyo to replace a messy lie with an equally messy truth; that much she can admit to. Yet, somehow, the thought of revealing her life to Akane feels an order of magnitude more difficult. Although for Ukyo, the lie she'd been living with had been unsatisfying to begin with, and even the "truth"—whatever it really was—was hardly any different in its complexity, the lie that underpins her friendship with Akane is easy, reassuring, comforting, ironically feeling truer to who she really is than the dispiriting bramble that the curse has turned his life into. With Akane, she doesn't have to worry so much about who she is, how she acts, whether her persona is sufficiently convincing, whether she lives up to her parents' ideal of what it is to be a son or a daughter. Even if she happens to be in her female form at the time, she's probably felt more "herself" in those moments than any others in the last few months. And isn't there some truth to that?

Ranma spits out the toothpaste. Bah. Too early in the morning to get all caught up in this crap. Rinsing her face, she forgoes another transformation—chaining them back to back like this always gives her the chills—and walks out to the kitchen, sleepily accepting breakfast from her mother and taking a seat.

She eats her breakfast quietly, letting the tea cool down to room temperature before drinking it down in a seamless gulp, and she slowly comes to her senses as the caffeine kicks in. Bussing her dishes back to the kitchen, she's met by kind, but slightly concerned eyes.

"You've been quiet this morning, son. Is something wrong?"

"Huh? Naw, just thinkin'."

Nodoka's words take a few moments to sink in, but when they do, they stick. Though it's a
common enough affectation of her mother's to call her 'son', lately it's felt more and more strange hearing it from her lips whenever she's in this form. The strange feeling is only multiplied further when she stops to think about the fact that it feels strange at all to be called "son"; after all, isn't that what she is, body-changing curse weirdness aside?

But she's come this far; she can admit that their relationship is different from the one they had months ago, and that at least part of it is because, at least some of the time, she might also be her mother's daughter.

"You know, Ma, I know you've been doin' your best to treat me the same no matter what. And I appreciate it, I do. But even if it's just us two, I don't mind if, sometimes," Ranma's cheeks burn, "...if ya wanna try calling me 'daughter', too."

Nodoka's eyes widen slightly, as if slowly processing the meaning of what Ranma's just said. For a moment Ranma isn't sure if she's going to snap with anger, cry, or jump for joy, but instead she just smiles, that bright beaming smile of motherly pride.

"Very well then," she says evenly, "daughter."

The word unearths a sequence of confusing emotions for Ranma. She's just asked for it, yes, but it's altogether different to hear it directly from her mother. One part of her protests at her own adjustment—just months previously, the word would have thrown her into a righteous anger, goading her into automatically defending the manhood she'd always been told was an unshakable core of her being. And yet, another part feels that it's only right for her mother to call her 'daughter'; after all, she thinks, turning the tables back on herself, ain't that what's true right now? In this body, in this life, what else would she be?

Even that, as easy and tempting as it is to just accept without a second thought, piles upon itself a kind of unease, a reciprocal strangeness to the thought of how being called 'son' could come to feel foreign at all. If those categories—male or female, son or daughter, are so flexible as to allow her to traverse back and forth between them freely, what do they even mean for her? And why is it so important for her mother, to have someone she can think of as a daughter?

Well, there's one way to find out.

Muster ing her courage, Ranma lets the words flow out of her before she can think better of it and stop herself. "Ma, this might be a weird question, but why did you wanna have a daughter?"

Her mother seems startled by the question, but within a few moments later, a wistful expression comes to her face, as she begins to recount her recollections of the past. "From an early age, Genma told me that you were to be the greatest martial artist of your generation," Nodoka says. "And...of course, from an early age, your skill was remarkable, Ranma, like few I have ever seen. You took to the techniques your father taught you with a natural ease. Imagine my pride! And of course, as a mother, I thought it to be my duty to aid you in achieving this goal in any way that I could. I had not always planned to continue practising iaido, but seeing how the martial arts moved you..."

"Wait, you were gonna quit?"

"I am not only a martial artist, Ranma. Certainly not in the way that your father considered himself such, although it became clear in time that that fool is a half dozen other things besides, liar and cheat among them," Nodoka replies with a scoff. "But with a son, he had little regard for any time that I spent with you which was not itself in service of that goal. And I myself, well...I often felt that I had little else to share that would be proper to instruct a son in."
Slowly, Ranma's understanding begins to take shape. "So, when ya found out about what happened with the curse and all…"

"Well, as much as I knew the reality of it, it was difficult for me not to feel like I had been given an opportunity to meet the daughter I never had, if only for a little while. Looking back, perhaps it was unfair to you, but then," Nodoka smiles thinly, "maybe I can be as foolish as your father, when it concerns these things."

"It's—it's okay, Ma, I mean there ain't really any rules of how ya deal with magic Chinese curses, right? I know I've kinda been a pain myself," Ranma says, "but when ya compare it to Pops, like… there ain't even a contest. So, uh, thanks for stickin' with me."

"What kind of mother would I be if I didn't, daughter?"

"Well, I guess…" Ranma's blush returns, and she fiddles with her watch to distract herself from the hazy warmth that fills her cheeks and ears. A small part of her still fills with amazement that she's managed to develop this relationship with her mother in the end. And more than anything, she doesn't want that to end. "So, I've been kinda thinkin', Ma. I know I ain't always the best about saying 'thank you', but…Tanabata's coming up soon, right? We ain't had all that much time to just spend time together. I thought maybe, if ya wanted…we could go and pick out a yukata to wear for it?"

Nodoka smiles a smile that Ranma doesn't think she's ever seen before—unbridled, almost childlike happiness. "You—you wouldn't mind that?"

"Ya never got the chance to do this, right? And besides, ya know…it could be nice. Just to hang out for a while, not haveta worry about whatever weird crap that keeps following me around for a few hours. Hell, I feel like I've had enough of that for a lifetime."

"Then it's settled." Nodoka stands suddenly, walking over to the kitchen and pulling out a heavily bookmarked phonebook. After a few pages of flipping about, she nods to herself. "I know just the place. In the shopping district in Kichijoji, there are a number of shops that sell second-hand kimono and yukata. I'm sure that we can find something that would look wonderful on you, Ranma."

"Ma, it pinches." Ranma picks impatiently under the broad green sash wrapped artfully around her yukata. The yukata itself is a vivid, yellow-orange sunburst in tone, decorated with white jasmine flowers. Everything else is arranged impeccably, from the white flowers woven into her delicately braided and done-up auburn hair, to the lightly applied makeup, to the small silk drawstring purse she clutches carefully in her hand.

"Perhaps, daughter, but it's nothing to worry over too much. You look beautiful."

Beautiful? She glances back into the mirror, taking stock of her appearance, noting the care invested in every part of it. The woman in the reflection is hardly recognizable to her own eyes, yet there's no doubt that this is her, and the bare fact of that is overwhelming enough. With her face in full flush at that realization, her cheeks almost match the colour of her hair. Nobody—or at least, nobody she cares about (she refuses to acknowledge the existence of that arrogant figure skater)—has ever called her "beautiful" before, and hearing it is deeply affecting.
"Th-thanks, Ma. For goin' outta your way for all this."

"I should be the one thanking you, Ranma. I never thought I'd have this opportunity, but now that you've given it to me, I—I don't want to forget it. This will be a...precious memory for me," Nodoka says, her eyes going misty. "I'm sorry, I don't know what's coming over me! You should go meet your friend, I'm sure she's looking forward to spending time with you."

For all that her mother's eagerness to dress Ranma up in a variety of outfits has felt overwhelming at times, there's something about seeing the love that goes into devoting hours into sharing this part of her life with her, for her, that feels...nice, and reassuring, an act of love and kindness she realizes she's seen less of in her life than she maybe should have.

"Alright, well, I'll be off then, I guess. And, Ma?"

"Yes?"

"I love you."

Nodoka's heart soars, and the smile on her face matches it. "I love you too, daughter."

Ranma strikes out to Akane's house in a buoyant mood. After all the agonizing—and the ridiculous routine Hiroshi and Daisuke pulled on her in an effort to help—asking Akane to spend Tanabata with her was a surprisingly painless endeavour, Akane's response eager and without a hint of hesitation. While a small part of her remembers Ryoga's advice to reveal the curse sooner rather than later, for the moment it seems like a somewhat distant concern, something she can consider after spending the day with someone who, for the moment, is just a friend, someone she hasn't yet failed to have a nice time with.

The day itself is a little less pleasant, with gathering clouds in the distance, and in the soggy heat of July, the walk to Akane's house is more uncomfortable than Ranma remembers; compared to the shorts she often wears, even the light cotton of a yukata begins to weigh down on her. Still, when Ranma's eyes fall upon Akane answering the door, complaining about the humidity is the furthest thing on her mind. In a sky-blue yukata patterned with dragonflies, and a vivid red obi, Akane carries her traditional dress with effortless grace. "Oh, Ranma!" she says warmly. "You look nice!"

"Thanks. Y-you too, 'Kane. Ya ready to head out?"

Akane glances back into her house, and down at herself. "I think so," she says, then points to a small purse tied loosely to her wrist. "I have most of what I need in here, anyway."

"Well, let's get outta here then. I don't wanna miss out on the food!"

"Something tells me running out of food isn't going to be an issue, Ranma," Akane answers, laughing gently. "But sure, let's go."

From the nearby station, Ranma and Akane pick up a bus headed south to Asagaya, a district in nearby Suginami with a prominent shopping area hosting the majority of the Tanabata festival's attractions. Along the ride, Ranma and Akane fit right in among the groups of young women dressed in yukata. The holiday spirit seems to suffuse the air, and the bright, eager conversations of those around them seem to lift Ranma's mood even further, letting the quiet, nagging voice
reminding her that she needs to tell Akane about her other side sooner rather than later slip to the back of her mind for now.

Upon their arrival, they're immediately greeted with another world: the covered market at Asagaya is totally transformed from its usual setting. While many businesses and casual restaurants carry on as usual along the narrow street, hawking their wares or discounted foods, others have leased out their real estate to a variety of yatai, pop-up shops, magicians, carnival games, and the like, and the like, and the entire atmosphere of the area is revamped by a series brightly-coloured papier-mache caricatures hanging from the ceiling, festooned with ribbons of translucent paper.

"Oh, this is so beautiful!" Akane marvels. "Have you ever been here during Tanabata before?"

"Naw, I've been with Ma shopping a few times here, but never during a festival before. Pretty crazy how different it looks."

"Mmm," Akane hums. "I can't imagine it without all these decorations. They make it seem so alive."

"Well, it ain't anything all that fancy normally, just a street with a roof over it. Does look nice when they've gone all out though."

Ranma's eyes are drawn to the multiple stands of food, and she's considering speaking up to Akane about picking up something to eat, when a voice from a nearby booth calls out to them. "Excuse me, ladies?"

It takes a moment for Ranma to pick up on the fact that he's speaking to her, but Akane turns to face him, and soon enough Ranma notices as well. The man, looking to be in early middle age and excessively proud of his moustache, begins excitedly pointing to a sequence of charms he has laid out on the table in front of him. "I have something I think two lovely young ladies such as you might be interested in. Right here I have many charms, but most importantly enmusubi, the love charm. Maybe you'd like to be coming here next year with the man of your dreams, eh?" He points to a set of small red envelopes with heart-patterned stitching.

Ranma rolls her eyes, but Akane seems immediately drawn in and replies sweetly, "Oh, that sounds so romantic! How much are they?"

"For two girls as cute as you, 300 yen is plenty."

Akane undoes the drawstring on her purse, and withdraws enough to pay both for her own and Ranma's. The man thanks her and waves them off, leaving Akane to hand one charm to Ranma.

"Um, thanks," Ranma says, vaguely flustered by the thought of Akane being the one to give her a love charm, unsure of whether it's intended as the action of a friend or a romantic interest. "So what's the deal with these? Ya ever tried one before?"

"Oh, a few times. I don't know why, but whenever I visit a festival like this, it reminds me of a dream I've had since I was little."

"What's that?"

The smile Akane wears on her face soon gives way to a wistful glance away. "I always figured when I got older, I would become like Orihime, and I would find my Hikoboshi somewhere out there. But whenever I meet guys in university, and I think it's someone who I should get along with, I never quite feel that spark I'm supposed to... you know?"
Ranma nods along nervously, unsure of how to respond exactly, noticing once again that her life story doesn't line up so neatly with any answer to the question. "I, uh, I dunno about that…I guess I ain't ever given it much thought. Like maybe I ain't really anyone in that story."

Akane's gaze falls on Ranma once again. "Have you ever dated before?"

Ranma stops herself from answering "yes" right away, wary of giving the wrong impression. "Never had a boyfriend or anything."

"I've tried it a few times. It was easy when the boys were just jerks, and I didn't have to stick around. But even when they were nice, it didn't seem to change things. Sometimes I wonder if it's something that's wrong with me."

"Aw, no, 'Kane. There ain't anything wrong with you at all. They probably didn't deserve ya, that's all."

That angelic smile graces her face again, making Ranma feel weak at the knees. "You're sweet, Ranma. I'm glad…I'm glad we became friends."

"Yeah," Ranma nods. "Me too."

Akane's cheeks glow, and as the two of them wander off down the street, a thought cuts through the cloud of good feelings warming Ranma from the inside, reminding her of the ever-present uncertainty to this. How would Akane react if she told her? She imagines the story now, that perhaps the spark Nabiki has alluded to Akane feeling for her, that if she had the strength to just tell her now, she could be her Hikoboshi—but just as easily, the reverse, that it's precisely because Akane doesn't see her as a man, that she feels that spark, and that telling her could bring it all come crashing down to ruin.

The heightened stakes chill her, and she tamps down the impulse to say anything. For now, isn't the warmth of this friendship enough for her?

Her reverie is interrupted by an excited exclamation by Akane; without Ranma noticing it, they've reach a section of the arcade with a series of carnival games, and one in particular has caught Akane's attention.

"Hey, let's try the high striker!"

Ranma follows Akane's eyes and sees a light-up machine where a group of teenage boys are whacking a hammer against a padded element at the base of the machine. After each one makes an attempt, a chorus of jeers or celebrations erupts from the small group. With a smirk, Ranma motions towards the boys. "Whaddaya think, wanna go show them who's boss?"

"You read my mind," Akane answers, a similar smile creeping onto her face.

When they approach the machine, the older man in charge chuckles to himself and fluffs up the sequence of prizes on the table behind him. "Are you ladies here to try out your strength? You can give it your best shot, but I'm afraid it's been giving these boys quite a hard time."

Putting on an innocent facade, Ranma affects a cutesy reply to the man. "Gosh, mister, I'll try and see!" She offers the man a hundred-yen coin, then withdraws a tasuki from one of the sleeves of her yukata, tying back the sleeves to give her arms more manoeuvrability. Finally, she lifts the hammer, and brings it crashing down against the lever. With a terrific thump, the puck attached to the lever rockets up to the bell at the top, cresting as it taps the bell with a soft ding, before falling down, the eyes of both the boys and the man staffing the booth slowly drifting from the machine.
itself to the short redheaded girl who's just demolished their best efforts.

"W-what the hell, dude?" one of the boys exclaims. "Did you rig this thing for her? You're makin' me look bad in front of these guys! Lemme at it again!"

Akane coughs gently. "If you'd like to try again, you can go after me."

Ranma returns from picking her prize out from the nervous man—a small box of sweets—just soon enough to see Akane bringing down the hammer onto the plate of the lever. Right away, it's clear that something is terribly wrong; something in the lever gives with a sickening snap, and the puck careens up the striker, striking the bell so hard that a crack forms in the puck. As it rolls back down the machine lamely, something in the platform seems to sag from the pressure.

"Y-you broke it," the man mutters, his face pallid with fear. As Akane approaches the booth to pick out her prize, he shrinks back, like he's about to run away.

"Hey! I won fair and square!"

"R-right. Here, um, take anything you like!"

Smiling sweetly, Akane looks over the prizes, picking out a stuffed little black piglet with a vaguely worried expression on its face and walking back over to Ranma. As the two walk off, satisfied with their own proof of strength, a revelation grips Akane, and the perplexed expression on her face turns to giddiness as she takes the piglet and thrusts it into Ranma's face.

"For you!"

"Wh—ack!" Ranma yelps as her field of vision is briefly overtaken by black fluff. As she realizes Akane's offer, however, her annoyance resolves into a shy smile; a stuffed animal isn't exactly to her typical taste, but the thought of a gift from Akane fills her with a fuzzy happiness nonetheless, and she takes the piglet into her arms and smiles. "Aw, thanks, 'Kane."

The evening begins to wind down, and Ranma and Akane continue to wander lazily through the market, admiring the papier-mache decorations as they visit new sections of the area. Periodically, Ranma will point excitedly to a new booth selling sweets or fried fair food, and leave with an armful of takoyaki, dango, crepes, or taiyaki. Akane, meanwhile, is content to rack up prizes at the other festival games, piling the small trinkets into Ranma's other arm every time they pass a cork gun or ring toss stand.

When they've finally covered every inch of the festival, the two wander out of the covered market over to Asagaya's main drag, and find a bench under a stand of trees to sit down and people-watch. While Akane tries one of Ranma's latest batch of heavily-discounted yakitori skewers, Ranma fiddles impatiently with her outfit, removing and replacing her sandals, and tugging at the narrow skirts of the yukata and the obi tightly wrapped around her waist.

"Ugh, I just can't get used to this damn thing," Ranma whines. "I mean it's cute and all, I guess, but I can barely walk."

"Well, the whole thing is supposed to be about looking pretty and graceful, not letting you run around. A little unsettling, now that I think about it..."
"Yeah well, how am I supposed to fight if I suddenly got challenged?"

Akane blinks. "You're not supposed to—hang on, how often does that even happen!?"

"Well, I guess not that much since my old man stopped pullin' his tricks so much. He did try to sell me off to a restaurant he walked out from a tab on to wash dishes once. I told 'em to get stuffed, and the owner thought cause he was bigger and taller and did some karate in high school he could take me. Heh, sure showed him."

"What!? How long ago was that?"

"I dunno, I was like 12 or something."

The expression of combined shock, horror, and righteous anger continues to magnify on Akane's face. "Aren't there, like, child labour laws against that or something?"

Ranma shrugs. "Pops always said you can't trust the law to protect ya. That kinda crap wasn't exactly unusual."

"I'm pretty sure that's because your dad was always breaking the law," Akane counters, burying her face in her hands.

"Well, yeah, when ya put it that way, half the precepts of the Saotome School were about running away when someone was tryin' to catch you…" Ranma pauses, her expression shifting into a dejected pout. "My old man really was a complete bastard, wasn't he."

Akane hugs Ranma sympathetically. "I'm sorry, Ranma." She looks down at Ranma's yukata, noting her awkward body language in the outfit. "Is this really the first time you've worn a yukata? I thought, with the way that your mother wanted to dress more like a girl, she would have bought you something like this before."

Ranma searches for words, realizing more deeply that living for such a short time as a woman, her life story doesn't fit with the things that Akane knows or thinks about her. Now more than ever, the thought of coming clean to Akane weighs heavily on her mind, but the fear of losing the easy camaraderie she's forged is too much to bear, and so instead, Ranma stumbles over a half-truth, parrying away Akane's question. "W-well, I spent most of my time with my old man as a kid, and he would flip his lid if he saw me wearing some frilly getup, tell me I was a weak disappointment or call it a distraction from martial arts." She shrugs. It's all technically true, but reciting it makes it sound all the more bleak; had she been born this way, would her father have treated her like that since childhood? Or worse, might he have thought she wasn't worthy to teach at all, and walked out of her life entirely?

