Make or Break

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by TwilightsHerald

Summary

The school idol craze is sweeping the country, and carrying along a certain couple of redheads with it. But when the kids of Nerima notice a fad, they tend to get carried away! Anything Goes Idol Dancers are set to turn the movement on its’ head, but if there's anything they have to learn, it's that Kousaka Honoka doesn't lose - and she's got the best teacher out there in 'not losing'!
Chapter 1

A/N: I admit I've been trying to avoid putting these in my fics themselves, but in this case I've come to the conclusion that it's necessary. For those of you coming here from the (Surprisingly active) Ranma community who may not have been following anime for awhile, Love Live! has a surprisingly robust discography. Ranma 1/2's is a bit less comprehensive, but it's there. So, since I'm a terrible poet I'll be 'borrowing' some of the lyrics where it makes sense. Songs being sung from/performered will be listed at the start of each chapter. Per site rules, no challenge to any copyright is intended or implied.

A-RISE - 'Private Wars' first released on 'Notes of School Idol Days' soundtrack.

Ranma - 'Kagayaku Sora to Kimi no Koe' from DoCo Second.

Spring in Nerima. The cherry blossoms may have fallen weeks before, but it would still be months before the heat and rains of summer would arrive. Unlike much of the rest of Tokyo, Nerima had managed to escape much of the transformations of the last twenty years. Most of the houses were still tiled-roofed, almost none over three stories. It was a good mix of traditional Japanese architecture with the sprawl of the 70s, none of which had yet to be bought up and converted into either high-end housing or apartments to accommodate the masses of people still living in the city. In short, a seeming island of suburbia right in the heart of one of the biggest metropolises on Earth.

But how could such a thing be? To get a partial answer to this, one would go to the Tendo Dojo. One of the largest of the traditional buildings in the district, it featured, not just the dojo itself, but a two-story house and even a small zen garden with koi pond. To a casual observer, one passing through, it might have seemed like the very picture of traditional living and tranquility.

There are people who look at the Apollo missions and conclude the moon landings were faked, too. It takes a still-closer look to begin to understand how Nerima has survived the times so unchanged. For that, we must look to the living room, with its’ low table, and cushions for seating to the sides and a small couch opposite a wide-screen television on a media stand. And on the couch, there was a girl. With her short hair cut neatly to frame her face, bangs trailing slightly over her eyes, and a fairly conservative pink dress over a plain white blouse, she could have been almost any Japanese girl in the country. However, her figure was beyond fit and trim and had a bit of muscle definition. At that exact moment, it was the only thing that betrayed there was anything unusual about her or this place.

This was Akane Tendo.

Currently she was watching a show with three girls in white, frilly mini-dresses dancing on a lit stage. The lead dancer had short honey-blonde hair, flanked by a slightly taller one with a longer, fuller style of chestnut brown, and an even taller girl with dark purple hair and green eyes. Their movements were fluid, and their singing voices clear as bells. Akane sat, nearly entranced by the scene in front of her.

She sighed with a mixture of envy and longing, only to hear a curious 'hmph' from behind her, Akane spun half around on the couch, only to see the boy of her dreams and nightmares behind her. About the only average thing about him was his height. His body was lithe and chiseled, evidence of long hours every day in martial arts practice. His messy hair was pulled back into a tight pigtail. His body language suggested that he was utterly at ease with his surroundings, but his slate-blue eyes held a certain tension, just beneath the surface, that was always ready to come out.
His mode of dress was unusual to say the least for the time and place. A traditional Chinese silk shirt, blood red, with long sleeves hung loosely over his shoulders, rolled up just enough to show off his arms. In similar fashion, he wore silken black pants and a sash around his waist, suggesting a study of Kung-Fu within the bounds of China itself. He wasn't much older than Akane.

This was Ranma Saotome.

"Don't know why yer watchin' that. Just some dolled up idol singers." Ranma commented.

Akane shook her head, speaking with a tone bordering on disgust with Ranma's apparent ignorance of the modern world. "Just shows what you know. Those are school idols. It's like a club, not that you'd know anything about those."