Sadness and sympathy give way to anger again, and then to righteousness. "Well, that won't happen again. I won't let it."

"Huh?" Ranma says, blushing as Akane's hug starts to shift from sympathetic, to protective, to… romantic? Ranma curses herself for not being better at reading the atmosphere.

"I-I mean," Akane blurts out, her own cheeks flushing crimson to match, and her arms letting Ranma loose to create distance between them. "We're friends, right? And friends look out for each other. So if y-you wanted to wear something like that more often, I wouldn't let anyone say anything bad about it, even if it was your dad. Because you're," she pauses, unable to maintain eye contact, "pretty."

Ranma's heartbeat pounds like a jackhammer, flustered almost to the point of being beyond words,
her insides tightening with a fierce, exquisite rush. The sensation is so unfamiliar, so far beyond what she's known, she hardly recognizes the attraction for what it is. Every nerve in her body thurms with a delirious ardour, pressing her forward inexorably, back into the molten warmth of Akane's presence. "Ya really m-mean it?"

Akane looks like she's about to burn up. "Of course, Ranma! You're really pretty. B-beautiful even."

There's that word again. Beautiful. Emotions cascade overtop one another in a vertiginous surge, and it strikes her now with dizzying certainty, as she looks at Akane, warm chocolate-brown eyes framed with immaculately arranged black hair, the pink blush of her cheeks, the graceful, sharp curve of her neck, that she can't deny it anymore. Cure or not, she doesn't want things to return to normal with Shanpu or with Ukyo. In this moment, she doesn't want anyone else in the world but Akane, a fact becoming hard to square with her divided life. And much as she knows that living a full life with Akane now means both accepting that she's the girl that Akane likes, and telling her that this form is only one half of her, the thought of shattering this moment is almost too much to bear. And yet…

The moment doesn't last. The clouds mounting up against the horizon earlier have gradually shifted into position squarely over the epicentre of the festival, and after hours of threatening they choose this moment, out of all of them, to begin raining—at first just enough to drive Akane and Ranma back under the covered street, but quickly enough that sharp winds send lashes of rain in through the covered section.

Just my damn luck, Ranma thinks, and laughs humourlessly. She's beginning to wonder sometimes if the rain doesn't follow her, just to remind her every once in a while that she's cursed, and that all she can ever do is escape it for short stretches of time before it comes back to bite her.

"Well, there goes that," Ranma sighs.

Akane's eyes glance up at the ceiling of the market, where peals of rain slough away the glass ceiling in loud crashes. "Poor Orihime," she mumbles.

"Huh?"

"That's what they say, when it rains on Tanabata, that the magpies can't carry Orihime over to see Hikoboshi, and she has to wait another year to see him."

Maybe the universe really is trying to tell ya something, Saotome. Or is that "Hikoboshi"? comes the dry chorus. (She's beginning to find it really aggravating when her male voice chimes in like this when she's in this form.) "Well, it might suck to be Orihime, but I'm also kinda thinkin' it sucks to be us right now. Ya think we can make it through to the station and head back before we get poured on? No point in gettin' squeezed by everyone else in here."

Akane shrugs her shoulders, slightly deflated. "I guess so."

After getting so close to…something—Ranma doesn't dare imagine quite what it could have been—the ride back to Nerima is quiet and if the atmosphere's not quite tense, it's at least heavy, with neither Ranma or Akane speaking up. A thousand potential words, and the worlds that follow forth from them, sit on the edge of Ranma's tongue, but she can't will herself to utter any of them.
Instead, the two part ways at the station, leaving Ranma to return home soaked to the bone, every part of her wishing to be free of the form, if only not to have this tightly-wrapped cotton robe clinging like plastic wrap to a set of curves that right now serves all too strongly as a reminder of the equally heavy thoughts on her mind.

A slightly embarrassed greeting to her mother soon gives way to stripping off her outfit and heading straight for a hot soak in the bath. Now in male form, the memories of the night feel all the more jumbled and confused in his head, more than anything at the almost disturbing surprise of the reminder that his male body isn't just a theoretical piece of him in the relationship that he wants with Akane, but a part of him that's always just a splash of hot water away.

"Shit," Ranma mumbles to himself. "If things are gonna go on like this…no, they can't go on like this. I can't keep livin' like that. I gotta tell her."

Slumping back into the bath, he heaves a sigh until his mouth drifts under the surface, blowing away bubbles of frustration as his mind drifts to the terrible task he's cornered himself into, now a seeming inevitability.

Ranma doesn't sleep much that night, and shuffles out of his bedroom the next morning with hardly a thought given to his typical morning routine. Nodoka is busy at work making breakfast, and a half-woken Ranma tries not to let the lingering reminders of the task ahead fill his mind before he's had some caffeine to reckon with it.

Not long after he emerges, the phone rings, and Nodoka quickly answers. "Hello, Saotome household."

She pauses and listens to the buzzy reply, then nods and holds out the phone. "Ranma, it's for you."

"Yes, it's Saotome," Ranma answers with a rote tone, forgetting his own form for the moment—and briefly stopping his own heart at the thought, waking himself up fully in the process.

Fortunately for his own security, the voice on the other line is not Akane, but a different one that Ranma's been anticipating for a long time. Nevertheless, her voice carries an uncharacteristic heaviness that prompts a twinge of concern within Ranma. "Hello, child," Kelun says.

"Kelun," Ranma answers breathily. "You got news?"

"I have received a letter from the elders of Nûjiézú concerning the cursed waters. I thought you would want to know as soon as I obtained the information."

"The curse? You mean they got back to you with the cure?"

"It is…not quite so simple, Ranma," she answers, her tone so measured and restrained Ranma can already feel the dread rising in his stomach. "I would suggest, if you wish to go over the elders' discoveries in detail, that you come to the Seito Hanten as quickly as possible."

"I'll be there in a half hour," Ranma says, teeth grinding against each other as his whole body feels set on edge all at once.
Language notes:

尺/shaku: A traditional Japanese unit of measurement, equivalent to 30.3 centimetres. Swords are usually measured in number of shaku.
Thanks for reading along so far, everyone—we're coming close to the end of the story now, with one more full chapter and an epilogue, which should within around 2-3 weeks. After that, we're off to the next story. I don't want to say too much quite yet, but Ryoga will be a much more central character!

Kelun sits alone in the centre of the room, expression severe, as several packages and letters are strewn about the table. Her expression is grim, the usual playful grin and cackle absent in her greeting.

"Ah, good, you're here," Kelun says. "Sit down, Ranma."

Ranma takes the seat across from her, but every second without a complete answer leaves him feeling more and more agitated. "What's goin' on, old ghoul? Way you're talkin', I'm assuming it ain't so simple as a free and easy cure."

"Indeed, child," Kelun says. "Xiǎoméi has sent me copies of known material in the village on Zhòuquánxiāng, its mentions in the Běncǎo Xīhuáng, the Materia Medica of Nǚjíezú, and the Annals of the Shèxiāng Dynasty. All of them explain that there is no known cure to the imbalance of the chi caused by the waters of Zhòuquánxiāng."

Ranma's face falls, the taut muscles in his arms and shoulders collapsing as the weight of the news overtakes him. "There's—there's nothing?"

"There is something." Kelun clarifies. "I hesitate to call it a cure, but it would rid you of your transformation."

"I don't get it. If it stops the transforming, how ain't it a cure?"

Withdrawing a pair of scrolls from the pile of materials on the table, Kelun loosely translates as she points to varying sentences on the parchment. "Within the Annals of the Shèxīāng Dynasty, there is mention of the Musk people, who developed a preparation of the cursed waters of transformation, used to perform both a terrible rite to preserve their tribe, and an equally terrible punishment to inflict on traitors to their people. By heating the waters of a cursed spring, it would have the same effect with hot water that typical use of the waters would have with cold water. In times where the tribe lacked enough women, they would use the waters of Niángniquán, the very same waters you were exposed to, upon animals, and use the heated waters to seal away their animal forms. Alternately, the gravest punishment against a warrior of the Musk was the sealing curse of Hēitūnníquán, which would transform the traitor into a pig to be roasted and eaten in a celebratory banquet." Kelun finishes her description, gaze fixed on Ranma as she searches his features for a response. "I'm sure you can see where I am going with this."

Ranma's expression of shell-shock sets in around halfway through Kelun's description of the Musk technique, and her conclusion doesn't assuage it. The words of response that Ranma gives almost float out of his mouth, his emotions struggling to understand the reversal of fortune he feels. "Using the Musk punishment on purpose." The nature of the consequences of using it—to give up
his male form, his uncursed form, just to be free of the transformation—goes unspoken, but the two of them understand it all the same.

"It is not a decision to be taken lightly, Ranma, I understand," Kelun says, her old eyes shining with a sympathy Ranma hasn't seen in them before now.

"What about Pops?" Ranma asks quietly.

"His curse is no different from yours in this respect. However, as you can imagine, sealing the curse would be quite a different matter for you than for him."

"Right…"

"You seem unsure."

"I dunno, Kelun," Ranma says. In place of the anxiety and tension, or the total shock, he recoups some of his personality as he poses another question, voice steady and grave. "What do you think about it all?"

"It is spoken of in the Annals of the Shèxiāng Dynasty that in ancient times, the springs of Zhòuquánxiāng were not seen as curses or punishments, but rather as yóudào—a just and enlightened way of being. Even those transformations which today we would see as curses were instead perceived as challenges, or opportunities. There were those who were even said to prefer the state of affairs: the Annals tell the story of a boy named Tài Láng who, once cursed in the spring of Ox-Crane-Eel-Yeti, used his great strength to become a warrior who commanded the armies of the Musk for many years. I admit that when I first met you, child, I understood it in much the same way," Kelun says, sighing as she sets down the scrolls. "But I now no longer do. It is clear to me from my interactions with the two of you that even if at one time, these waters could have been said to be something else, in this modern world it is clear that they are curses."

"I dunno," Ranma says. "I don't even think you're wrong, though. Like, half my life this summer wouldn'ta happened, literally, if I hadn't gotten this curse. It ain't all that bad to have, just… different. Least, it wouldn't be so bad if I didn't haveta hide it from every damn person I know."

"It is like you said, child. The world that we live in today has no space for someone like you. Rather than accepting it as a natural state of being, having two forms in this the modern world would be seen as an aberration, a supernatural occurrence to be controlled, studied, and sequestered from society at large."

"So that's it, then? I can see how long I last tryin' to keep up this double life, or throw out half my life for good?"

"I understand the situation is hardly ideal. But it may be worth it for you to think about it in these terms as well: had you taken a cure that would have removed the curse from you, would you not also be 'throwing out half your life', as you put it?"

"Yeah, but—huh."

"You see, it is not so simple in either case, is it?"

"I guess you're right," Ranma says, his voice taking on a more serious, studious tone. "It wouldn'ta been easy going back to the way it was before, and not having this other part of my life anymore. But, least that way I woulda known what I was going back to."

Kelun nods along as Ranma speaks. "It is difficult to be exposed to the possibilities of both sides of
something as you have, and then to forsake them," she answers. "You have, I imagine, learned a
great many things about how a person is seen in the world based on their appearance. In seeing
that, perhaps you have also come to understand the things that do not change between your two
forms. In this alone, perhaps, I believe you are fortunate."

"Fortunate? Feh, I dunno about that. Seein' just how much of what people say is just the crap they
say cause they got this idea of how a girl or a guy has gotta be…"

"Knowledge, too, can feel as a burden and a curse, child. But that knowledge may also grant a
person the perspective to live one's life along a more righteous and wise path." Kelun stops to
consider the thought, letting it sit for a few moments, before the words come to her, and her lips
curl into a small smile. "Yǒudào, in a manner of speaking."

Ranma doesn't answer immediately, and his eyes glance downwards towards the ground, as the
gravity of the conversation and his choices leave him playing emotional catch-up. "So," he says
finally, gaze once again meeting Kelun's, "what's the right choice, then? Tryin' to stay in the
middle as long as I can? Or kissin' my guy side goodbye forever just so I don't gotta worry about
transforming again?"

"This is precisely what I am saying. There is no right or wrong choice. Yǒudào is not about the
choice you might make in a position such as this, but rather how you live your life after making
that choice."

"How's that make any kinda sense? Ain't how ya live your life a kind of choice?"

"Tell me, Ranma, do you believe that it is more moral to be a man than to be a woman? Or, in your
case, to be both?"

"Wha—I mean—what the heck kinda question is that?"

"I have lived in two very different worlds in my time, child. The old ways of the Nǚjiézú would
perhaps be quite foreign to you today; men would take the family name of their wives, the
household and the family legacy passed down through an unbroken chain of eldest daughters, the
leaders of the spiritual and political communities were likewise mostly the old women of the
community. In Japan, your traditions are much the same, but in reverse, the family following in the
shadows of the man. Yet even Confucius, the arch-patriarch himself, considered there to be virtue
and merit to be found in womanhood. Those values he endorsed, perhaps, are abhorrent to me, and
to you as well, I should hope. But he did not preclude that a woman could live an upright and moral
life. However you choose, or might have chosen to live your life, Ranma Saotome—as either a man
or as a woman, or even as both—there is no shame or dishonour in it."

Ranma shakes his head, laughing humourlessly. "Guess so…figures that I'd get all caught up trying
to make a decision that don't even have a right or wrong answer."

"I imagine that it is such a difficult decision precisely because there is no right or wrong answer.
So, if you seek my advice, Ranma, it is this: don't decide now."

"Don't decide?"

"Think on it, certainly. But you have no need to arrive at the answer immediately, when you may
do so at your own pace. In the meantime, I would like to return this to you." Kelun reaches down to
the floor, bringing up a bottle with a small muslin bag tied to it. As Ranma reads the Chinese
characters in the front, he can see that it's the same bottle that got him into this mess to begin with.
Kelun holds up the bag as she explains it. "The Musk preparation is relatively simple. The water
should be heated in a kettle with this preparation of dried and ground wolfberry, mountain yam, and yellow foxglove, and drunk as you would any tea."

Ranma stands up all at once, his skin crawling spontaneously. The thought of deciding—and even of not deciding—feels too overwhelming to consider, but he takes the bottle from her nevertheless and places it carefully inside his bag. "Thanks, Kelun. For…everything."

"I'm not going anywhere quite yet, Ranma. If you need anything at all…I'll be here."

Though Kelun's farewell is earnest and warm, it barely registers to Ranma's ears. Instead, he's lost in a web of thoughts of his own making, a single fact remaining inescapable no matter how quickly he tries to run from it. _No sweat, Saotome, just the biggest decision of your life to consider here._

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Ranma's almost a block away from the Seito Hanten when a blur of long, silky hair approaches him from the side, grabbing him by the arm. "Ranma," Shanpu breathes, her voice carrying an undertone of desperation.

She's not quite the last person he wants to see, but he suppresses a grimace nevertheless. After everything that's happened, their relationship has felt strained enough, without even considering everything he's just learned about the cure, his feelings for Akane, and how his parents would react to all of this. However easy it is to think that, though, what matters is what he says, and does. And right now he's doing nothing.

_Ain'tcha better than your old man, Saotome?_ The voice snaps him back to reality, reminds him that he was just about to run away from his problems straight into another one. If he wants to find a way to live from here on out, he knows that he needs to deal with things properly. Even if that means hurting her, and himself, he needs to end things between the two of them.

_About time ya rip off the band-aid and do it._

"Hey, I'm uh, I'm sorry I didn't stick around, I shoulda waited to see if you were around. Just…ya know, ain't exactly at my best right now."

"I know," Shanpu says, her eyes exuding a kind, sympathetic sadness. "I'm sorry too. That the news from Nūjiézú was so disappointing. I really had hoped that Xiāoméi would come through with a cure."

"Yeah, me too Shanpu. I dunno exactly what I'm gonna do. I guess I had no idea what I was really expecting, maybe I was really fooling myself into believing there would be a cure. I don't know if it's better or worse that your grandma cooked up the ritual of the Musk guys, or whatever they're called."

"It isn't a real cure." Her words are matter-of-fact, but the affect is drained from her voice, like she refuses to recognize the existence of it.

"Yeah," Ranma says, his expression distant. "I dunno though. Maybe I've been lookin' at it wrong the whole time. That it ain't really about the cure at all, but about 'her'."

"I'm not sure what you mean," Shanpu says, voice waverung slightly.
"I know the curse can kinda come up at the worst times. I don't think there's anybody to blame about all that, but after a while, it starts to feel like the universe is tryin' to tell me something. That I'm tryin' to do something that nobody can really do, and that I can't keep doin' this and expectin' nothing to change."

"But why does anything need to change? Even without the cure, aren't we just in the same place as before?"

"Cause...cause it already has changed. My girl side ain't on borrowed time, like I thought before. If anything, it's the other way around. No matter what choice I make, it'll always be a part of me. It's my guy side that's up in the air now."

"You...you want to be the girl then?" Shanpu asks apprehensively.

"It ain't that, Shanpu," Ranma says, looking away and laughing coldly. "Yanno, sometimes it's like this and it seems like nothing's different from when we started. Like if I ignore the half of my life where I'm the little redhead, everything's great. But then I think to myself, is that fair to you? Is it even fair to myself? Whether I like it or not, that's a part of my life now that's there to stay."

"But you're still you in that form, right? I don't understand, Ranma. It doesn't have to be this other life that you live."

"It does, though. And it is. That's what I'm tryin' to tell you. Outside of a few people in the know—my folks, Ryoga, Ukyo, you and the old ghoul—everyone I ever meet again, less I use this bottle and wish half of me goodbye, I'll always be two people, never one. And even my Ma, my old man, you, I ain't mad but...ya don't treat me the same. Nobody does."

It brings him physical pain to see it, Shanpu's heart breaking in slow motion before him, and because of him. "It's not—I didn't mean—I-I'm sorry, Ranma. I'll be better, if it's that, I can try to be better..."

"Damn it, if it just came down to tryin', ya think it wouldn't be just you? I-I think there ain't a lot you can do. Don't even think it's wrong, really, in a way it's natural, the way it oughta be. You see a different person, it means there's a different person, who you gotta treat like a different person." Ranma tries to keep some sense of composure, uttering the short statements, trying to stick to facts so his own facade won't crack and let the whirlwind of emotions rush through to replace it, but the strain is visible in his reddened eyes.

"So that's it, then?" Shanpu asks, eyes wide in fear. "You don't even want to try?"

"I did. We did. And it usually ended up with some guy chasin' us around town, me with red hair, and both of us wishin' that I were the guy ya met, instead of the sex-changing weirdo you got. Wasn't anybody's fault, but that ain't any kind of right way to have a relationship."

"You're not a weirdo, Ranma. Your other form...it's just the curse, there's nothing you can do about that."

"That's what everyone says, but they're wrong. About the curse, I mean. Sure it was a hassle to get used to it, and it ain't exactly roses to have guys leerin' at ya, but the curse ain't being a girl. Less you're gonna tell me your whole life is a curse?"

"No! But that's—that's different."

"Maybe." Ranma shrugs. "But the point stands. Hell, it's hardly been four months since this whole mess started, and what have I got to show for it? Closer to my Ma, a real job teachin' in her dojo. A
buncha new friends. You. I'm willin' to bet your grandma's taught me more about my life in the past few weeks than I'd managed to learn in twenty years. I'd have to be insane to call that a curse. It's just, at the end of the day, I gotta take a step out the door, and all of that disappears. Cause when I can't be this guy half the time, the world won't let it be me. Like I'm not Ranma, like I ain't even real when I ain't who I'm supposed to be. Ya see it now, Shanpu?"

Ranma breathes deeply, as Shanpu doesn't speak, just listens, and he continues. "I didn't, for a long time, but I think now I do. I don't wish the old ghoul had managed to dig up a cure, not really. I wish I didn't have to pick and choose. I wish I could be whatever I wanted, any time I wanted, and not have it haveta be such a damn big deal, to spend my whole damn life hiding it cause the world ain't ready. I wish I could run out in a rainstorm like this and have everyone share a laugh over it when a little redhead showed up to work. Hell, I grouse about it now, but even when my Ma fusses over me and buys me some crazy getup and treats me like her daughter…it's nice, sometimes. To see her care about something in a different way. To get a look at another side of her, another side of the world. But having both…I can't have that. So I can either keep goin' like now, hiding and hiding and hiding till what? Till someone lets the secret out? Till I can't keep the halves apart anymore and break down? Or, what, take what I can get from the life that fell in my lap a couple months ago, knowin' that I'll lose a part of me, just so I won't have to run and hide anymore? You try making that choice and see how ya like it. Cause that's the curse."

"I—Ranma, I never—I've been so stupid, all this time. Aiya, you must hate me." Shanpu's voice hardly breaks over a whisper.

"I don't hate ya, Shanpu. I could never. But maybe…maybe two people can like each other, and that don't fix the problems in the world. I don't want ya to go, I wanna be friends, but…"

Shanpu looks away, shame-faced and silent. "But you don't want to be with me."

As Ranma's left alone to reckon with his own words, his own actions, the sight of Shanpu turning her back on him and walking away, he still wants to stop her, wants to make believe that everything could still work out if he just pretends that his life isn't tearing him apart at the seams, but all he can do is stand stock still, a single thought replaying in his head:

\textit{Nobody ever said doing the right thing felt so shitty.}

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The trip back to Nerima is longer than any he remembers. The thought of facing his mother and her reaction—let alone his father—is just as terrifying as it was when he left the Seito Hanten, but his heart is heavy still from his confrontation with Shanpu, and he can't bare himself so easily, so soon. As he wanders out of Shakujii Station, a stray, self-destructive impulse just wants him to emerge into a thunderstorm, wants a natural disaster to rip away his ability to hide and force him to lay it all bare to the world, but as ever, the weather never cooperates so easily. The heat is no surprise, but for a mid-July day, it's unseasonably dry, like the rainy season's gotten all of the water out of its system.

"Well, the weather's nice at least…" Ranma mutters to himself. "Might as well wander for a while."

Without an immediate destination, he steps into a convenience store and looks down along the aisles. A machine in the corner advertises a multitude of cold drinks, and a passing whim for a milk
tea is cut brutally short by the reminder, especially painful in the moment, that nothing could be so simple, not even buying an iced tea to fight the heat. Almost disoriented by the whiplash, he buys a prepackaged castella cake just so he doesn't leave empty-handed, and sets his feet to wandering, hoping it'll keep his mind from doing the same.

Stepping back out into the sun, Ranma's ready to get himself lost, let his mind and his legs wander, as he thinks back to his past. A year ago, in the same position, what would that Ranma have been doing?

Well, for one, he recalls drily, there was his father's latest get-rich quick scam, an "extreme" kempo class intended to lure unsuspecting tough guys into what was little more than a fight club ponzi scheme (which—Ranma had to admit—had made a decent amount of cash until organized criminals began to sniff around). Or there were his "odd jobs", which was really just a nice way of calling the dead-end temporary work with no promise of a career that he'd taken to support Genma and himself.

The times where he trained in kendo and iaido with his mother, in those days, were welcome, but brief interludes from a life that, when he thinks on it now, was more barren than he's comfortable admitting. His father's dreams of a dojo were fantasies, piled up onto an idea of manliness that Ranma has looked into himself to find and instead found empty, and his life outside of that was… well, was it really so different? A life lived in service to the promise of realizing an empty dream, without much in the way of friendships or relationships. Ukyo was just an acquaintance in those days, and Ryoga was his only real friend.

There was good in his life then, before the curse overshadowed everything else, but maybe, he thinks to himself, those things can continue to exist, no matter what decision he makes. Facing his parents is a more imposing task than he wants to face in the moment, but maybe the words of an old friend can help. So it's fitting that getting himself lost, in the end, leaves him just where he needs to be: in front of the apartment of the first one who'd learned of his curse and hadn't walked away, and the only one in his life without a vested interest in the way this ends.

"Ranma? What are you doing here?" Ryoga's eyes, briefly half-lidded, are shocked awake by the appearance of Ranma on his doorstep. He briefly glances around and behind him, like he needs reminding that he's still in the place he expects himself to be.

Ranma shrugs his shoulders tensely. "Just been over at the old ghoul's place. She got a letter back from her friends in China. Learned about the curse and how it works. Long story short, the redhead ain't goin' anywhere soon."

"Ah, shit, man. I'm sorry."

"It's fine, just…couldn't really go straight back to my old man or Ma. Feel crappy enough on my own, without their craziness to add to that right now. Plus Shanpu took it like a lead balloon, so the whole day's kinda gone to shit."

"Yeah," Ryoga says sympathetically. "Uh…I'm just about to take Shirokuro for a walk. You know I'm liable to get lost anyway," he adds drily, "so wanna come with?"

Ranma chuckles despite himself, grateful for the small levity despite the circumstances. He motions out towards the canalside street, shaking his head. "I oughta haul off Shirokuro and get her trained to be a guide dog for ya."

"You think I wouldn't have gone for it if it worked? Sometimes I think she's even worse with directions than me." Ryoga steps out onto the street, closely followed by a cheerful, black-and-
white dog on a leash, who trots out to sniff the visitor.

"Hey, it's just me, Shirokuro. Good to see ya again, girl," Ranma says, leaning down and scratching the scruff of the dog's neck.

Ryoga stretches out his back, then follows Ranma down the concrete steps to the walking path that follows the course of the canal. "So, Saotome. The Chinese lady couldn't find a cure in the end, huh?"

"They checked their history books goin' back into ancient times and didn't come up with shit about gettin' rid of the curse, so, yeah, things ain't exactly lookin' up on that front. Nah, the thing is it's almost worse. See, there's a cure. Kinda."

"What are you talking about? How's 'kind of a cure' worse than nothing?"

"Apparently they got some ancient dynasty that used to use the springs where ya picked up these curses as a punishment. Bad enough ya got this crazy curse, right? Especially back in the old days where ya can't just get hot water that easy. It ain't hard to think about how they'd make it worse."

"Worse? Like…making it permanent." Ryoga's eyes go wide as the implication sets in.

"Yeah. So if I want a 'cure'," Ranma says, visibly wincing at the term, "that's my only shot. No more transformation bullshit means no more being a guy."

"Well, at least you're not any worse off than where you started, right? Things will just keep going the way they are now."

Ranma stops, sitting on the embankment to the river and looking away in shame. In a voice barely above a whisper, he utters, "I don't—I don't want that, though."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't want things to stay how they are, Ryoga. I can't keep doin' this! I feel like I'm gettin' torn apart at the seams, and there ain't enough Ranma in me to keep living this double life. I can't be two people at once. And you know I can't just tell everyone about this curse."

"If you do it? You don't mean you're willing to go that far just to avoid telling her about your curse, Saotome? I know you're a bastard, but even that…"

"If it were that simple, I wouldn't be here askin' your damn advice, P-chan!" Ranma retorts, his shoulders sagging. Looking around him, he finds a few pebbles nestled in the cracks of the embankment's paving, and starts to toss them into the canal idly. Shirokuro eagerly follows their arcs through the air, and Ryoga lets her off the leash to chase at them in vain. With a lopsided smile, Ranma speaks up again. "I mean, last night everything was simple. Scary, maybe, but simple. I figured I was gonna be like this for another year at least, which was bad enough cause I sometimes wonder if I'm tempting fate whenever I walk out the door like this. I was gonna tell Akane cause I figured I'd gone on long enough tryin' to skate by like I usually do. But this ain't just about do I tell her or not, it's about, well…what am I gonna do after this, Ryoga? If I don't take this, I'm lookin' over my shoulder for the rest of my life. Is it so wrong to want something normal to
hold onto, even if it's kinda fucked up? Even if it means admittin' there's no way to go back to the way things used to be, before I got all this crap piled on me?"

"I don't know if you can call what you're thinking of doing 'normal'. Whatever happened to being a man and dealing with this honestly?" Ryoga's expression seems to have faded from outrage to a kind of disappointment and suspicion. "You are still a man, right?"

The question takes him by such surprise that it unspools him. What does it mean for Ranma Saotome to be a man? If it ever meant anything, other than his father's wild-eyed determination to craft Ranma's life in his own vicarious image, can it really still be true now that the curse has taken its place, its division of his life both a gravesite for that old life, and a seedbed for this new life where whether Ranma Saotome is a man, or a woman, or both, is in question?

"Yes!" Ranma starts, but not like he means it. His face falls, searching for language that doesn't exist to describe a life that, according to the rest of the world, shouldn't exist. "Or—I dunno, man. Tell ya the truth, the longer I've been livin' this double life, the more I feel like what they tell ya, about what makes a guy a guy, what makes a girl a girl, it's all a bunch of crap. And I don't know where I fit in there. There ain't a word for 'that depends on the weather'. All I end up thinkin' when I go down this path is why's it gotta matter? Why can't I just be myself, whoever that is? Just cause I got this damn curse, it don't change anything about who I am."

"But it does matter, Ranma! You can't just pretend like it's some game, like you can just pick and choose whether you're a guy or a girl whenever you feel like."

"Ya think I don't know that, Ryoga?" Ranma's voice is desperate, almost plaintive, as he answers, standing back up to challenge Ryoga's statement. "Ya think I don't get that people look at ya different when you're a stacked redhead or a built guy? Wanna know what, that's the real curse. I— I had this dream a few weeks back, 'Ranma's expression is suddenly shy, and he lets out a small laugh as his eyes trail away. 'The whole world was kinda crazy. Seemed like everyone I knew was tryin' to kill or marry me. There was all kinds of magic crap going on, so in comparison changin' back and forth into a girl—that was the normal part."

"Well, it seems like your ego is doing as fine as ever, even in your dreams," Ryoga quips, then pauses to consider a more unsettling thought. "Please tell me I was one of the people trying to kill you."

Ranma snorts. "Yeah, ya had the middle school 'prepare to die' thing down pat. It's a good thing too, I don't need to be haunted by the nightmare of seein' ya go all Blue Thunder on me," he says, shivering. "But anyway, the dream got me to thinkin', well, if it were just normal to have, it wouldn't be so bad to go on like this forever. But we ain't in that world, and the more I go on with everyone lookin' at me and seein' two different people, the more I've started to believe it myself. Find myself thinkin' about 'her' and me. Worse, 'him' and me. That ain't any kinda way to live. And even the cure ain't all that. Even if there was a real cure, how do ya tell people that the person they got to know is gone?"

"So you're just giving up? It just seems like you're just doing the same thing, but in reverse."

"It ain't about giving up!" Ranma yells, his voice straining with pent-up frustration. "Ya just don't get it, do ya? If Pops had never bought those damn bottles to begin, then maybe I wouldn'ta gotten into this mess. But he did. And then my life changed, and I met 'Kane, and Shanpu, and hell, even the old ghoul too. You can't take any of that back. But now...I mean I'm here now, and least if I pull the trigger I get some kinda control." His eyes break contact with Ryoga's and flit to the ground darkly. "Least I'd get to be some kinda normal, 'stead of havin' to worry I'll get found out one way or another one day down the road. And maybe it's better that way."
Ryoga goes quiet for a long time after Ranma answers, like the emotional impact of Ranma's situation is finally catching up to him. "You know the first thing I thought when I saw your curse, and you explained it?" he says, chuckling faintly to himself. "I thought to myself, what, you've got a cute body like that and you call it a curse?"

"Hey, look, I ain't gonna argue with that. Ain't any kinda curse to look that good," Ranma says with a grin, but it quickly fades. "But it's like…ya go through your whole life, and since ya only ever got the one body, you figure that people treat ya like they do based on who you are. Then this curse shows up, and all of a sudden ya notice that it's a bunch of bullshit. That it ain't got anything to do with you on the inside, just what they think ya gotta do or be just cause you look one way or the other. Don't matter what I do or what I say, my old man calls me a prancin' disappointment the second I walk in the door like that, never mind I can't control the damn weather with my mind. Ma sees I'm suddenly cute and all she wants to do is play dressup."

Ryoga nods gravely. "They act like you've changed, but you're the same."

"And if it don't make a difference to who I am on the inside, is it really worth it? To fight it my whole life, always wonderin' if the rain might catch me off guard or I somehow get hit with some hot tea cause of a stupid coincidence? I ain't a science genius or anything, but even I could tell ya what would happen if the secret got out for real. I'd get paraded around like a freak show, my picture in every newspaper. And not cause of who I am, not cause of anything I did. Not cause of Ranma Saotome, but cause of the curse. And for the sake of what, really? Cause it's who I am? Or cause of Pops wantin' to live his life through me? Or cause I can't handle Ma springin' some fancy outfits on me?"

"I don't know, Saotome. Guess that's something you have to decide for yourself."

"Well I'm gonna. I mean, I gotta. But you asked, there's my answer. It ain't all as simple as everyone else wishes, I guess." Looking down at himself, he suddenly feels antsy, in need of something for his fingers to do, so he rifles through his bag, and finds the castella cake he bought earlier. Its very existence seems sort of ridiculous and pointless, but it's something to focus on for the moment, so he unwraps the cake and takes a bite out of it.

"Yeah…" Ryoga says. "You thought about it? What you're gonna say to your parents?"

"Man, that's a whole other can of worms. I don't even know what my old man's gonna do when he learns he can't get cured, but ya just know if I really bite the bullet and lock myself, he's gonna flip. Hell, he might do it if I don't. Better start shoppin' around for a new family register just in case."

"I'm not gonna adopt you, you little freeloader. I've got it bad enough buying you enough food for someone twice your size now."

Between mouthfuls of cake, Ranma grins smugly. "You sure? 'Yoiko Hibiki' has got a real sweet ring to it, Ryo-chan."

"You—shut up, Ranma!" Ryoga sputters, blushing fiercely. "That's not funny even in your girl form, you know."

He wouldn't have dared do it in this form before today, perhaps not even before this conversation. But the heady feeling of facing the reality of his life that lies ahead, of a life where he's a girl some of the time, or most of the time, or even all of the time, it feels—well, not good exactly. But doable. Like a life that he can live, if not without inevitable wondering of what might have been, at least without shame. So Ranma allows himself this girlish giggle and batting of his eyelashes. "You're such a sucker, Ryoga."
"Whatever…" Ryoga mutters, before awkwardly adjusting and composing himself. "So. Your dad's gonna disown you for pulling stunts like that, no big deal. What about your mom?"

"Yeah, about that…"

Two emotion-laden conversations on the topic are under his belt, but the one Ranma fears most still sits ahead of him. His mother's feeling toward his cursed form has been supportive from the outset, often almost excessively so, and Ranma had worried before that when the time came to take the cure, that she would reject it. But now the "cure" that Ranma has been offered is a quite different one, and if anything, Ranma isn't sure what to fear more: the other world, where he might have had to reckon with the possibility of taking away the daughter that her mother has come to regard as her own, or this world, where he has to reckon with the thought that he might truly become that daughter.

From Ryoga's apartment, the walk back home is brief. Ranma isn't sure whether to be thankful it isn't longer, so the thoughts that rattle around in his head can't grip him for longer, or curse that the trip doesn't give him more time before he has to face his mother. A small part of him hopes she won't be home for one reason or another, but there's no such luck as he turns the keys and opens the door, quickly hearing a stir from the small practice space.

"Son?" Nodoka steps into the hallway, a slight cast of surprise on her features. She's dressed in a hakama and gi, and her free hand rests on the scabbard of her sheathed sword.

"Yeah, Ma, it's me," Ranma replies, mumbling as he removes his shoes and puts aside his bag.

Noting the look of conflict on his face and his joyless answer, Nodoka's voice takes on a tone of motherly concern. "Is something wrong, Ranma?"

"No," Ranma starts, then takes a breath. "Maybe," he continues, when she looks utterly unconvinced. "Aw, Ma, don't look at me like that. Just…we gotta talk."

"Well, come in. I've just started some exercises, but perhaps you could join me and we could discuss the matter."

Ranma nods automatically, and shuffles to his bedroom to change. A few minutes later, he emerges in blue iaido attire—the first time he's worn his own in a long while.

"It's about the curse. Or the cure. Or, uh, both, I dunno," Ranma starts, stumbling over his words. Now that the time is coming to explain his remaining options to his mother, the woman with not only the strongest opinions on the matter, but one who cares deeply both for her son and her 'daughter', he's all nerves, and the thought of her judgment of his decision one way or another petrifies him.

"Oh…" Nodoka's eyes suddenly seem distant, as if Ranma is delivering a death sentence. "I understand, son. I will miss my daughter, but I appreciate that you gave me the opportunity to enjoy her company, if only for a few months," she says. Though her speaking is measured and calm, the undercurrent of mournfulness is clear.

"Ya don't gotta worry about that, Ma." Ranma's eyes track hers, and his curt response seems to startle her out of her routine of cuts and strikes. "There ain't a way to remove the curse. If what
Shanpu's grandma said is right, then that, uh, body is gonna be part of me, for the rest of my life.

Nodoka seems to read the conflict in Ranma's voice, and though her face settles into a wide-eyed, owlish gaze, she nods as she takes in the new information that Ranma gives her, pausing to sheath her sword before answering. "I know that the form has posed problems for you, Ranma, but I hope that you understand by now that I accept my daughter and my son as one and the same. And I will try to do my best to live by those words, and to treat you the same either way."

"Well, ya see, that's k-kinda what I wanted to talk to you about." Fear still threatens to grip him by the throat and cut away his words every sentence he speaks, but as each sentence brings him closer to telling her about the 'other option', to cut away his male self and leave her with a full-time daughter, it constricts him further. If he wants to utter it, he has to do it soon, before his courage abandons him entirely, before he's left back in the morass of indecisiveness, back to trying to live two lives even if it tears him apart.

He sits, breathes out deeply, and begins the simplest of iaido katas—mae, a forward horizontal slash from a seated position. It's less artful, less controlled than when he does it in his female form, but the sword ripples with the tension of his draw, muscles taut and sharp. The unfamiliarity is a petty shock to him, but he doesn't allow himself a reaction. Instead, he sheathes the sword, shuts his eyes, takes another few breaths, and opens them once again.

*Moment of truth, Saotome.*

"There's a way to stay one form and not the other. It's just, uh, not t-this form."

His mother nods again, not fully grasping what Ranma's just said right away. "You mean...oh my," she finally utters. "That's quite a large decision to make, son. Are you sure it's the right thing to do?"

Ranma exhales deeply as he thinks, trying to find a way to answer his mother honestly. "No," he finally replies. "I ain't sure. It feels...it feels crazy, Ma. I think about what kinda life I had before Pops got us tangled up in this mess, and I think no way I would have said yes to this just to keep that. But it ain't all that simple either. I feel like I'm fakin' who I am all the time, and I'm just tired of that. I'm tired of hidin' this big secret that feels like I'm gonna get caught out on one day if I get unlucky. I'm tired of bein' two damn people. And if this is the one shot I got at gettin' that back, well..."

Nodoka listens to Ranma's explanation. "It sounds like you've given this quite a lot of thought, Ranma."

"Been about all I could think about since the old ghoul told me."

"How long ago was that?"

"Just this morning."