"Eh, thing like that's just boring, and it gets in the way." Ranma crossed his arms behind his head. "Besides, we did stuff like that last year. Wasn't too bad." He took a few moments to assess it. "Huh. A school put that on? Not too bad, I guess. We couldn't do more than sing karaoke, really."

Akane looked at Ranma. "What? I could too do that!"

The pig-tailed martial artist snorted. "Really? You? Just look at 'em." Akane started her slow boil while Ranma prattled on, ignoring the warning signs. "Ya need grace, a sense of timin', charm...yer voice ain't bad, might do all right there. Oh, yeah, almost forgot. You'd need ta put in almost as much time as learnin' a new kata. Ain't somethin' you can just muscle yer way through like a gorilla."

"Oh, and you'd know all about it Ranma?!!" Akane stood up and spun around to shout at him.

Ranma shrugged. "Ain't got a clue. I can just see an uncuute girl like you'd never have what it takes to do that well."

"Oh really...then why don't you go CHECK IT OUT FOR YOURSELF?!" Ranma threw up his arms to defend against Akane's uppercut, but it was far too late. The blow landed, and he found himself being propelled up, through the roof of the house, and towards the horizon.

Akane sniffed as Ranma's voice echoed back "Ya uncuuuute toooooombooooooyyyy…"

As Ranma flew off beyond the horizon, Akane blinked a few times. “Great. I can't believe I smacked him off that way. Now he's going to be grumpy all week.” She sat back down to watch the video, but her heart wasn't in it anymore. “Ranma, why are you still acting like this?” Her mind drifted back to that horrible day on Phoenix Mountain. I love you! Those were his words, the words it seemed they could never say to one another. That had been why she had gone along with the shotgun wedding their parents had thrown together when they got back from China.

But it seemed like it was just a momentary thing after all. Nothing had changed.

Meanwhile, in the Kanda ward near the borders with Akihabara and Jinbouchou, the terrain of the rest of Tokyo had long since taken over. But there were still islands of green. One such was Otonokizaka high school - a traditional building, renovated many times over the years but maintaining the look of a high school all the time. What was unusual was the activity going on on the accessible rooftop. Three girls, practicing their dance.

This wasn't the complicated displays of the aforementioned A-RISE. The comparatively simple choreography was challenging their skills as it was. It should have been simple. A bit of flair to catch the audience as they went into the chorus. The girl in the front of the trio seemed to be having difficulty, though.
Her auburn hair, a ribbon holding it up on one side, was matted to her head with sweat. She stood at about the same height as most of her classmates. She wore a cyan shirt with a kana symbol over her magenta tank top, paired with dark blue workout pants. There was a certain flagging of her movements telling of long exercise, but her bright blue eyes still had a spark of determination.

This was Kousaku Honoka.

And, unfortunately, she had just decked one of her two best friends for the third time that session.

Only barely noticeably taller than Honoka when not sprawled out on the ground, her light ash-blonde hair splayed out underneath her. Her face scrunched up in pain, amber-colored eyes just barely peeking out even as she had to cover her nose to keep a trickle of bloody from dripping onto her pastel yellow shirt or, worse, the much more expensive beige skirt she was wearing for her workout.

This was Minami Kotori.

Fortunately for her, this was not a common thing for her friends to be doing. That'll be important to note later.

"Owww! Honoka, whyyyy?" Kotori's voice was a bit on the high-pitched side as she sat up. "Can't you look my direction first?"

"I'm sorry!" Honoka kneeled down to pick up the other girl. "But I'm supposed to keep looking at the audience!"

Kotori's hair fell in waves back into position as she retied her own green ribbon (for the second time this time.) "Maybe we should do something else there. I could lose some teeth!"

The third girl was about as much shorter than Honoka as Kotori was taller- not much. Her long black hair fell straight behind her. She seemed much less tired than the other two, physically anyway. Emotionally was another story, as her exasperation got the better of her and she brushed some imaginary dirt off her T-shirt. "Honoka, it's up. Not behind! You twist around at the waist and punch up into the air. And you're not moving enough before that, or you'd still not be hitting Kotori on that step!"

This was Sonoda Umi.

"...aaaAAAAHHHHHH!"