"I see," Nodoka says, gazing down at her sword intently, then extending the pause by sheathing it, and sitting again in seiza. When she makes no move to act, Ranma follows her lead, and takes a seat across from her position. "It would be a very different life that you would lead, son. Have you given thought to what you would do in the future?"

"Future?" Ranma asks hesitantly, feeling like he's been caught flat-footed. He's grown so used to not thinking more than a week in advance, that now, prompted for a life plan, he scrambles for some kind of idea to grasp at. "I guess...run the dojo, ya know? I ain't taught for all that long, but I
like it. And I'm proud of what you've taught me. I'd wanna have other people learn it."

"That's heartening to hear, son, but it's not quite what I mean. If you are serious about becoming my daughter for good, there are other considerations that need to be made."

"Uh, like what?"

"Well, what would you do when the time came to start a family?"

Ranma's thoughts unravel as his mother's implications become clear, and more to the point, as a particular consequence of taking this path becomes clear. He's felt the tug of infatuation to a number of girls, sure, and occasionally imagined his future life with a family of some kind, but always in an entirely abstract way. Now that his mother brings it up, he realizes just how little he's given any kind of thought to the fact that if he uses the Musk preparation, any chance at fatherhood leaves his life for good, replaced with—what, exactly? Marrying a man? Pregnancy? Motherhood?

His heart skips a few beats at the delirious train of thought, and he struggles to find the words necessary to describe how he feels about the possibility to himself, let alone to his mother. And if he takes this path, what comes of his relationship with Akane? It would be so simple to remain in his female form, never having to brook the issue of the curse again. Yet the price for it is not negligible; without ever coming to meet his male form, it would never result in marriage, nor children. And would, or could Akane really feel the same for him, let alone every prospective romantic relationship for the rest of his life? She doesn't even know this person, after all, just the woman he ended up becoming at some point in these last few months.

"I, uh, I dunno, Ma," Ranma manages finally, flushing deeply. "Guess I ain't thought about it as much as I should, huh? I mean, I always figured I was kinda young to be thinkin' too much about all that kinda stuff."

Nodoka tilts her head thoughtfully. "I suppose that it isn't the kind of choice one is often faced with making. But I hope that you give some thought what it would mean to do this. You've made me proud to be a mother to a considerate, dutiful, and manly son. And if you decide that this is the right thing to do. Just remember that the duties of a daughter and a son, of a wife and a husband, of a mother and a father, are not the same."

"And what if…" the words catch on his throat. "What if it don't work out like that? What if I ain't cut out for some of that, even if I stay like this? Or if I don't?"

His mother pauses again, this time for longer still. Just as Ranma's assumptions have been challenged by the dozens today, he can read her own struggles with trying to adjust her personal code to fit a child with a complicated life, that her wish for a daughter has come with rather more strings attached than she might have hoped.

"Ranma, there are many things that seeing you as both my son and daughter has forced me to consider with new eyes. Maybe I have held ideas about who a son or a daughter ought to be that are excessively old-fashioned. That perhaps ought not be taken to heart," she says, her eyes cast down on herself. "But there are others that are important. And family is important like nothing else. Not simply the family name, or whether the world might view it as proper; goodness knows there are those who saw my choice to leave your father as a stain upon my personal honour. More than that, family is about future. It is about seeing the generation that comes after, and knowing that your children will carry on a piece of you into the future, a piece which itself will be passed on to their children."

"Ma?" Ranma's voice remains weak, the implications weighing heavily on him. A child—on the
face of it, the thought of giving birth is unthinkable—but then, is it truly any more unthinkable than living in an eternal limbo?

"I am not blind, son. I know that you have lived in this way for your whole life, and that those you might love might not necessarily match up so easily with the ideas of what most people would consider usual or proper. I may not be able to understand entirely, but then I suspect there are very few people who could understand just what you have faced. Even if you choose to follow a less… traditional path, you will always be my child." She just smiles, that unmistakable mother's smile. "Now, I still do expect grandchildren someday, no matter what."

To this, Ranma can only laugh weakly. Well, least she ain't thinkin' of makin' me go through some fake marriage for the sake of family honour.

After the last of his whirlwind conversations comes to a close, Ranma returns to his bedroom and slumps down on his unmade futon, numb.

For all that he's spent the majority of the day trying to work through the logic of whether or not to use the preparation that Kelun has given him, sorting through the divergent opinions of those around him—to say nothing of the jumble of uncertainty in his own head—left alone to think for the first time in hours, he's no closer to a real answer.

Of course the "cure" would come with a set of strings attached; why should he have expected anything else? His life had never been keen on offering him tidy solutions to his problems. Yet, as uncomfortable as it is to admit it, Kelun's point was right; a true cure would have presented its own set of problems. Giving up every part of the life of Ranma of the Flowers to be free of transforming…it might have been worth it, true, but returning to the solitary life he led before would have been a steep price to pay nonetheless. But following the logic of that to its inevitable conclusion raises a far more uncomfortable corollary—if it truly would have been worth it, then isn't the same thing true this way around? The life of his female half ensured for good, in exchange for giving up his past. The transaction doesn't come without cost, but the past few months have taught him nothing if not that Ranma Saotome is more than the man his father taught him to be, and that he doesn't have to be that man in order to still be himself.

But just sayin' the words is a hell of a lot easier than livin' by 'em, he thinks to himself. The irony isn't lost on him that the difference between those two has underpinned the lie at the centre of his life, one he's only now beginning to untangle himself from.

As the days pass, though, the earthquake in Ranma's life brought on by learning of a "cure" changes surprisingly little, on the outside. She teaches another iaido class, and earns a surreptitious thumbs-up from Daisuke and Hiroshi for her (mostly) successful outing with Akane. Yet, with a splash of water to wash her face and brush her teeth every morning, and a soak in the furo every night, there are at least two reminders every day that Ranma's existence is defined around water, the hot and cold each alternately playing the role of angel or demon.

Sometimes, Ranma wishes he could cool down without it demanding a change in forms—especially when having a pair of breasts like her own can lead to another kind of uncomfortable sweating—and sometimes she'd rather take the increased public attention of her female form just so she doesn't have to always be on alert for a stray raincloud, a glass of cold water, or any other potential threat to the secrecy of her curse. Hot water can be a welcome change at the end of the
day, taking away the body that all too often gets her leered at and flirted with in public, or it can be an uncomfortable reminder that a solution to the back-and-forth lays in wait, but only at the cost of the form that hot water returns to him.

And then there's Akane, the girl that grounds Ranma in a life with a seductive simplicity, if she can accept the consequences that come with it—consequences which themselves are all too easy to forget when she's in the moment. In this particular moment, in the commercial district of Kichijoji between a number of Akane's favourite shops, Akane is engaged in the well-worn katas of Martial Arts Shopping, and Ranma follows along, gamely trying out Akane's suggestions and buying more than a few; after all, now that this form is here to stay in one way or another, she figures, it can't hurt to have a fuller wardrobe. The two of them pass the day almost as if in a dreamstate, and Ranma finds it a blissful escape just to have a normal afternoon for once, after all the drama.

As she and Akane wander over from the heavily-trafficked streets of Kichijoji lined with boutique stores into Inokashira Park, though, Ranma heaves a sigh, slinging a full bag of newly-purchased clothing over her shoulder. Now that she can't occupy her thoughts with the petty distraction of shopping any longer, the unwelcome heaviness of her troubles threatens to creep back in. The shade from the cypresses lining the paths along the bank of the central pond is a welcome relief from the oppressive heat, and muffle the sound of the city around them, but the intimate refuge from the world also proves an easy amplifier for the uneasy thoughts that whip back and forth in her head.

Akane places a gentle hand on Ranma's shoulder. "You okay?" she asks. Her voice trembles faintly, like she isn't quite sure of the question herself.

"Yeah, just thinkin' about…" Well, what? Just thinkin' about how ya still ain't told her? a male voice chides, and she winces faintly. There's an opportunity here for her, if she takes it. But as always, it's never quite so simple, and the words that spill out of her are generalities. "Just thinkin' about a conversation I had a couple days ago with my Ma. About the future. Guess I ain't thought about it much before, who I wanna be, and then she springs the whole 'I'm expecting grandkids' speech. Not that I ain't supposed to think about it at all, but it's kinda…"

"Kind of hard when you're worried about disappointing your parents?" Akane supplies.

Ranma blinks. "Yeah." Her eyes drift from their gaze out onto the pond back to Akane. It surprises her still how easily comfort and casual ease comes when it's just the two of them; as long as the question isn't the one that twists her insides with fear, she feels she can talk about almost anything else. "What about you? Ya don't seem too sure about it yourself."

A shy smile flits across Akane's face, like she and Ranma are now both in on a secret, or comrades-in-arms against wild-eyed parental schemes. "Daddy…he means well. I know he cares, he just doesn't always have the best way of showing it."

"Ma too. She's sorta old-fashioned about a lot of this stuff, but when ya stop to think what she's sayin' is 'you better sleep with a guy one of these days', it's like, I dunno…I can't even imagine doin' that." The words flow out of Ranma's mouth with a natural ease, some part of her finding the relaxation in admitting something—anything—of the stresses mounting up against her; she doesn't even stop to consider how the words might be interpreted until Akane's already in the midst of answering. "I mean—!"

A pall of shock crosses Akane's face, but it gives way quickly to a laugh, and a relieved smile that shines like nothing else. "It's okay, Ranma," she says, placing a hand on Ranma's shoulder. "Really, I—I'm happy. To know that I'm not alone in that." She breathes in deeply, and the tone of her voice shifts. "I've spent the past few months trying to deny some things to myself. All the things I read…"
they said that it was normal, that I would grow out of it. But I never did, and I kept thinking I was failing or doing something wrong, that I was leaning on this because I couldn't handle an adult relationship. I'm realizing, though, maybe...maybe this is just how I feel. Maybe that's wrong, or perverted, or stupid, but I can't pretend it isn't true. I like girls, Ranma, I—" her voice catches in her throat, and her voice cuts to a raspy whisper. "I like you."

Somehow, even when Akane's confession doesn't come entirely from left field, she still manages to find something about it that floors her. Maybe it's the reminder that while Ranma herself has taken it for granted the whole time that the things she feels about Akane are true and real—she herself grew up being expected (and expecting herself) to fall in love with a girl, after all—Akane's been struggling against all reason to find some excuse for her feelings for another girl. Maybe it's the way that she realizes now, in full, that the person Akane has fallen for is her, not merely despite the fact that she's a woman, but because of it.

Maybe it's because something strikes her heart just the way as she realizes the chilling truth, that if she wants this, if she's willing to take what comes with it, that it can go on like this; for whatever part of the truth she might be eliding by sealing away her male form, there's another part of it that would let her live a simpler—and in some ways truer—life.

But while no answer to her dilemma is immediately forthcoming, Akane's eyes look beseechingly down into Ranma's, her lips trembling with fear, as she awaits Ranma's answer. And how can she answer in any other way here, but with the truth that this is what she wants as well? And if it was worth putting aside the promise of a cure before she knew the truth, isn't it still worth it now that she knows the score?

She tries to find the words to express it, but language fails her, so instead Ranma's blue eyes meet Akane's, and she stands on tiptoe—better start gettin' used to that, shortstack—and presses her lips to the taller girl. Everything around them, all concerns of the past or future, of curses or parental apprehension or social judgment, melts away into the bliss of the present as Akane blinks away tears of joy, crushing her lips back against Ranma's in return. After all the awkwardness, the pain, the stress that the curse has brought into her life, the electric lance of pleasure that accompanies the touch of Akane's skin against her own feels like a secret slice of paradise carved out of this troubled world only for her, and she wishes for nothing more than for the feeling to never end.

Finally they part from the kiss, and Ranma smiles, trying to will the fleeting moment into lasting longer. "Dummy," she says lovingly. "You ain't wrong, or perverted, or stupid. You're—you're cute. Real cute."

This time around, it's Akane's turn to go redder than Ranma's hair. Even flustered as she is though, she can't restrain the joy in her heart, and soon she dives back in for a hug.

Yeah, I could stay like this for a while, Ranma thinks to herself as her head nestles into the crook of Akane's shoulder. When the two untangle again, Ranma extends a hand to her on impulse. "Alright, I could go for some dinner. Whaddaya say? My treat."

Akane nods brightly, and the two wander back into the suburb's central hub, ducking into an izakaya. There, for a little while more, all the worries and fears in her heart are weightless, unable to hold a candle to the brilliance and joy in Akane's beaming visage.

But when they depart, Ranma's mind is once again awash with possibilities as exciting as they are terrifying, as nerve-racking as they are relieving. A thin voice in her mind that wonders still whether she can truly leave things as they are and stay like this for good duels with another that whispers back, ain'tcha had enough of the run around? Don't ya deserve one good thing to come outta this, if you're gonna take the plunge?
There's no voice to whisper back an answer. Not as Ranma and Akane ride the train home, hand in warm hand. Not as Ranma draws a bath, a queer conflictedness accompanying the transformation as he stews alone in the tub. Not as he emerges with an unplaceable shiver and dries off, throwing on a tank top and shorts and making his futon, nor as he lies back to sleep, accompanied only by the back-and-forth in his mind.
A few days later, still plagued by the thoughts that followed her home from her date with Akane, Ranma finds herself at Ucchan's right around closing time. Just like last time, and the time before, a sentimental swell of her emotions accompanies her stride into the door, but this time, thankfully, it doesn't join with nearly as much of the pain of the times before.

For whatever mistakes she's made, there's another opportunity here for her, a second chance at the easygoing connection she and Ukyo had shared. On the other side of the door, Ranma has what she needs most in the moment: a friend.

"We're clo—" Ukyo calls out, before she glances up, her eyes meeting Ranma's. After a few moments, the light of recognition clicks into place in her eyes and she replies, trying a little too hard not to smile. "Hah, I should have figured. Back to this again already, huh?"

"Gonna try and tell me ya don't miss this?" Ranma grins, and slides a 1000-yen bill across the counter as she takes a seat at one of the barstools. "Think I could get one of those seafood specials to go?"

Ukyo stares at the bill for a moment, almost in disbelief. "He can be trained…" she mutters, before catching herself. "Or, wait, is it 'she' now?" she asks, a surprising lack of judgment in her voice.

Ranma pauses to consider, and then bursts out laughing. "Hah, wish I knew myself, Ucchan." She sighs, adjusts her position on the stool, and speaks again. "Times like these ya remember the reason it's called a 'curse' after all."

"Ugh, I'm still trying to get used to it myself. But, I guess it isn't as easy as you make it look, huh? I admit, I might have been a little jealous when you first showed it to me…"

"If ya just got to pick whenever ya wanted, maybe. Truth is though, I've been thinkin' of givin' it up. I dunno, maybe it's dumb but, with the way ya dressed like a boy for a while, I figured ya might know a little more about this sorta thing than most, could maybe give me some advice."

Ukyo frowns, focusing her attention intently on the swirl of okonomiyaki batter she's just poured out onto the griddle. "Giving it up? You mean, a cure? You don't seem too excited about it."

"Well for one, it ain't quite what ya think. The 'cure' works backwards, so if I take it, this is who I am for good," Ranma says, gesturing to her body. "Weird thing is, that ain't even the part that scares me the most anymore, I don't think."

"This from Ranma Saotome, 'man among men'?!" Ukyo says, her eyes widening slightly. "Wow, you really have changed, sugar."

"It's like I said, I got to thinkin' a lot about this crap when a splash of water changed everything about what people thought of me."

"Well, I can tell you this, Ran-chan, how you're dressed, what you look like on the outside, it might change how you're seen, but it doesn't change who you are on the inside."

"Does it really though, Ucchan?" Ranma asks, almost as much for her own benefit as for Ukyo's. "I keep thinkin' about that, cause I spent so long with everyone treatin' me like I'm two different people, but then I wondered if maybe the problem was me. That I couldn't figure out how to be the same person with this damn curse, so I let it change me. That it was my fault. And I ain't sure
what's worse."

Ukyo bobs her head as she ponders Ranma's answer. "Well, it's like I said, you have changed. But what does that mean, really? We all change, sugar. It's one of those little things called 'growing up'. And for better or for worse, the way the world looks at you is going to be a part of that changing. I, um, can't imagine there's all that many guys who've experienced...well, whatever it is you've gotten up to in the last few months."

"You don't even wanna know. More crap than I can count. A lotta crap I wish I could forget."

Ukyo sighs, her eyes breaking contact with Ranma and back to the okonomiyaki, which she flips with automatic perfection. "You know, when you first told me about this...curse, I thought it was kind of a joke. Like, here you are, this knockout redhead," —Ranma feels a strange flutter in her stomach hearing those words from Ukyo— "but when I saw it, saw you, saw every one of your quirks in this girl and thought, what a joke, that you'd think you'd be able to manage living that way. But, I realize now, I've been wrong the whole time."

"Yeah, well, I dunno about that. Been wonderin' myself if I ain't cut out for it. Ma was talkin' about duty to the family and havin' grandkids and everything, and that's scary, ya know? And before ya get on my case, I ain't even talkin' like the ol' man-among-men Ranma here, just the Ranma that woke up one day and realized I ain't ever thoughta the future. Like I'm still just a kid."

The okonomiyaki, now a golden brown, sizzle as Ukyo slides them off the grill, decorating each with a lattice of sauce and a pile of bonito flakes. She presents one to Ranma and takes the other for herself, and comes around the counter to take a seat by the redhead. Shaking her head, Ukyo's expression takes on a serious cast. "No, Ran-chan, I think I—no, I was wrong. I never stopped to think that I was treating you the way that everyone used to treat me, the way you didn't treat me. Think of it this way. Back then, if I showed up to a date wearing a sarashi, you didn't look at me like I grew an extra head, right?"

Ranma hesitates, but nods between bites of the okonomiyaki. "Well, naw, why would I? It's just a piece of clothing, right? It don't change anything about who ya—ohhhh," she says finally, as the parallels she draws become concrete.

Seeing Ranma's realization brings a smile to Ukyo's face. "Yeah. So, I can't tell you if this 'cure' you're thinking about taking is a good idea or not. But I can tell you that cure or not, this—" she says, gesturing to Ranma's body in its entirety, "this is you, all of it. You're still that arrogant jerk who wants to win at everything, but who'd do anything for a friend, no matter the cost. You could accept it about me, that I was the same person no matter how I looked. Even when the rest of the world judged me, you didn't care. So," Ukyo concludes, placing a hand on Ranma's shoulder, "this is me, accepting you. The packaging on the outside? That's not so important. No matter what, you're still you, in all the ways that are important."

The gears turn yet again in Ranma's head, as she applies Ukyo's philosophy back onto her own life, formulating the beginnings of a plan. Maybe Ukyo is right, that Ranma is the same person no matter what, that it's only a thin layer of social expectation that shifts Ranma from one person to another.

Akane likes her as a girl. Fair enough. She's lived with the form long enough; for all the confusion, for all the conflict in her heart at hiding away her other form, every bit as much hers, she can deal. But Ranma's the same person, no matter what. If she can't bring herself to tell Akane now, maybe, just maybe, Akane could see the same person she fell for in the male Ranma—if not as someone she can fall in love with, then at least someone who could be a friend. And maybe if she can manage that, then she can find the courage to tell her the unbearable, messy truth.
Maybe, if she remembers what Ukyo's told her, a dual life might be livable.

The plan that Ranma comes up with is simple in theory. Akane's casually mentioned her favourite coffee shop, Chaponpon, once or twice as they've passed it exiting Furinkan Station, as a place where she studies a few times a week. He recalls the way Akane approached him when they first met, turning the stresses of his first attempts at a public life in his female form into something bearable, then something fun, then, eventually, a real part of who he is. They met and formed a fast friendship before; in the moment, riding on nothing but impulse and the conviction instilled in him by Ukyo that he can be the same person, it seems self-evident—can't they do it again?

The next morning, Ranma wakes hours earlier than usual, assembling an outfit somewhat unlike his typical clothing; as much as it pains him to leave it, his women's windbreaker is far too recognizable. His braid feels too closely associated with him, too, so he leaves that aside as well, putting his hair instead into a low ponytail. His mother reacts with surprise to see him up and about so early in the morning, but he waves off her concerns with a hastily-concocted story about seeing a friend. Figuring he might need to spend a few hours waiting in the coffee shop, he glances about the living room for something to read to pass the time. Atop one of the counters sits a half-read volume of *Please Save My Earth*, and Ranma reasons that now is a good a time as ever to catch up; he's had little time to set aside to reading for pleasure in the last few months. He snatches the book and tosses it into his bag before setting out.

With small mock-Tudor gables and an almost castle-like construction, Chaponpon clashes slightly with the other buildings around Furinkan Station. Set apart from its neighbours, the café gives off an old-fashioned vibe that seems to fit with Akane's sensibilities, and though Ranma feels a vague air of discomfort walking in, like he's stepping into a place that he doesn't belong, he pushes forward and orders a coffee and cake, taking a seat at one of the sunlit side tables. Without much to do until or unless Akane even arrives, he begins to tuck into the volume of manga he's brought along.

The story's surreal narrative of reincarnation is as engaging as ever, though looking at it with the new eyes of his double life brings a strange poignancy. The character of Enju, originally a woman who chose to reincarnate in a male body so her unrequited love to Gyokuran would no longer trouble her, found instead that even in his new life, he could still not let go of his love for Gyokuran's reincarnation.

Would that be his fate in a double life? His male side, never able to find its place, longing for the life only his female side could have? Yet, Enju and Gyokuran's reincarnations were themselves best friends. Couldn't that be enough, if it means some day that he could find a way to tell Akane?

*Or maybe*, he thinks, *I'm just readin' too damn much much into a story*. He huffs and shuts the book, ordering another coffee and sitting back, people-watching to pass the time and intermittently glancing at his watch. Finally, just after eleven, Akane walks in with a stuffed bookbag. She orders an iced milk tea and takes a seat in one of the comfortable armchairs in the corner of the shop, strewing a variety of textbooks, notebooks, index cards, and pencils across the coffee table.

For the first time, Ranma is treated to the sight of Akane Tendo as a stranger, and that alone comes close to breaking his heart. Every last facet of her behaviour—the way her eyebrows furrow when she's deep in thought, the small quirk of her tongue as she takes the straw from her drink and slurps at it, how her hand gently pushes her short fringe out from her line of sight, the way a small smile
dances across her features when she realizes or understands something—makes Ranma want to burst out of himself, to run over and kiss her like the separation between them is imaginary, but instead he arrests his instincts, and just watches a bit longer.

After a few minutes, Akane looks over at him, seeming to have noticed one or two of his furtive glances. The tone of her voice, flat and vaguely annoyed, fills Ranma with dread. "Can I help you?"

Put on the spot, Ranma suddenly realizes he doesn't know what he can possibly say to Akane that won't sound out of place. For once in his life, he curses himself for knowing too much about Akane; trying to pose to her some ridiculous question he already knows the answer to seems wrong, yet he hasn't thought through their exchange well enough to know what else he might say. "Ah, heh, I've just seen you a few times around the neighbourhood. You're a martial artist, right? Kendo?"

"Yeah," she says, and her eyes turn back to her work; it's plain that she already can't wait for the exchange to be over.

Ranma panics, scrambling for something that finds him a way back in. How had it all started with Akane, on that rainy, late spring day? He racks his memory for a hint, and stumbles over the first reply he can find. "T-that's cool. Ya don't see many female martial artists around these days. Must be pretty tough, huh?"

As soon as he's said it, a wave of regret claims him; the tone of it falls bluntly, the bizarre distance now standing between him and her making every word feel clunky and awkward, like the words themselves are several sizes too large for the things he wants to say. In the voice of Ranma the Wild Horse, his unsteady entreaty at friendship reads more like a badly-planned attempt at courtship of a girl who hasn't indicated any interest.

"Uh-huh." Another parry. Ranma's beginning to feel both like he's like made a mistake in coming here, and that he doesn't have quite the skill in social arts to fix it, and the desperation at finding a way to earn that dazzling, luminous smile of hers curdles with a seeping dread that this face, these hands, this voice can never bring it forth.

"So, do you uh, practise at a local dojo? Or somethin' like that?"

Akane pinches the bridge of her nose, and sighs heavily. "Look, no offence, but I don't know you, and I'm busy. So if this is your 'let's get to know each other' routine, I'll make it simple: I'm not interested. Sorry."

The bottom drops out of Ranma's guts as he hears it. Not because Akane's clipped, curt response is especially out of line for someone turning down a perceived advance, but because the very fact that Akane utters the words makes them crueler than he can stand. He stands up, teetering on knees that threaten to give out, throat scorched with the sickness of heartbreak, all the breath squelched out of his lungs, and grinds out a contrite farewell. "Sorry, it's my bad. I won't bother ya anymore."

Ranma gathers his belongings mechanically, stuffing the damnable volume of *Please Save My Earth* into his bag, and walks stiffly into the oblivion that waits for him outside the door.

His legs waver every step of the way home, but after what feels like a miserable, god-forsaken
eternity through the muggy, noonday sun, he finds himself once again at his mother's doorstep.

There's no response to the jingle of keys and the creaking of the door, and Ranma exhales with relief at being granted this minor blessing among the farcical constellation of curses laid at his feet. Just imagining his mother's beatific smile twisting into concern doubles him over in trepidation, and he stands at the sill of the genkan for several long moments, until his breath returns to normal.

Or, well, whatever counts as normal for a circumstance like this.

Since he learned of the nature of the curse from Kelun, he's left the bottle of Jusenkyo water on a shelf in his bedroom, and while it's gone unused the whole time, hardly a day has gone by where Ranma hasn't turned it over in his hands, contemplating the remedy that would conclude this chapter of his life once and for all. In these introspective moments, reckoning with the terrible truth that a simple ritual could seal away this part of him for good, he's often wondered if, after all, he might not be able to make a go of it by just keeping away from hot water; after all, it's a substantially easier feat than avoiding anything below body temperature.

But this time, as he takes the bottle, a brittle grimace on his face, the stiff retort to that fantasy cuts through as sharp and purposeful as Akane's incisive words:

*What's the point?*

Avoiding hot water for weeks is easy enough. With a little care, even months would be doable. But when it reaches that point, what use is remaining unlocked, for a male form whose place in the world leaves him apart from the woman he wants at his side? Even if he were to choose himself over her, what guarantee would he have that the same thing would not happen again one day, one way or another?

Another lover, another double life. Hadn't it happened just like that already? Even after patching things back up with Ukyo, things aren't the same, and might never be again—to say nothing of how things deteriorated quickly with Shanpu. And if that's the best he has to hope for, would that even be enough? Just so he could keep the ability to turn back for…well, not a rainy day, but an occasional escape? At that point, is it even worth it?

His eyes dart back to the bottle, and for an instant he's right there back at the coffeeshop, Akane's contemptuous gaze on him, his heart freezing and shattering like a brittle sheet of ice over the pit of despair below. More than anything, he never wants to see her make that face again, and if this is what it takes, then so be it. His features harden with resolve, and he makes for the bathroom, leaving the bottle on the kitchen counter.

Standing before the mirror, Ranma's greeted by his face—*his* face. He's grown half-unused to the sight of it, something that he isn't sure whether he should be happy about or not; on one hand, it represents the life he's choosing to leave behind, and there's something not entirely unwelcome to that thought. The dead-end jobs, the distance from his mother, the social isolation. The riding crop of his father's drive towards "manliness in all things". And yet…there remains a stubborn fragment of his soul that wishes he might never get so comfortable with the thought of losing this, that wants to etch this face, this chest, these shoulders and arms (and a few other things besides) into his memory for all time, and never forget them.

He gives the body a final once-over, his fingers raking over the skin and bone and muscle synonymous with him for so long, now the price of admission to approximating a normal life.

"Well," he announces to himself, "It's been fun, but it's time to go now."
By now, the all-too-familiar tap has been his go-to source of spontaneous transformation, and it's fitting, he thinks, that it would be the source of what he's resolved to let be his last one. He turns it on, and a blast of cool water later, Ranma wears a different face—her face. With an uncomfortable shudder, she paces back into the kitchen, where an uncertain future lies in wait, spelled out in ominous characters.

_Cursed Springs Water of Transformation: A Maiden's Heart._ "'A maiden's heart.' What a damn joke," she mutters aloud as she picks up the bottle.

It sighs with a faint fizz as Ranma uncorks it, and she pours out just enough water for a cup of tea for one, followed by the powdered herbs in the small bag tied to the bottle. A slightly pungent aroma, reminiscent of the taste when she first drank the Jusenkyo water, fills the air, and as Ranma pours the water into the kettle and sets it to boil, it only grows stronger, mixing with the reconstituted fragrance of the dried medicine, until she can taste the very magic of the mixture on her tongue. The water heats, and finally boils, and she pours out a small serving of the water—now a darkened wine colour as a result of the infusion—and sets it on the table.

There's a cruel joke in the simplicity and the swiftness of it. Just a few minutes of preparation, and she sits here facing the water that will sweep away the last vestiges of the life she led before her father's ill-fated attempt to cure a simple head cold had sent her down the rabbit hole of branching possibilities, a new life that nevertheless Ranma can't imagine living without anymore.

_Least I don't gotta be worried about losin' it now._

It's a hollow comfort. But as her eyes bore down on the steaming concoction, she reminds herself that it's better this way. If nothing else, it's her path to being back to being a single person again. Even if that means cutting away the person she used to be…maybe it's necessary to cut away that broken half, to let the rest of her grow into a whole that can heal. Ranma the Wild Horse will be gone, yes, but, she admits to herself with some wistfulness, he's been gone for a while. She's been Ranma of the Flowers long enough to know that it isn't just an act anymore—or rather, that everything's an act, more or less, and all one can ever do is play a part they can live with.

"Ah hell," she mutters with a sniff. "What am I gettin' all sentimental for, huh? No point in draggin' this out anymore."

With a sharp breath in, she gathers her courage, steels herself, and taking the mug of scarlet-tinged water into her hands, she knocks it back as quickly as possible. She winces with pain as the temperature of the drink stings against her throat, but doesn't pause until she's swallowed the whole foul-tasting mixture.

The aftertaste aside, the first thing she feels after drinking the tea is a horrible, shuddering crackle of foreboding that arclights through her spine and grips her throat with a sickening clench. The water feels like molten lead against her tongue, a feverish, languid horror that clots in her mind as it brings her to the brink of transforming and no further. The anaphylactic dread quickens her heart, sets her breath to laboured and panicked, her eyes wild, like something's gone terribly, terribly wrong and it sort of has, Ranma thinks, because nothing changes and yet, in a matter of moments, everything's changed. The world kaleidoscopes, the possible paths of her life warp and splinter away from everything familiar, from all the stories he grew up assuming would be his one day, from everything he had thought was true about himself, from the man he'd never given any thought to being anything but, into a gaping abyss.

Lurching back to the kitchen sink, she hunches over the lip of it, screwing her eyes shut and retching. A small pool of the bloodstained crimson of the tea sloshes around in the stainless steel of the sink, but nothing changes, and she manages a dizzy reel back into a dining room chair, where
she slumps over the table and tries to settle the frantic thoughts spinning out into dark, unexplored corners.

*It's over*, she reminds herself, *it's done*. The part of her that expects some measure of relief finds little in the act itself, and less still in the pair of delicate hands before her. This, all of this—who she is, her life, this body of hers, now her one and only—is exactly the same as it was just minutes ago, yet the stark reminder that her male half is gone grips her insides with a curdling disquiet. Whenever playing the part of this version of herself, Nodoka's daughter, had been too much, her other side had always been there to offer some respite, however brief, just as this side of her could wall off some of the more unpleasant difficulties in her male side's turbulent life.

But now there's no escaping one way or another: this is who she is. And even if that makes her some measure of *normal* again—a single person, no longer divided along these lines of who everyone wanted her to be, what they saw in her bodies, how they imbued them with split purpose, split identities, split desires—she doesn't feel quite whole, but rather like a half of her has been sacrificed for the sake of a chance at a normal life.

*Hey, what's with the pity party, Ranma?* her inner monologue cuts in, not in the tone of her own voice, but with Mariko's. She shakes her head and laughs self-consciously. "Aw damn it, now I really do know I'm losin' it," she laughs self-consciously. "I gotta clear my head."

Almost automatically, her legs propel her up from the chair and back into the bathroom. Thrusting herself before the mirror, she finds a girl with eyes raw with exhaustion and emotional freight, an expression lost in confusion and self-doubt. As if acting on instinct, she turns the tap on, squeezes her eyes closed, and splashes her face with cold water.

Somehow it's more tolerable to see this face staring back from the mirror when she's just had a jolt of cold water wash over it. It's the same face as a moment ago, but through the dewy pearls of water skittering down her face and dripping away, it seems just a little bit sweeter, just a little bit more fine-boned and graceful. Maybe it's just custom by now, she thinks, that after a splash of cold water, the form that feels right to her is her female form—wait, no. Her.

*Me. This is me. All of me.*

Ranma takes in her features with the curiosity of a newborn, trying to trace all the differences in her face and body (too many to count, let alone name) from the form of the stranger once known as Ranma, now residing only in her memory and imagination. Did he have a larger nose? Darker eyes? Did he have stubble on his cheeks? How did the contours of his shoulders and broad chest shape the clothing he wore?

No, better not to think on that too hard. She shakes her head and tries again, this time looking back at herself, to see if she can understand who this new Ranma is. She's pretty, in a sort of wild, unkempt way, and even if her muscles don't carry her nearly as far as they did in her male form, for a girl, she's clearly strong, with lean muscles underneath her soft skin. *Okay, don't overdo it, Saotome...just cause ya got a type, don't mean ya gotta go fallin' for your own damn reflection,* comes the deadpan voice. She takes a deep breath, looking down at her own body.

*It ain't so bad, right?*

It's not the life she imagined, and it hasn't come without its own demands. But this is Ranma Saotome she's looking back at, and whatever form, she's not one to back down from a challenge. Even if that challenge is to cope with the world turning its ideas of who she ought to be on its side, and pressing onto her another social role that, in retrospect, is just as ill-fitting as the first—well, she can find a way to live through it all. That's what the old ghoul had told her, at least. That there's
a life to be lived in this form, without dishonour or shame, a 'just and enlightened way of being': yǒudào.

She tests out a smile in the mirror—Mariko-in-her-head's orders—trying to tamp down the worries and the fears chasing her into this corner, and forces herself to list out what she has to hold onto, what no curse or magic can challenge anymore. No more this-way-and-that-way antics, thrust into one life or another depending on the weather, or some ridiculous scheme cooked up by her parents. For all her difficulties, she has her mother. She has the inner peace of martial arts. She has more friends than—well, probably than she's ever had, realistically.

And she has Akane.

A pang of confusion and guilt grips Ranma's heart as the thought floats through her mind. She's gone so long keeping her double life away from Akane. Part of it was always a selfish fear, much as she wishes she could deny it. Since becoming cursed, for so many others, Ranma's put on a performance, pretending to be someone she isn't for the sake of making it one day further, playing the roles until she didn't know which was the role and which was real, until they all melted down into some new version of her.

But, another part of her protests, the secret placed on her shoulders was never one she wished to bear, and now, well...it isn't a secret at all anymore. Just a memory of what her life once was, what it might have been if not for her father's mistake. Now this, and only this, is her. The hot water won't bring him back anymore, right?

Before she knows it, she's turning the tap as hot as it will go, the water slowly warming until it begins to steam. With another deep breath, her eyes pressed shut, she thrusts her hands under the flow of water, a tingle of expectation accompanying the blast of heat.

She doesn't need to open her eyes to know. The sharp shift of flesh and bone that accompanies the transformation is unmistakable, every time, a snap of queasy pulling at her insides from every corner of the body. But the feeling that accompanies the telltale prickle of the steaming water against her skin is nothing more than the stomach-turning ill fit of the temperature against her body, and the throb of heat against unchanged pink flesh.

Reaching for the tap to turn it off, she presses the heels of her palms into her face, her fingers raking through her auburn fringe. Her throat chokes out a laugh and a dry sob at the same time, mourning and relief mixing in her heart as a chapter of her life shuts behind her, opening onto the expanse of the world to come.

She doesn't stay in front of the mirror for much longer; the sight of the face that's hers and yet looks just enough like his to serve as a sharp reminder begins to wear on her, and after the whole procedure is done with, she goes back to her bedroom, crumpling into the unmade futon and lying there for what feels like an eternity. Emotions run through her like a live wire, snapping her onto a new channel before fizzling out and mixing into the sick cauldron at the pit of her stomach. There's some part of her that clings to a pointed regret, like she can't believe what she just did to herself, and another part that spits right back I did what I had to, exhaling in relief that the terrible noose of fear binding her to the baggage of the curse has finally come undone and freed her. She reaches a point where she's not even quite sure if she's dreaming or just hallucinating, mind wandering into the darkness and light, presenting idylls of lifelong romance and bitter agony alike, but after a time,
the racing images in her head fade, and she sits up, once again lucid.

Shifting in place uncomfortably, she pushes a lock of her hair out of her face. In the poorly air-conditioned bedroom, lying like this in her now ill-fitting, male, clothes, has left a thin layer of sweat against her skin. Much as a faint apprehension claws at her, with the state she's in, at least getting clean again will be an improvement, even if it means facing up once again to the permanence of her choice.

Heaving a sigh, she rights herself, then paces over to the bathroom, intent on getting through this in as businesslike a fashion as possible. She strips her clothing and tosses it in the hamper, then sits down at the shower stool. Undoing her tangled ponytail, she runs a few blasts of the showerhead against her now-loose hair, and then begins to lather shampoo into it.

For the moment, rinsing her hair under the lukewarm water of the shower, she can maintain the flimsy fiction in her mind a little longer, that nothing's altogether so different, that she's living her life as she would have. Even once her hands leave her hair, and begin taking a washcloth and soap to her body, the fiction holds; this has already been her normal for months, and she briefly prepares herself for her habitual behaviour when it comes to interacting closely with this body of hers, letting her mind wander away from a heightened awareness of her form and disconnecting from the feeling of cloth against chilly, exposed skin, when a thought strikes just right against the facade, exposing its fragility. When it was simply a part-time curse, it was easier for her to simply wall off the more profound alienness of inhabiting a different body, focusing mostly on the way the world around her bent its views around this short redhead than on the consequences of a new form on her physical state.

But now, every touch against her body will be against this skin; the routine of dissociation won't do. She'd thought before, too, that she could just forgo hot water, but if she's honest with herself, it's just disassociation of another kind, warding off all the fears she's been putting aside all this time. And fear, as ever, has always prodded her to stand against it with spiteful determination, so she rinses off the remaining suds, stands, and marches over to draw the hot water for a bath. The level rises slowly, her eyes following the plumes of steam that rise from the tub as it fills.

So, a masculine voice prods her, this is your normal body. You're takin' a normal bath. What's the problem?