And the lives of these three girls was about to get a lot more complicated.

"GET OUTTA THE WAY!"

Umi was able to react to the sudden noise - a scream coming from above - in time, throwing her arms out to push her two friends away from where they had been standing, her legs coiling and springing with skills trained to the point of instinct through long sessions with her family school to carry her out of the way as a pig-tailed boy finished his descent from the sky, crashing into the roof.

When the dust-cloud cleared, the trio blinked. He should have been dead. No one could survive a drop like that, but all that had happened was the roof tiles had cracked and come loose under his landing.

Saotome rubbed some dirt out of his face as he addressed them directly. "I'm Saotome Ranma. Sorry 'bout this…"
Umi was the first to recover, posture straightening as she turned back around to shout. "You can't just fall from the sky HERE! This is a girl's school!"

The pig-tailed boy snapped back with "Well, what was I supposed to do! I got punted here from Nerima, ain't like I got that much of a choice where I land!"

Umi wanted to continue her tirade, but she was stopped when a restraining hand landed on her shoulder. Kotori finally brought her back around. "I don't think it was his fault…"

Ranma scratched his hand behind his head. "Yeah, sorry, I thought the roof would be clear to land on, and by the time I saw ya there it was kinda too late. Whatcha doin' on the roof this time'a day anyway?"

Honoka sighed. "There's nowhere else we CAN practice. We're…" she was about to explain, but Ranma interrupted.

"...oh, yeah, Akane was talkin' 'bout that before she sent me here," he looked them over. "School idols, right?"

Umi rolled her eyes. "That's the plan anyway."

Ranma turned and crossed his arms behind his head. "Well, good on ya. If you're not put off by havin' no place to practice, you'll do fine."

Kotori had a sudden flash of inspiration. "How do you know about school idols?"

"Eh...did a little bit last year over at Furinkan," The boy's explanation was nonchalant, as he intended to go back down the stairs and leave, but he was stopped by the one thing that could get under his skin.

Umi's sly, slightly sarcastic voice cut in. "I didn't think boys could be school idols, and Furinkan doesn't have a group on the web site."

Ranma gulped, realizing he had no way out. "Eh...guess there's no choice. Mind if I borrow that water bottle? I'll pay ya back." Without waiting for anyone to object, he jogged over to where the girls had stashed their things in the shadow of the stairwell to keep them cool. He untwisted the top, and upended it over his own head.

All three girls gasped at the amazing transformation. Suddenly, his body seemed to melt away, losing almost 30 centimeters in the space of a fraction of a second. Hard muscle seemed to be replaced with soft curves, barely visible under the now bulky Chinese clothing. The black color seemed to wash out of her hair like a cheap dye, leaving it a vibrant red. It all happened of a speed of 'blink and you'll miss it' but where before there had been a boy, there was now a busty, red-headed girl.

Honoka blinked.

Kotori blinked.

Umi blinked.

They all blinked again, for good measure. There was much blinking all around.

Through practice born of long suffering, the new girl launched into explanations. "It's a weird Chinese curse, yes I'm a guy, cold water changes me, hot water to turn back, if Pops made any promises to your families I don't wanna hear about it, take it up with the Panda, there ain't no
The girls of Mu's blinked again.

Finally Honoka seemed to find her voice. "...so you turned into a girl to become a school idol?"

"THAT AIN'T IT!" Ranma took a deep breath to calm himself down. "This was an accident, and there ain't no cure I've found."

Honoka only needed a moment to consider this. "Well, I think it's cool. Hey, can you sing something for us!"

"Honoka!" Both of her friends shouted at her, with Umi following up. "That's rude!"

The pig-tailed girl seemed to actually consider the request for a moment. "Yeah, I guess..." She took in a deep breath, thinking back to the party Kasumi had held for half the district over Christmas. At the time she hadn't really wanted to be a girl in front of all those people, but... well, it couldn't hurt.

Then she dismissed the idea. "Wait, not that one." Another moment to consider.

"Kagayaku sora to..." Her voice rang out, clear as a bell across the rooftop. It could even be heard from the grounds in front of the school, although not well.