She's beginning to hate that voice inside her head, but she does as it says, placing one foot in, then another, then sinking into the hot water until she's immersed to the neck. Just like before, that terrible suspense returns, an instinctual expectation that she's on the brink of transforming any moment; she tries to will away those memories and focus instead on the present, the steam against the pores of her face, and the enveloping warmth of the bathwater. Even as she sits motionless in the water, though, the fears she's trying to escape follow her in, slithering over the lip of the tub, roiling in the heat and dissipating into her.

For a few minutes she faces off against them, determined not to let something as anodyne as a soak in the furo frighten her. But then she hears a distant stirring, the smack of a set of keys laid down on a table, and the careful balancing act falls to pieces, a new fear displacing the rest:

Just what hell am I gonna tell Ma?

In her frantic, impetuous desire to get away from the curse, she's condemned herself and her mother to never giving that side of her a proper farewell. Now, once again, she has to face up to that and the hurt she may have inflicted—out of everyone she could have hurt, on her mother, one of the few people who's almost always been on her side since the beginning of this. She smacks her head and jumps up from the bath, grabbing the closest towel and wrapping it up around herself. It
isn't much, but one way or another she's going to have to face her mother, so she takes a deep breath and thrusts open the door.

"Oh, Ranma," she begins, a perceptible pause as she looks over Ranma's form and the steam emanating from the bath, "there you are. Why don't you get dressed, and I'll start making some dinner?"

As usual, Ranma can't place the tone of her voice, but it does nothing to assuage her fear—the rising conviction that she's understood what Ranma's just done right away, and that her level tone is just the first sign of a cresting wave of anger. Whatever it is though, it's a terror best faced while wearing more than just a towel, so she opens up her closet, rifling through the clothing to find something to wear. Among the discomfiting reminder that a good chunk of her male clothing is now more-or-less useless, she plucks out a pair of athletic shorts and the only tank top she owns that's better fitted for her (—girl half, she catches herself thinking), and prepares herself for whatever may come as she emerges.

When Ranma returns to the open kitchen, taking a seat on one of the living room cushions across from the countertop, Nodoka is busying herself putting away groceries. "How was your day? You left quite early this morning."

A lump calcifies in Ranma's throat, and she stifles a laugh and a dry sob at the question. It's so innocent and kind that its cruelty is astonishing; like she imagines a day in the life of Ranma Saotome could be nothing other than a fantasy of martial arts training and close camaraderie, and yet here she is, presiding over a disaster of her own making.

How can she even begin to explain it? Looking back, it all sounds ridiculous, a cascade of impulse and error that drove her to her breaking point. But she has to start somewhere.

"I did it."

For a moment, silence reigns, with only the distant hum of window-unit air conditioner and the whoosh of a few cars passing outside to break it. Nodoka glances briefly at the kitchen counter, where Ranma had left the bottle earlier, and then back at Ranma, an unspoken question.

Ranma just nods, slowly and deliberately.

"Why?" The question is soft, plaintive, a little heartbroken. "Why didn't you talk to me first?"

"Why didn't you talk to me first?"

Ranma falters, and tries another avenue. "Ma, you ever seen someone look at you in a way that hurts worse 'n anything they coulda said?"

"Ranma?" The ominous cut of her daughter's voice brings Nodoka to a near whisper.

"I went to see Akane today. Like, as a guy. I dunno what I was thinkin' really, just that, y'know, I'm the same person and all, right? If we could be friends one way, we could be friends another way. And maybe that way, I coulda told her about the curse. But…"

She looks up to see her mother following her every word, trembling, and it hits her, far too late, that this is what comes of excuses and half-truths. That from here on out, her mother deserves the whole story.

So, with hesitation, she recounts it all. Her relationship to Akane. Her conversation with Ukyo, her attempt to understand who she is not in terms of the outside world, but in the person she is independent of that. Her impulsive attempt to realize that by approaching Akane in male form, and her equally impulsive decision to use the Musk preparation. As Ranma reaches the end of the story,
she feels her teeth set on edge, the strain of keeping all of these complicated emotions that she herself had barely understood finally crashing down all around her, splaying out the messy, terrible truth to her mother. With a stiff gesture of her head, she finishes her speech, as if laying out her neck for an executioner.

"Oh, Ranma!" Nodoka exclaims, voice wavering. "Why didn't you tell me any of this before?"

Ranma can only hang her head, feeling defenceless, but clenching her jaw to keep from showing the fear or the sorrow within her. "I know, Ma. I shoulda. I'm sorry 'bout this, I shouldn't'a been so stupid, maybe if I'd stopped to think, or talk, or just—god, what have I done…"

Her mother shakes her head, and takes a step closer in towards Ranma, only to stop suddenly as she sees Ranma shrink away, visibly flinching. Her face rotates through twists of uneasy emotion, before settling on a broken smile. "My child, all this time…I haven't seen just how much you have been holding up on your shoulders, and how heavily it weighed on you." Slowly, like she's approaching a frightened animal, she takes a seat on the cushion next to Ranma, and offers an arm.

It isn't until now that Ranma realizes that her mother's shock hadn't been a prelude to anger, but to compassion and comfort, and that alone makes the anchor of melancholy within her harder to bear. And if she can't trust her mother's embrace, well, who can she trust? Experimentally, she scoots closer to Nodoka, and leans in, melting into a tight hug. "Ma, I…" she mumbles, no louder than a whisper. "I've been scared for so long. If I'm bein' honest, a lot longer than I've had the curse, but still…it made it worse. Made it feel like everything I did was cause I was scared of what might happen if I didn't, and like all I could do was keep hidin' and hidin' and now, well," she starts, but can't find a way to finish the sentence, instead just shutting her eyes and taking in the comfort of her mother's arms, breath hitching as she tries desperately to replace the fear—when did she get so afraid of everything, that even comfort scared her?—with the peace of her embrace.

"More than anything, Ranma, I want what is best for you. You are my child, and nothing will change that. I'm just sorry that I haven't been here for you when you most needed it. From now on, I won't make that same mistake again."

Ranma parts from the hug, and briefly, her eyes meet her mother's fierce gaze, a side of her that Ranma has scarcely seen. Just like that, the remains of her composure snap, decades of dedication to the idea that showing one's emotion is a weakness to be extinguished forgotten in the moment as she rushes back into her mother, tears streaking out of her blue eyes. "I'm sorry, Ma. I'm sorry," she mutters into the fabric of her sweater, not daring to look up again.

And then, much as Ranma wishes time might stop, that she wouldn't have to confront anything else, that she could just hide away in the sheltered womb of stasis, the world just keeps on turning. She feels faintly ridiculous, scarcely an hour removed from breaking into tears in her mother's arms, sitting down to dinner and putting mouthfuls of rice and grilled fish in her mouth robotically, as if nothing at all has changed. But the routine repeats the next morning, afternoon, and evening, and in between the stability of tedium, panic gives way to contemplation.

There's the obvious question. Well, what am I gonna do from now on? But it's a blooming, open-ended nightmare to think on, so Ranma regroups herself, rallies her thoughts, and tries a simpler tack. What am I gonna say?
To Akane? After the freshly-inflicted pain of those eyes boring into her, it's probably best not to dwell on that so soon. Ukyo? She'd accepted the idea with hardly a second thought. Ryoga? Well, he'd been her longest-lasting friend; for all they may have duelled over the meaning of the preparation offered to her, she thinks—she hopes—that things will be okay. No, it's the last name that comes to mind that derails her train of thought. The man she'd left in a livid, wounded rage, stepping over the threshold away from his life, seeking to undo the damage he'd wrought, if not on her own body, then on her mind.

But even now, in the depths of her disregard for her father, some part of her knows that he deserves to know. That no magic lies in wait to return him to his uncursed state for good, and that she herself has cast her lot with the curse. Much as the thought of the reunion fills her with dread, an old sense of duty wells up to match it. Not to her father as the idol, nor to the thought of 'manliness in all things', but as her mother put it: to family. So she swallows her pride—no small feat for a Saotome—and relents, stepping out once more into the midmorning haze of a cloudy late July day.

The march back provides her ample time to agonize over how exactly to approach him, or what to say when she does. A turbulent mix of emotions bubbles up, a contradiction meeting every other thought: a little demon on her shoulder whispers how easy it would be to succumb to the vindictive urge, returning to her father and rubbing it all in his face, that she's found some way forward through the curse that he was foolish enough to bring down on them both, whereas he'll spend the rest of his life torn in two, reaching for a human world that will remain perpetually just out of reach for half his life. It would be so easy; even with some spectre of normalcy to look forward to, a little shard of her heart is hardened against him, fueled by the spite she feels, both for the lie he raised her with, and for the huge mistake that prompted her to realize it, changing the course of her life forever.

But when she opens the door to her father's apartment, as ready, perhaps, to whip herself into the cruel, vengeful flaunting how she'll lead a life worth living over the living corpse of her father's dreams, as to grant herself any sense of closure with her father, the scene she's welcomed with strikes her emotions just right, like the soft hum of a tuning fork shattering glass.

The apartment is half-shrouded in darkness, lit only by the dreary grey of the outdoors flooding in through a window. Just like when she last left, an unpleasant smell pervades the atmosphere, though it's less pungent now, and more bitter and stale. If Genma's done anything at all since the last time Ranma was here, it hardly shows; the room looks more or less identically disheveled, and he sits in much the same spot as she had left him, looking more bedraggled and filthy than ever, his skin glistening in the half-light with a pallid, oily sheen. When she shuffles into the room silently, his eyes drift from their downcast position to look at her.

"I was wondering if you'd be coming back, boy."

She's about to yell something, anything, though she hardly knows what would make a difference this time that didn't last time, but her eyes lock with his, and in place of the fire she once knew resided in his heart, she sees only a haunting hollowness, and the anger and the venom she feels for him evaporates, replaced only by sadness and pity, magnified out of proportion to everything else.

The situation she's found herself in is ultimately her father's fault, yes. And her life will never return to the life she knew before. But some kind of life awaits her nevertheless, whereas this—her father's apartment—could only really properly be called a kind of hell, a prison of his own making from which he could never escape. His life, given away by a single foolish mistake. His son's life, forever changed, his own dreams for his boy never to be realized. Maybe her father deserves some punishment for his imperfections, but even this, she realizes, is too much.
And out of the pity she feels for her father being subject to this of all things, something like compassion, even forgiveness grows out of it. Perhaps some of his mistreatment still weighs heavily on her heart—she's no saint, and she won't grant him some kind of pure and complete absolution—but the bulk of her can't maintain the wrathful fire in her belly to punish him once again.

"Yeah, well," Ranma starts, "turns out ya only get one father, even if he's a pain in the ass."

"I suppose the same is true for one's sons. No matter how much one might instruct them in the path to manhood…"

She stares at him for a moment, half in disbelief, and then just laughs. "Pops, that don't stick no more. I ain't got much of that left in me."

Genma manages a grunt, looking outside wistfully for a moment and nodding. "Maybe so. Perhaps it's better that you find your own way, after all that this old fool has amounted to."

For the first time, when Ranma looks back at her father, she doesn't see quite the same thing. Not her father as a monster, the man who ruined her life, nor as the man who could do no wrong in his teachings. An old fool, perhaps, but only in the way that everyone goes through life as a fool, always thinking they know more than they do, until they're finally confronted with the truth. Just like her mother's shortsightedness in the way that she used the curse as an opportunity to treat her like a new daughter, just like her own dancing around the truth to keep a double life alive left her at a breaking point. He's a flawed man, no different from any other person, and somehow that revelation is freeing to Ranma.

"Everyone goes their own way someday, old man."

"I suppose that's true, isn't it," Genma says. He pauses, and then sighs. "So, you're resolved to staying," he searches for words, for once more careful than usual in his choice, "like this."

She smiles, a hint of sadness in her voice. "Ain't about resolved, really. Closest thing the old ghoul could find to a cure was to stay 'like this' for the rest of my life. And for you, well, that don't work out so hot, huh?"

If Genma is shocked by the revelation, he doesn't show it, and he simply shuts his eyes and nods, the evenness of his expression manifesting a self-control that Ranma didn't realize he had in him. "No true cure, then."

For a man she thought she might be able to hate, she surprises herself with the poignance she feels for him. No matter his guilt, no matter his mistakes, she wouldn't wish this as the end for him. "It is what it is. For what it's worth, Pops…I'm sorry."

"It was my own folly, Ranma," he says heavily, "even if it is one we will both have to bear. I hardly know where to go from here, but for that, I am sorry."

The sound of an apology on her father's lips is foreign to her, but if anything it makes it all the stronger. What's left of their relationship to salvage. More simply, what's left of her father's life to salvage?

"Look," she mumbles, suddenly struggling to maintain her composure. "maybe…maybethis ain't the place for ya anymore. If there ain't a way to be safe from the rain and the water in the city, gettin' a place in the mountains or the forest—become a park ranger or somethin', I dunno, I know ya got the outdoorsmanship thing down at least—maybe that's your ticket outta here. Cause this,"
She motions to the grimy apartment around her, "ain't any kinda life to live, not really, and your best shot at one means givin' everything you thought you had up. Take it from me."

"Think yourself a teacher now, eh?"

"I dunno about that, but...let's say I've had a lotta time to think. A lotta time to change."

"I'm getting old, boy. I don't know how much change is left in me."

"Comin' from the guy with 'adaptability is everything' in his top-five precepts? That's bullshit and you know it." Ranma snorts in vague annoyance, though she can hardly muster proper anger any longer. "Listen...for a long time, since before the curse even, I think, there was something that was makin' me sick inside, something I didn't even realize was there. And every time I thought somebody'd find it, it felt so bad I'd do anything, say anything, lie or hide or run away, just to be alone again, so nobody could see. And—and I thought that was just life, bein' afraid of everyone and everything cause it might break you open and then they'd all see that sickness inside of ya."

She sighs and leans back against the wall. "But then one day, I felt like I'd already lost so much, that I figured fuck it, might as well. So I turned around, and opened it up, and looked inside," she pauses, and mimics unscrewing a capsule toy between her hands, before opening her palms to Genma, "...and it was empty. Like I'd been runnin' from my own shadow, all this time. And now? I don't know what's gonna happen, exactly, but I ain't so scared of livin' like this anymore. It ain't the same, and I know it, but you can too. Just gotta let go of what's already gone."

So, for one last time, she hauls the garbage out, scours the worst of the pile of plates and pots and dishes, and wipes down the kitchen counters. Not because it's her duty, nor because it's manly. But because he's family.

And when she leaves her father's apartment, she feels a burden on her heart she didn't even know had been there all this time fade. It doesn't vanish, but the memento she's left with, the lingering weight of remembrance, is something she can hold in her hand and carry with her, without threatening to tear her apart.

Ranma was expecting to find her reunion with her father draining, or heartbreaking, or painful; she'd tensed her heart in advance, preparing to reel from the experience like a punch. But closure proves to be a surprisingly powerful buoy to her mood. Another day of her classes arrives, and Ranma almost forgets to dread the fact that she'll have to face everyone, Akane most of all.

There's a brief moment of panic in the pit of her stomach as Akane arrives, her expression blank, and for that instant Ranma is right back where she was then, in the midst of the memory seared into her heart of that look she gave to him. She doesn't know what she fears more: the irrational conviction rattling in her head that somehow, Akane knows, or that it won't matter in the end anyhow—that since they're both Ranma Saotome after all, that someday that same look will come again for her, just like it did for him.

But Ranma finds the courage to lift her eyes to meet Akane's, and she's every bit her usual self, with that smile that moves mountains, the slender curve of her neck as she tips it back to laugh, and that laugh itself, the way "Ranma" rolls off her lips like a chorus of angels to her ears, and if that's not enough to exorcise the spectre of that deadly glare, it's enough to swallow up some of the
darkness within her.

"Ranma?" Akane taps her on the shoulder, still smiling like a saint. "Ranma? Are you still with us?"

"Huh?" Ranma shakes her head sharply, snapping back to the real world. "Uh, I totally spaced out, sorry. Didja say something?"

"Jeeze, you really are out of it today, tomboy," Akane says, a lilt of playfulness in her voice. "I was asking if you were doing anything this weekend. You look like you could use a break…maybe if you're free, we could take a day trip out of town?"

_She doesn't hate me._ It shouldn't come as a surprise, but it feels like a revelation anyway, and her heart hums with a much-needed joy that's been sorely lacking. "Yeah, I could go for gettin' outta here for a day. You got a place in mind?"

"The weather's supposed to be nice. There's a pretty little seaside village down by Kamakura and Enoshima. If we got an early start, we could get there before the crowds show up."

Ranma's mind swims, a backdraft of happiness washing away the fear, and time skips along, for the first time in months, like she doesn't have a care in the world. The agonies of the previous days lift slowly, leaving in their wake an unfamiliar set of sensations: giddiness, excitement, anticipation, not to mention something more foreign still. Something she hadn't let herself feel much of in the past few months: hope.

On Sunday morning, a sleepy Ranma strolls out of the house and towards Furinkan Station, where Akane eagerly waits for them to begin their trip. Ranma, for her part, is grateful that Akane's all too happy to let her nod off on her shoulder—and, for once, that she's short enough to manage it—on the long leg of the trip along the Tokaido Main Line to Kamakura. As they switch onto the small green railcars of the Enoshima Electric Railway, however, Ranma's alertness finally catches up with her, and she begins to gaze out at the ocean from the window of the train.

In the sunlight, the water glitters with a vibrance Ranma hasn't seen for ages, and their destination—a rocky island erupting from the surface—comes into view. It dawns on her that this is something Akane wants to share, with her and her alone, and a hungry, possessive warmth laps up the feeling for all it's worth. She rests her head against Akane's shoulder—awake, this time—and surprises herself both at how naturally the gesture comes to her, now that she's the shorter of the pair, and at how gamely Akane responds to it, pulling her in just a bit closer with a knowing smile.

_Naw, this ain't so bad at all._

At Koshigoe Station, Akane nudges Ranma, motioning for them to exit the train, and they step out onto an otherwise small, quiet suburb, made remarkable after a few blocks of trudging through featureless streets by the presence of a long, wide beach and the ocean it opens out onto, their ultimate destination at the end of the bay, on the other edge of the beach. The inner child in Ranma is overcome with delight, and she kicks off her sneakers and pulls Akane along with her into the plush, silky sand.

For a second, Ranma defaults to trying to push away everything, and trying to focus in the moment, but then she realizes, with a combination of satisfaction and unease, that she doesn't have to anymore—more to the point, that she has reason _not_ to. This, here, her life with Akane, is no longer an escape from her other side, but her only life. And that means her future starts here.

"Hey, 'Kane," Ranma says, stopping briefly and digging her toes into the sand as her eyes drift
toward the ocean. "Ya ever think about what you're gonna do? After ya finish school and all?"

Akane hums in thought, sitting down on a nearby rock that juts out of the sandy beach. "A little too much, maybe. I don't know. I've told you about how Daddy always wanted me to inherit the dojo, and bring it back to life. I love martial arts, but...sometimes I'm a bit jealous of my sisters, and how they've had the chance to find themselves outside of that bubble. Nabiki is studying business at Hitotsubashi, and our older sister Kasumi works for a chiropractor over in Setagaya. But even now that I'm in university, I don't know if it calls to me. I mean, what am I going to do with a sociology degree, really? Maybe...it's not so much that I don't know what I want, but that sometimes I wish I didn't, because I don't want to do something just because Daddy decided I was 'born' to do it." She chuckles self-consciously and gazes downward, kicking her feet.

Ranma sits down beside Akane, extending an arm experimentally around her. "Yeah, I feel ya. I had my old man pushin' after his dreams for me so long, I hardly knew what the hell I wanted. Feels only the last couple of weeks I've even stopped to think what I'm gonna do. But, since I've been workin' for Ma, I feel like, I dunno, I got something that makes sense to me." She pauses and laughs to herself briefly. "Heh, with my grades, never thought I'd turn out to be a teacher."