Unknown to Ranma, and forgotten by the others, directly below the impromptu dance studio on the roof was Otonokizaka's music room. It was occupied, as it usually had been during the year, by a single student. She may have only been a year younger than the trio on the roof, but she was nearly the same height. Blazing red hair flared as she played at the piano in front of her, humming along to her newest composition. She paused in her playing, opening her violet eyes to look over the notes.

This was Nishikino Maki.

She was about to begin another run through when she heard a voice calling out from the window.

"...ryoutte, hirogete! Kanjitai!" In her youth going up through the music world, she had heard a lot of girls singing. This... if she were to be honest, whoever the voice belonged to had no real training, but she had passion.

Maki thought for a bit, then decided she wasn't getting any more work done on this song today. She started trying to figure out the accompaniment to the tune she heard coming from the roof.

She'd be negligent to let a voice like that not be at her best for Mu's.

"...awwww!" a sudden exclamation from Honoka broke off the pig-tailed girl's singing. "Our roof!"

Ranma's attention was drawn to the place where she'd landed. Right in the middle of the roof, there was a dent in the wood underneath the solid tiling. "Awww, dammit!" She groaned. "I'm sorry 'bout that. Look, where do ya keep the supplies around here?"

Umi raised an eyebrow. "You're telling me you can also..."

"Yeah, gotta fix up the dojo all the time." Ranma shrugged. "How hard could it be?" She barreled through the door at nearly top speed, surprising a fourth girl.

Had the younger Saotome been paying more attention, he'd have noticed that he had nearly knocked her off the stairs. She did manage to catch onto the railing without going over, however, and righted
herself, checking to make sure she hadn't been noticed by those on the roof. Taller, with her long hair in pigtails, her normally serene face was marred a bit by a flush of panic and the slight pain of being pushed aside. She briefly reflected that it could have been worse, and really was her own fault for spying, blue-green eyes quickly returning to normal.

This was Toujou Nozomi.

She pulled out her ever-handy tarot deck and quickly shuffled the cards, checking the top one. "The Sun...Bright Apollo, huh?" She glanced down the stairs after the redhead. "This is going to be so interesting."

Ranma heard a few familiar chords on the piano as she passed by the music room. She turned, looking in to see another red-head playing, or more precisely puzzling over the keys. "Hey, whatcha doin'?"

"I heard someone singing on the roof, just trying to work out the HEY!" Maki jumped up in shock, before looking over the speaker, a soft blush coming to her cheeks. "I mean, uhm, hi. I was just…"

"Oh, yeah, that was me." Ranma scratched the back of her head nervously.

Maki gave the pig-tailed girl another look over. "Oh...uhm, do you think you could teach me the accompaniment to that one? I'm helping you guys out - "

"Oh, I don't go to the school," Ranma didn't catch the look of disappointment. "But I know Kasumi has some sheet music. If ya don't mind waitin' till tomorrow I'll see if I can borrow a copy for ya."

Maki swallowed, barely meeting the other girl's blue eyes. "Yeah. Do you want to listen to me play for real?"

Ranma blinked a few times. "Eh, maybe later. Gotta fix the roof right now."

Maki was so stunned by this declaration she didn't say anything when Ranma went off, whistling.

She was the tallest girl in the school, her Russian heritage plain in her features. The silky golden-blonde hair and bright blue eyes were something of a giveaway as well. With a remote, distant bearing, she had a large number of admirers throughout the school, although she was only tangentially aware of the fact beyond that it was somewhat responsible for getting her her position as the President of the Student Council. Her body, for all that she hadn't been in serious training for almost a year, was still lithe, and her steps graceful.

This was Ayase Eri.

And all of her work at maintaining a cool, dignified attitude went out the window in a nanosecond. But she was somewhat grateful for that.

When the pig-tailed girl in strange Chinese clothing ran right by her, she was so shocked she nearly went out with them! It took her only a moment to right herself, but by then the girl had nearly turned back into the stairwell. She did the only thing she could think of.

"H-hey! This is a school! You can't just run around here at random!"

The girl stopped, just for a moment, turning around to face her with intent eyes. "It ain't random. I'll be gone by the end of the day, promise!"
Eri was about to say something else, anything to get this...weirdness...out of her school, but by then the girl had rounded a corner at a full sprint and was gone.