"Oh?" Akane's eyes drift over to Ranma, her body shifting comfortably into the embrace. "I would have figured with two martial artists for parents, you would have thought about it a lot."

"I mean, 'martial artist' ain't really something you can do as a job, no matter what my old man says. Hell, sure, I always wanted to keep learnin' new things, but bein' a teacher's different. And my Ma's been great, but I can count the number of times Pops actually did something you can call 'teaching' on one hand. Mostly, it was pretty much just con jobs. So I ain't got a ton of experience. Didn't even really start until I met ya at the tournament in Adachi, actually."

"Well, I wouldn't have been able to tell. You're a natural," Akane replies with a smile. The redhead shrugs her shoulders and puts on a grin. "Yeah, guess I am pretty good at this, huh?"

For her trouble, she gets a snort and a playful punch in the shoulder. "Aren't we feeling humble today."

Ranma laughs again, but it's a little different this time. Not so clipped and wary, and for once, almost carefree. 'I dunno. I got a lot to learn still, I know that. Actually, I'd kinda been thinkin' lately that...well, you ever thought about teachin' what you know? I figure the Tendo school's got some pretty interesting stuff. I mean besides the sword work, there's a buncha stuff besides that'd be cool to learn. Ain't ever tried archery or naginata before. I don't know how ya feel about your dad's dream, but I can tell ya you'd have at least one student," she says, pointing towards herself. "That's sweet of you," Akane says, shutting her eyes and leaning in further.

But Ranma turns to face her, expression hardening with resolve. "Hey, I'm serious, 'Kane. This is part of who you are, right? Like, forget what your old man wants for a minute. You love martial arts, and that's your art. If I get to know that art, I feel like I get to know you better, and...I want that. More than anything."

"I..." Akane falters. "I want that too, Ranma. I mean, I'm not sure I'd be any good as a teacher or anything, but if it matters to you...I'd like that," she stutters out, her cheeks burning as she turns away. "M-maybe, we could—I-I want to think about it, but let's talk about it again. Soon."

"Promise?"
Akane nods, and as they sit together on the rock, eyes gazing out at the ocean, Ranma's hand slides into hers, and just for the moment everything is right in the world.

When they stand again and continue onward to Enoshima, they're quiet for a time, but it's not an awkward silence; one hand in another is all the communication they need as they reach the edge of the sandy spit, taking a set of stairs up to the pedestrian bridge connecting the small island to the mainland.

The bridge deposits them in on the island's small village, little shops, groceries, and cafés lining the narrow, tiled street. With the time just past noon, tourists and locals alike buzz about the streets, lining up outside food stalls and filling up the seats in the restaurants. Ranma, for her part, is content to bounce from yatai to yatai, sweet-talking samples of shirasu bread, tako senbei, satsuma age, and ice cream monaka from the vendors, with a slightly bewildered Akane in tow.

"How did you…"

"Runs in the family," Ranma deadpans. "Want some?"

Akane plucks a fish cake out of the pile of food Ranma's assembled, one eyebrow still firmly raised. "I'm pretty sure this is unethical, but I'm just hungry enough not to care."

A nearby vending machine nets them a pair of sodas, and for a few minutes, they sit at the edge of the village, where steps lead up to the shrine complex atop the hill, finishing their impromptu lunches.

"This is a nice place," Ranma mumbles between bites. "Ya been before?"

"A few times," Akane replies. "Actually, after we finish lunch, I wanted to show you something, up at the top of the hill."

"Oh yeah? What's that?"

"You'll see when we get there," she smiles, almost a little mischievously.

After they finish their food, Ranma follows along as Akane guides them up flight after flight of stairs deeper into the island, through sections of forested thickets, terraced gardens brimming with vibrant greenery and flowers, around a cape with a wide view of the harbour and the water beyond, and finally across a series of torii gates within the shrine complex. Finally, taking a turn onto a worn dirt path away from the central area, they reach the summit of what Ranma can now see is labelled Lovers' Hill.

A glass gazebo stands at the plateau of the hill, surrounded on all sides by a number of chain-link fences, each one festooned to the limit with hundreds of brightly-coloured padlocks. Within the gazebo, a small golden bell wavers in the breeze. Further beyond, the broad blue ocean spills over the horizon, melting into the blue sky.

"The Dragon's Bell of Love," Ranma reads off the plaque beside it.

Akane nods. "You're supposed to ring the bell, and put a padlock with your names against one of those fences to be fortunate in love."

"I see what this is about," Ranma grins with realization. "Well…don't suppose ya brought a padlock, huh?" Akane simply sticks out her tongue, withdrawing one from her bag.

"I never thought…" she starts, fingers idly toying with the lock as she searches for the right words.
"I thought I couldn't be happy, because of the way I felt. When I'm with you, I don't feel that way anymore. It just feels…right."

The words tumble over in Ranma's mind. She can't quite reciprocate the statement; for all that Akane's touch against her skin is thrilling, every thought of her in this moment is warm and comforting, the terror of her look of contempt a distant memory, just a few things sit out of place in her heart.

Then again, maybe it's not right, not entirely. But life rarely offers that kind of perfection, and she's felt enough misery and heartache over this. If she has the chance to find something good out of all of this, she'll take it for all that it's worth. "Yeah. I'm happy too," Ranma says finally, offering her hand to Akane as she leads them over to the bell.

They each place a hand on the rope to the bell and pull down, and it clangs with a tinny chime. Then Akane takes the padlock, writes their names out in flowy kana and binds them together with a heart, and locks it to the fence. Akane beams back at her, with that smile more powerful than anything else she knows, and Ranma's heart swells with the beginning of what could only be called love.

Standing together here, on this cliff at the end of the world, Akane's hand in hers, Ranma can't help but feel that after all the needless pain and stress and loss she's faced over this, there's a life to be lived here, a happy one that rises above that anguish. And if it isn't perfect, isn't the storybook ending of her dreams—well, for now, the simplicity of their happiness is enough. It's more than enough.

Ranma returns from her weekend escape from Akane in a dreamstate. In the days, everything that follows seems to go her way, like some sort of repayment for everything that happened when her curse could transform her on a moment's notice.

Of course, something has to give eventually. What surprises Ranma isn't that her idyllic world doesn't last forever, it's that the little flaws that show in it come from unexpected places. Her relationships continue more or less as before, with Daisuke and Hiroshi sliding into place among the group of students that have, over the weeks, become Ranma's friends. It's just that there's one nagging exception, in the form of her oldest friend.

Since learning of Ranma's decision—and perhaps more to the point, of her relationship with Akane, Ryoga hasn't reacted to her like he used to. Their old patterns of teasing don't land quite the same way, and the days of an easygoing bond of brotherhood feel like a distant memory.

But accepting that life isn't perfect doesn't mean she's willing to let their relationship deteriorate further, either. One afternoon, Ryoga opens the door to his apartment to find a familiar redhead, standing with her hands on her hips.

"Ryoga! Hey, what's goin' on? Ain't seen ya outside of class for a couple weeks."

Ryoga's body language is stiff and standoffish. He shifts uncomfortably in his sweats. "Been busy."

"Not busy enough that your katas ain't lookin' better. I know you've been practising. C'mon, what's really going on?" Ranma prods.
"It's nothing," he says grimly, looking away. "I have to go to work, okay?"

"Don't bullshit me, Hibiki, you ain't even dressed and shifts don't start for another 3 hours," she says, striding into his apartment without invitation. Ryoga yields with a sigh and follows her into the living room, but she quickly whirs around when they arrive. "This—hang on, this ain't about the curse thing, is it?"

Her statement isn't entirely unexpected, but it knocks Ryoga off balance nevertheless. "I—damn it, Ranma!" he fumes. "I don't know how to talk about the other thing. It was one thing to talk about it, but seeing it for real, that this is you, forever now, it—it's different. I want to get it, but...look, a year ago, we were like brothers, right? Just how's that supposed to work, looking at this?"

Ranma steps back, looking genuinely wounded by his words, and her temper flares. "Don't you get it? Nothing's changed, you bastard, not on the inside!"

"Yeah, you should tell that to Akane."

"Idiot, ya think I ain't still torn up thinkin' about that? How things coulda gone differently if I hadn't been too caught up in my own crap? I know I've made some mistakes, I'm just tryin' to stop dwellin' on what's behind me and figure out what I'm gonna do now."

Ryoga doesn't look too thrilled by Ranma's answer, and he settles into one of the chairs in his living room with a look of skepticism. "So? You've got the girl, and your little 'secret' is history. Seems to me it's easy to say that when you've got it made."

Ranma cringes visibly at the portrayal of her choices, and his phrasing does little to settle her temper. "Got it made!? This wasn't exactly my first choice, asshole!"

The sharpness of her reaction elicits a flinch from Ryoga. Somewhat chastened, his voice loses its edge of spite. "Look, man. I'm trying to understand, but you don't make it easy, sometimes. Is that what this is really about? The future?"

She wants to snipe but...he's giving her a chance to explain herself, right? She hops onto the couch, sitting crosslegged as she listens. There, facing down Ryoga's judgment, she snaps her eyes away from their distant expression and looks into his, nodding at his mention of the future. "Well, you know that 'Kane's old man has this ritzy old dojo from back before the war? She was tellin’ me that it's a pipe dream, only...I don't think it is, really. It's got a lot goin' for it—the location and size and all. The Tendo school’s kinda old-fashioned, but a lot of people have a soft spot for the throwback swordfighting look."

"Tendo school? I didn't know her family had its own style."

"Yeah, it's a koryu style, been around for like 500 years, apparently. Mostly kenjutsu, but they got some archery, naginata, even some unarmed techniques too."

"So, you want to learn her family's style and teach it. Pretty ambitious plans, for someone you haven't known all that long."

"I mean...I dunno. I've been figurin' lately, I never thought much about what I was gonna do as a job when I got older. Hell, there was a couple years in there where I never thought more'n about hittin' the next rent payment. Remember back in high school, the old man had me doin' whatever shit job I could find just to feed his crackpot schemes?"

"I mean, now that you mention it, the convenience store jobs were nothing, compared to his other ideas. Didn't he get you to start selling fake caviar from the yatai he stole?"
Ranma chuckles to herself, the memory sparking a perverse kind of nostalgia. "Yeah, he bought a buncha mentai and black food dye and charged 5000 yen a pop. Man, I musta conned like 30 people by the time the cops showed up."

"Dude, has anyone ever told you that your childhood was kind of messed up?"

"You and every cop that ever brought me in, man. Ya see now why I'm after something a little different, right?"

"Point taken."

"And I mean, since I've been runnin' the class for Ma I realized that I like it. It makes sense to me. Now maybe this thing with the Tendos don't pan out for whatever reason, but even if it ain't meant to be, plenty of ways I can still teach, right?"

Ryoga's expression shifts; where before a low-grade frustration had furrowed itself into his brow, he seems to relax as Ranma recounts her plans, and before long he's wearing a full-faced grin. "Good for you," he says finally.

"Huh?"

"I mean…I dunno, man, I don't know how else to put it. I ain't had any of the usual crazy shit that follows me around happen in weeks. Ain't done much at all, really, just hangin' out with 'Kane, a little with Ucchan and Mariko. Hell, I even got Hiro to let me try out his new Super Famicom the other day. It's not like everything's perfect or anything, there's some, um, weird crap for sure, but mostly? It's just…normal. It's okay."

The smile on Ryoga's face softens, but doesn't fade. He stands up and takes a seat beside Ranma on the couch. "Well, we made it this far as brothers. Maybe it's a little weird, but I guess there's no point letting a little thing like this change that."

"Yeah, well that's a good thing too, cause I sorta wanted to ask ya something. See, Ma seems to be okay with Akane, but she also keeps mentioning I owe her grandkids."

"How's that going to work? I mean no offence Ranma, but I shouldn't have to be the one to tell you this. Between two girls…"

"Yeah, ain't so simple, right? So, uh, look, don't take this the wrong way, but if I called ya up in a couple years and said, 'Hey P-chan, wanna whack off in a jar?' what would you say to that?"

Ryoga pales, and then laughs nervously. "I'd say you're a weirdo, but you probably already know that."

"Oh please, the way you're actin', ya make it sound like getting off is some kinda huge trial or something."

"Can you not!? I'm trying not to think about the implications, here. Just, it's not going to be you carrying the kid, right? That'd just be…god, the weirdness really is spreading…"
"Yeah, well, welcome to my life. You're a real pal, Ryoga," she says, clapping his back with a brief grin. Then, though the grin disappears, it leaves behind an earnest expression. "Hey listen, I know, especially with this curse crap, we didn't always see eye to eye, but ya know you can always talk to me, right? Even if that means yellin' at me and tellin' me I'm bein' an idiot about something…man, you're my best friend. Rather have ya read me the riot act than run away again."

The unexpected display of emotion seems to strike Ryoga just the right way, and he snorts out loud. "You're such a bastard, Ranma," he says, going in for a hug nevertheless.

Ranma pats him on the shoulder, before standing and offering him a genuine smile. "I gotta get goin', but I'm glad I came here, today. I know you gotta do your wanderin' sometimes, just…don't get too lost, buddy."

One week later, Ranma stands in front of her bathroom mirror and does a full turn, running her fingers through her currently unbound hair.

She'd been torn, looking at the dozens of options in the aisle of hair products, wondering if it might have been better to dye her hair back to a full black, and carry a piece of her old self moving forward. But the thought of it—of being just a little too much like the Ranma that's lost forever—still dredges up a pain that Ranma wrestles with, and in the end she settled on this: a deep, dark, fiery mahogany—not quite the vivid auburn of her now-natural hair, nor the pure black she'd grown up with. If nothing else, it serves as a reminder that when all's said and done, she doesn't have to confine herself to following someone else's ideas of who she has to be. That she can be someone in between those two personas.

Braiding it back up in her usual plait, she nods to her reflection in the mirror, satisfied, and turns back to her open messenger bag on the table, where the bottle of cursed water sits. There's just one more task ahead of her, before the remnants of her old life are truly behind her.

The contours of her trip back to Ikebukuro Station are as familiar as ever; the train, the timing, the busy whorls of passengers milling through the station. An uneasy jitter climbs up her spine as she exits out of the station and onto the narrow street, the Seito Hanten drawing closer in the distance. One step, then another, then another, and she opens the door—if only briefly—back into the world of her past.

Shanpu stands at a table in the centre of the empty restaurant, piling up dishes and glasses onto her tray. She's just as Ranma remembers her, sharply dressed in her purple qipao, hair long and straight and perfect as ever. Ranma's almost afraid to break the spell, to bring the peace of concentration to an end by setting foot where she feels she doesn't belong anymore, but Shanpu notices first, glancing up from wiping a table to see Ranma.

"Hey." Ranma hadn't been quite sure what to expect, but she's still surprised when Shanpu responds—well, with maybe a tinge of sadness in her voice, but evenly nonetheless.

"Hey, Shanpu." She shifts her weight tensely as thoughts whirl around in her head, trying to find the words for an overdue apology.

Shanpu sets down the rag she's using to clean the tables and approaches Ranma. Her expression seems torn between relief and hesitation, and Ranma bites her lip, still half-fearing an anger might
still come. "I like your hair," she says finally.

Well, that ain't what I expected. "Uh, thanks. It's new. I like your, um...you."

Shanpu's laugh is sweet and nostalgic, eliciting a pang from Ranma's heart. It's easy for her to forget when she's with Akane, but standing before this girl, it's immediately evident what she saw in her. "You're cute, Ranma," Shanpu says, a hint of that sadness filtering back into her voice, tempered by something else that Ranma can't quite place. Her eyes take in the shorter girl from head to toe, and she speaks up again. "Did you use the..."

Ranma nods as casually as she can manage. Much as she might try to pass it off as a triviality, it isn't and they both know it.

Shanpu turns away like she's been struck, squeezing her eyes shut. "Well, guess you're here for business with grandmother then, yes?"

"Naw. I mean yeah, but not only at least," Ranma starts, her shoulders drooping. "But also...I'm sorry I ain't been around to talk lately. At first I just told myself I was givin' ya some space, but... hell, I ain't any good at this kinda crap. I was just avoidin' my problems, as usual."

"It's not always so easy to forget those things, Ranma." Her eyes flick down and look over Ranma's small body, if not with disdain, then with hurt and disappointment, like every curve reflects back an echo of the Ranma that she can no longer see, the Ranma that perhaps she feels was taken away from her. It's hard, facing that gaze, for Ranma not to feel a shadow of that guilt.

"I know," Ranma replies quickly, and a little too coldly. "Believe me, if there's anyone who knows that ya can't just pretend nothing happened and go back to normal, it's me. But, I'd rather be friends than nothing at all. Don't you?"

Shanpu pauses. "I don't know," she admits.

"Well," Ranma nods, trying to stifle a heavy-hearted sigh, "guess that's better than than a no. If ya do decide, you know where to find me." She shuffles off towards the door to Kelun's office, leaving Shanpu to consider Ranma's offer.

She enters, exhaling with relief, to another familiar scene, the old woman leafing through a supply catalogue. "Ranma," Kelun says as she catches sight of her, looking as pleased with herself as ever as she looses a low cackle. "It's been too long. You're looking well."

Somehow, after everything, she's found herself missing this crazy old woman's willingness to laugh at anything and everything. "Hey, old ghoul," Ranma replies with a small smile. "You're lookin', well...same as ever."

"When you get to be my age, child, that's a good thing. So, what brings you back here after all this time? From the looks of it, you've cast your lot, haven't you?"

"It's that obvious, huh?" Ranma fiddles with her braid sheepishly, stepping up to one of the seats by Kelun's desk and slumping into it. She opens her mouth to say something else, but then stops herself, and laughs. "Heh, gotten so used to explaining myself, I almost forgot I don't really gotta do that with ya, huh?"

"On this matter, at least, I think I understand, Ranma. Matters of the soul are never so simple to resolve."

"I guess you're right. Still, I'm sorry for the way it all went down then, 'specially with Shanpu.
She's a nice girl, but I guess, with everything happening…"

"It's a shame. You would have made a good grandson-in-law," Kelun rattles out another creaky laugh, "but she'll find her way. As will you."

"Yeah," Ranma nods, "I think I will. It's like ya said, right? Yǒudào."

"You remembered well, child. A shame indeed…but never mind that."

"Guess I should be thankin' my lucky stars I didn't get knocked out and shipped off to China on an arranged marriage?"

"Hah! My granddaughter told you about that one, eh? Ah, well, you win some, you lose some." She shuts the catalogue in front of her with finality and leans back in her chair. "Maybe the time for having designs is over for me, but I do hope you stay in touch. To be able to come face-to-face with the legends of my childhood, well, it was something special."

Ranma just smirks, and slides a business card across the business table. "Well, I ain't goin' anywhere, but here's my new card."

Kelun picks up the card and squints at the name written on it: 早乙女乱茉. "Luànmò. 'Wild jasmine'. Yes," she says, one last chuckle to herself, "I believe that suits you much better. Well then, Saotome Ranma, I certainly hope that this isn't goodbye. An old woman does need her entertainments, after all."

"Naw, this ain't goodbye. If anything…it's a new beginning." Opening her bag, she takes out a half-full bottle, her curse and cure, and places it on Kelun's desk, before standing up. "See ya round, old ghoul," she says with an affectionate smirk, and turns and strides away confidently, out the door and into another world.
"Ah, that really hit the spot," Ranma says as she and Akane leave the small izakaya nestled along a side street of Harajuku, right at the outskirts of Yoyogi Park, back out into the chilly evening air.

"Mmm," Akane hums happily, one arm around Ranma's waist as she pulls the shorter girl closer to her, sharing their warmth. "On a night like this, you can't go wrong with oden, huh?"

"Yeah…” Ranma shuts her eyes and leans into Akane's embrace. Even if a bowl of soup (or a hot spring, or freshly-boiled tea) still sometimes leaves her feeling awkward and out of place in her own skin, like she's stuck on the threshold of a transformation that will never quite go through, the feeling that follows it tonight—a warmth in her belly, the closeness of Akane against her, and a non-negligible amount of sake—does its fair share to assuage that. And if it isn't perfect, and leaves her sometimes wondering what kind of life she might have lived but for that fateful day, or whether she really made the 'right' decision, well…it's okay. It isn't the end of everything, and despite it all she's found some semblance of happiness in the arms of the girl beside her.

Still, it doesn't make for a welcome topic to dwell on, and Ranma's mind quickly reaches for another topic. "Oh hey, did you get Hiro's invitation to the thing on Coming of Age Day yet?"

"Oh, yeah. I thought it was a little weird. I mean, it's just a drinking party, right?"

"Well, don't tell anyone, but I kinda got a hunch he's makin' a big deal outta the thing cause he and Dai are gonna go official."

"Eh, seriously? Those two? I mean, I guess, not that I'm in any place to judge…” Akane says sheepishly.

"I mean, it ain't that weird. Ever noticed how they're always together? Don't think I remember the last time I saw just one of 'em."

"Well, you make a good point. But the only times I've talked to Daisuke he seemed to be very, um, interested in me. And you. And Mariko. And, well, Ryoga and Tatewaki—oh."

"My point exactly. You ask me, the guy's alright, he's just a huge hornball. Anyway," Ranma nods vigorously, shaking out the shiver that rattles her slightly, as a brief gust of cold wind snaps at their heels. "Enough about that. Let's go up to the shrine now!"

The pair of them wander along at the idle pace of the people around them, through the first great gate along the path to Meiji Shrine, taking in the beauty of the surrounding forest in a gentle blanket of snow, the occasional stands of decorated sake barrels, and the brightly coloured paper lanterns that guide the way to the shrine complex. With the busy throng of visitors collected at the entrance to the shrine, there isn't much quiet to be had, but they're happy enough to forgo conversation and just stay close.

As they navigate the crowds, Akane's arm around her tightens, and Ranma's briefly struck by the unfamiliarity of the sensation of an arm bending down to cradle her. Ranma was never particularly tall as a boy, but now, at almost 15 centimetres shorter, she's shorter than almost everyone. In her prior relationships, she'd always been the taller of the two, and had often held wrapped an arm around her girlfriend like this. On the other side of the equation for the first time, it's briefly
startling, but she finds there's a soothing comfort and protected feeling that comes from it nonetheless, at least enough to assuage the faint jealousy that Akane's height even reaches average.

When they arrive at the centre of the temple complex, they join a brief queue to wash their hands and mouths before their prayer at the shrine proper. When Ranma's turn comes, she ladles out the water into her hands, briefly shocked by the sharpness of the cold water against her skin, but all she can think about as her hands are ritually rinsed is that if she'd tried to come here before, when her curse still triggered, she'd have had to do in this form anyway. For some reason, as she dries off her hands and meets back up with Akane, that thought sparks her to laughter.

"Something funny?" Akane asks.

"Just thinkin' I never figured I'd be here like this," Ranma replies; it's a half-truth, at least.

"What, with a girlfriend?"

*Or, ya know, as the girlfriend.* "Hey, ya don't gotta put it quite like that. I'm kind of a catch, ya know."

Akane giggles and pats Ranma on the arm. "Well, you hardly need your ego fed any more than it already is, Ranma, but yes, you are." Motioning towards the shrine, she guides the two of them up through the gate into the central sanctuary, where the offertory box awaits their prayers.

Ranma bows twice and claps twice, the beginnings of something like a prayer forming in her mind. *If you're really out there, um, hey. I ain't ever been much good at this kinda stuff, ain't ever been much of one for believin', neither, but you could say I had a scare, or at any rate, I feel like there's things out there I can't quite take for granted anymore.*

*So, I don't know why this all happened to me. Maybe never will, other than the usual crap hand the world likes to deal me once in a while. Or maybe it's fate, and it had to be this way for some reason. Some test of faith I gotta prove. But if you're listening, here's my prayer, or wish, or request, or whatever you wanna call it. Maybe it's the wrong call, maybe it's the right call I made, staying this way, not makin' waves or anything. Maybe it's karma, after all. But please...please don't ever make me haveta make a decision like that again.*

She bows again, then glances over back at Akane, who seems not to have taken nearly so long with her own prayer. "Awfully big...wish you got there, Ranma."

"Hey, sometimes you just got somethin' you gotta get off your chest, alright?"

"Yeah, I'll say," Akane mumbles, her eyes drifting away innocently.

"Aw, shaddup. You know what I mean."

"That's true. Well, I guess it's no surprise that you can't even keep your mouth shut when it comes to talking to the gods."

"You're a jerk," Ranma says, in a well-worn, loving tone, and waves away Akane's judgment. "Alright, we gonna get our fortunes or what?"

A small eaved roof hosts a large numbered chest of drawers inset against the back wall; ahead of them, a few people are placing a coin into the collection box and drawing a fortune, but within a few minutes it's Ranma and Akane's turn to take their chances.
Ranma slides a coin into the slot on the large collection box by the drawer of fortunes, then takes the box holding the fortunes and shakes it vigorously.

"You don't have to shake it that hard. You'll break it open at that rate, tomboy." Akane's voice is a warm lilt as she prods Ranma teasingly.

"Please, if anyone's gonna break anything it'll be you and those biceps." Ranma sticks her tongue out back at Akane, only to be startled back into attention as a number pops up from the end of the container.

"48, huh?" Akane reads off the number and glances up at the wall of drawers, numbered from one through one hundred.

Ranma's eyes search until she's found the correct one. Opening the drawer, she withdraws the top sheet of paper from it, and then, after a moment's hesitation, she just starts to laugh.

"What? What did you get?" Akane says, impatiently trying to peer over Ranma's shoulder to get a look at the fortune. When she sees it, far from explaining anything, she's only more confused. "Half-curse? I don't get it. What's so funny?"

"Aw, it's nothing," Ranma says, swatting away Akane's concern, her expression twisted up into a half-hearted smile. When Akane's expression doesn't change, she shrugs and offers a hedge. "Ya might just say I got a hunch about these things too."

"Okay…" Akane pouts, her eyes drifting away from Ranma and the collection box, seemingly lost in thought. Ranma's eyes catch on her, and she wonders briefly if she's made a misstep. "Honestly, Ranma, I wish you'd explain yourself a little more sometimes. I know that it isn't always easy, and I know that this kind of relationship is sort of new, for both of us. But you don't always have to keep everything bottled up inside you."

A thought bubbles up in Ranma's mind, basking in the irony of the moment. The decision she made, to take the Musk sealing curse, was supposed to let her live her life free of this, no longer bound by the constant need to hide one life or another, to just make the best of the life that would remain to her. Yet she's found that an 'honest life' doesn't come so easily to her either, when the history of her new life has been made entirely in the last several months, and part of who she is will always be defined by the person she was for the twenty years before that.

"Maybe…" Ranma starts, then falters as an old, unwelcome baritone inside her finishes the sentence. *Maybe you're just as bad as your old man, Saotome. A liar and an asshole, who just got away with conning the girl you love cause ya didn't have the guts to tell her the truth when it mattered. And maybe now ya just gotta live with that, cause it's too late to go back and fix it.*

Her expression holds steady, but inside she cringes, knowing the voice isn't entirely wrong. There's no way that Akane would believe it to begin with, and even if she would there isn't a way of saying it without hurting them both. Maybe that's the half-curse she's holding in her hands.

"Maybe I oughta tie this damn thing up and get outta here," Ranma finishes half-heartedly, then shakes her head. "Sorry, 'Kane. I ain't any good at this sorta thing. Why don't ya get your fortune while I get ridda this?" She hands the box over to Akane, and heads off to knot the bad-luck fortune against one of the nearby metal bars.

When she returns, Akane holds a paper in her hands, with a small smile.

"Half-blessing," Ranma grins back. *Yeah…maybe that's what this is, after all.*
Her eyes meet Akane's as she melts into the taller girl's warm embrace, and she's welcomed with a deep kiss.

By now, if only from the many times her mother's slotted her into it for measurements and minor alterations, Ranma's used to the restrictive feeling of wearing her mother's vintage long-sleeved kimono, a pale ensemble with a constellation of shimmering, silver-threaded multi-coloured flowers, and the elaborately knotted, patterned golden obi and fur stole that accompany it. Instead, it's the meaning that it's freighted with that weighs on her heavily as her eyes drift outward, towards the hundreds of other young women dressed in similar kimono, and the young men in western suits or traditional hakama. Here, more than anywhere else, the gulf between who she was and who she is feels most apparent, and it's hard for her not to feel a twinge of loss. Not because the men's outfits are especially appealing—Ranma's vanity allows her to admit that the ornate furisode is a big step up in appearance from a bland suit and tie, at least. But seeing, in the brute dichotomy of "women here, men there", the life she might have led contrasted so sharply with the life that she leads now, it's hard not to think of how a version of her might have fared, if none of this had come to pass.

Glancing over to the girl beside her, she's offered a smile and a hand. Ranma returns both, squeezing Akane's hand affectionately, before glancing back up at the stage. Atop the rostrum in the far end of the arena, a balding man standing at a podium concludes a speech on the responsibilities of adulthood, leaving the crowd of newly-christened adults to scatter to the four winds.

"Well, that was boring. Remind me why we came to this again?" Akane shakes her head judgmentally.

"You know how Ma gets, she'd lose it if I skipped outta something like this, specially the whole fancy getup. 'Sides, pretty sure the whole point to deckin' ya out in so much of this crap is so ya can't get outta here even if ya wanted to." Ranma replies drily, affecting the slow shuffle the kimono forces her into.

"Yeah, unless you're a guy," Akane says drily.

"Fuckin' guys," Ranma grouses, keeping the laugh of deep irony to herself. "Say, speakin' of which, wonder where those bastards all ran off to…"

"You aren't getting rid of us so easily, Teach." A warm voice is soon followed by the appearance of two young men in sharp, tailored suits. One has a shock of voluminous light brown hair cascading into his wide, almost childlike eyes; the other, a sharp part in his short, dark brown hair, looks on with a thin-lipped smile.

Ranma grins. "Hiro, Dai. You guys look, well, like you'd survive if the building caught fire."

"Yeah, at the cost of looking like a bunch of faceless goons. How's a guy supposed to stand out like this? Especially when all the girls are this beautiful!" Daisuke puts on a face of mock despondence.

"If you weren't such a horndog, maybe that wouldn't matter so much," Hiroshi quips, dragging Daisuke back by the arm with a grin.

Akane snickers, but when she glances away briefly, her eyes catch on another pair of familiar faces.
approaching the group.

"Surprise!" Mariko, in a kimono and obi set with lush pastels of green, yellow, and pink, nevertheless crashes into the arranged semi-circle of the group with a grin, dragging along a tall man with a forest green haori and striped hakama that, as Ranma looks over them, suit him unexpectedly well.

"Oh. Ryoga, Mariko! You're looking wonderful."

Mariko extends two thumbs up. "And you four are too cute!"

Ranma turns from Daisuke and Hiroshi to greet the new pair, waving at Mariko with a smile and then prodding Ryoga playfully. "Nice threads, P-chan. You playin' stand-in for Kuno today or what, loverboy?"

"If it's all the same, you can leave me out of your bizarre fantasies, Saotome."

Ranma snickers. "Well, thank god Kuno's older 'n the rest of us at least. I don't wanna think about what ol' Blue Thunder would do if he saw me all done up like this. I mean, I'm hard enough to resist on my own, but this is a step up."

"Okay, you can stop complimenting yourself now, Ranma," Akane elbows Ranma. "It's in bad taste."

"What? It's true, I can't help bein' cute. Tell me I'm wrong."

Akane sticks out her tongue in mock spite. "You are the furthest thing from cute, you incorrigible tomboy."

Ranma feigns an expression of righteous indignation. "Hmph, jerk."

"Okay, far be it from me to break up a lover's quarrel," Hiroshi cuts in, "but it's quarter after two, and we promised the parents we'd be over by two to get some pictures taken. So, keep the drama in a bottle for a couple hours, and grin and bear it for a few picture poses, alright?"

"A few picture poses" turns out to be the majority of the afternoon, as every one of their parents wants their chance at a dozen photographs with every possible pose, peripheral acquaintances, siblings and parents drifting in and out of the scene. The hours drift by in a haze of Mariko's ever-present peace signs, Daisuke's dramatic sighs of impatience, Ryoga periodically wandering off, and everyone's smiles turning more and more rigid and pained with the passage of time. By the end, even just standing around in the cumbersome outfit begins to exhaust Ranma, and the newly-made adults agree to reconvene in a few hours in more casual attire, leaving Ranma back with her mother for the time being.

Disrobing from any kimono, let alone a fully-appointed Coming of Age Day furisode, is no small matter, and Ranma appreciates the attention that Nodoka gives to helping her remove it, even if it comes with a strange new familial intimacy. Other than a little assistance with putting on a sash before Tanabata, it's been more than a decade since her mother has done something like help her into or out of an outfit, but it's all the more unfamiliar as it lays bare the obvious differences in just who and what she is now, not only to herself but to her mother. If it fazes Nodoka, she doesn't show it, and her expression warms from stoic diligence to that motherly smile of hers as she undoes the delicate knots in the obi, then the pair of koshihimo holding up the kimono. When all of the ties of the kimono are undone, Ranma slips it off, then briefly darts to her bedroom to exchange the nagajuban for a more comfortable outfit, returning in a jumper and a pair of jeans.
"Thanks for the help, Ma. No way I was gettin' outta that thing alone."

"It's no trouble at all, daughter. In truth, it feels a little bit nostalgic, somehow."

"Nostalgic?"

Nodoka nods. "Twenty-four years ago, I was standing right where you are now, as my own mother helped me out of my kimono after the ceremonies of the day. She was often...candid, when it came to expressing my responsibilities as a daughter, but there was never any doubt as to her love, or her pride in me. I want you to know, Ranma, that for all of your troubles, I am proud of you all the same."

"Aw, Ma, don't get all mushy now..."

"Nonsense. If I'm permitted to be mushy on any day of the year, it's the day when my daughter becomes an adult."

An adult, huh?

Even if the word settles strangely on her heart, she supposes that's what she is, now. Looking back at her past selves, they seem so foreign, so distant now that they might as well be long-lost friends. Maybe some part of her still aches thinking back of the boy she was, and the man she'll never come to know. But loss is a funny thing, and mixed in with the throb of sorrow is a curious conviction that rises up to meet it, that if fate, or destiny, or chance alone are what brought her to this moment, that it's been worth it.

Sitting back down beside her mother, she encircles her in a tight hug, and somewhere in there, at the deepest level, she feels it. If it meant she wouldn't have had Akane in her life, or this closeness to her mother, or even the lessons she's learned, or the discoveries she's made about who she is, then that other life wouldn't have been hers. And in this life, there's a place for her, one which, for better or for worse, Ranma wouldn't trade for the world.

A few weeks later, Ranma strides into Shakujii Station with a shiver. On any given day that wouldn't be so out of place, except that today she's alone.

It's funny when she thinks of it; it's become so unusual for her to spend a day on her own, that setting aside a day for it is something to mark. Yet, somehow, it's not the same kind of solitude that she felt before all of this started, when weeks might have passed between doing anything other than sparring with Ryoga, doing meaningless busywork for the sake of Genma's empty dreams, or the occasional training session with Nodoka. In those days, in hindsight, the intimate days of cashier work and waiting tables, even when they involved seeing hundreds of people pass by in a day, they were lonely.

But today, she's just on her own, and for the moment, that suits her just fine. It's not that she lacks for company; her friend group has expanded with time, from Ryoga and Ukyo, to Akane, Mariko, Daisuke and Hiroshi. Kuno's mellowed some with time, and even matters with Shanpu have improved some from their low point. At the very least, Ranma no longer glances around nervously in expectation whenever she steps out onto Ikebukuro Station, as she's doing now, switching trains so she can make it out to Bunkyo Ward, where a promise to herself and herself alone waits to be kept.
Catching a train on the Marunouchi line, Ranma settles back in for the second leg of the trip, eyes drifting out to the other passengers. Even now that the question of who she is—or at least what she is—is more or less settled, although it's been cut more and more as of late to make room for wariness of would-be gropers, she hasn't lost the habit of glancing out at the other passengers, the men and the women alike, and trying to imagine who they might be, and how she measures up. She wonders—do they lead honest lives? Do they lie to the ones they love? Are they lies of malice, or lies of comfort? And how about herself?

Well, that's why I'm headed out here, ain't I?

Nestled between aging tenements, commercial streets, and freshly-built high-rises, Yushima Shrine cuts a strange figure, the relic of another world lost in time and space and brought to the barren, paved streets of Tokyo. The wooden construction of the shrine complex is familiar, in the way that many Shinto shrines are, but Ranma isn't here to pray. For today only, January 25th, the shrine sells a particular charm, one that—among all the possibilities—has piqued her interest more than the rest.

Glancing around her, and noticing the dozens of people of all ages carrying around the carved little charms, she wonders if maybe she isn't quite so alone after all.

"Are you looking for something, miss?" To the side of the shrine's main pathway, an older man with a carving knife sits behind a small stall with an assortment of charms of varying sizes, all of them vaguely cylindrical and featuring a bird motif.

Ranma's eyes glance up to meet his, and she holds up one of the charms on display. "These are the liar-bird charms, huh? I did a bit of reading up about 'em, but how are they supposed to work?"

The old man grins. "Ah, a newcomer then? Well, you begin by taking one of these," he holds up a charm to his mouth, "and whisper in the lies, secrets, and regrets you have. This little bullfinch will spin them all into a song of truth for you to follow and carry with you for the year that follows. Then next year, you come back, bring the charm here, and leave those lies and secrets behind, and start again for the new year."

"Sounds…a little messed up, when ya put it that way. But hey, ain't like that don't kinda fit me neither. So sure, why not. How much for one of these little guys?"

"Hmm…" He takes a critical eye to Ranma. "You seem like a serious girl. I tell you what, you promise to come back next year with the charm and exchange it for a new one, and you can take that one with you, my treat."

Ranma looks down at the charm, then back at the old man. "Alright, sure, why not. Thanks," she says, gesturing to the charm in her hands. "So, same time next year?"

"Same time next year."

As she strides away from the shrine and back out into the real world, she holds the hollow end of the charm close to her lips. "Man," she whispers in, "have I got a story for you."

Chapter End Notes

A huge thank you to uragaaru for all of her incredible patience, editing, reviewing, and
advice on this. Without it, this fic would have doubtlessly been weaker for it. Additionally, I want to thank everyone from the Ranma Discord and everyone who's commented here for their feedback as well.

I'll be taking a break for a while to get started with my next project, but I hope to have something to show everyone soon. It's tentatively titled *Cute Little Fang*: a world that quickly veers off the canon trajectory when Ryoga's knocked into the Spring of Drowned Girl instead. For those of you hoping for more of this story, I'm happy to say that, while I won't be working on it right after this, there are plans for a sequel to *Ordinary Lives* in the works.

Thanks again to everyone. This was a fun ride for a first Ranma work, and I hope everyone enjoyed reading it as much as I did writing it.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!