A few minutes later, two more schoolgirls of note were at the athletic field. One was in the standard gym uniform of school T-shirt and bloomers, while the other wore the school uniform.

The first girl would have been about two inches shorter than Honoka, standing side-by-side. Her light green eyes were practically tearing up with sweat dripping into them from the exertion of her run on the track. With coppery red hair messed up by the wind, she was the very picture of 'tomboy' in a way Akane didn't really match.

This was Hoshizora Rin.

The girl near her, with a stopwatch, smiled brightly. "Rin, I think that was your best time today!" Her darker blonde hair was more neatly trimmed, but still short. The same height, her amethyst-colored eyes were shining with excitement. "I think you'll make the track team for sure." She made sure her thick-rimmed glasses were in place as well.

This was Kozumi Hanayo.

"Kayochi. . ." Rin used her nickname for the girl who had been her longest-time friend. "I'm more worried about you. Aren't you going to go for it?"

Hanayo was about to respond, the predictable blush of embarrassment already starting to appear, when a blur wearing a pair of black Chinese pants and a red shirt with wood-fasteners went right by them. Both girls stared as the newcomer went into the maintenance shed. "Uhh..." Rin was stunned, to say the least. "...how fast was she going?"

That was answered when the girl came back out of the shed, still jogging at the same ludicrous speed. This time she had a number of ceiling tiles slung over her back, tied together with some twine, and a plastic bucket full of something so heavy it was straining the handle for her to grab onto it one-handed. She had a flat spade clenched firmly between her teeth, and on the whole appeared to be carrying enough to weigh more than she did.

Rin glanced back at Hanayo. "I've gotta get my time down,"

"...yeah."

Ranma jogged back up the stairs. She had considered briefly just making the jump, or running up the side of the building, but neither option seemed great when up against the relative fragility of her cargo. So instead she just started going back up the stairwell.

A plan that went awry when she very nearly ran into a certain blonde again. "All right, missy!" Eri shouted at her. "I don't know who you think you are, but you're not allowed here!"

Ranma spat her tool out, catching and idly balancing it on one foot so she could stick her tongue out at the bossy girl in front of her. "Don't know who you think you are but I got somethin' I gotta do before I go."

"I am the president of Otonokizaka High School's student council, and this school has enough problems without thi...thi...thi..." Eri trailed off into babbling as she took in the whole scene in front of her. "Wha...how are..."
Ranma flipped the spade back onto the top of her head. "Eh, just good balance. Not that ya'd know anything 'bout that. Now, ya gonna let me clean up or do you get ta do it, prez?"

Eri nearly felt steam coming out of her ears when a hand landed on her shoulder. She looked back at the familiar face with the twin ponytails.

"Erichi," Nozomi said quietly. "I agree it's against the rules, but is there really a problem if she just wants to fix something before going home?"

Ranma looked between the two. "Heh. You, I think I like. Seeya," And without another word, she was gone.

Eri stared at her best friend, then threw up her hands. "I don't get you lately," she finally decided on as a response.

Nozomi grinned, and revealed The Sun card. "The cards say we should be on the lookout for new opportunities. I think she may be the last thing we need."

"Then why let her stay?" the president took the opportunity to go on the offense, but was stymied when Nozomi just smiled back at her in that serene way she had.

"Well, for one thing," came the response "Look at how much that tiny girl was carting around. If she really wants to stay, do you think we have the slightest chance in the world of stopping her?"

Keys slammed down onto the piano in frustration. With the promise of the very thing she had been working on, she quickly decided to try to get back to doing something productive. Try, but she couldn't get the other redhead out of her thoughts. Something about the girl, whether it be her bright blue eyes or the obvious beauty of her figure even under the over-sized clothing was just driving her to utter distraction.

She tried again, playing one note at a time, when another flash of crimson hair drew her attention away from the piano - again - and she saw . . . uh, wow. She's . . . strong. The strange girl had apparently stopped by for another quick listen, but seeing she wasn't really managing anything right now just gave her a rather sheepish grin and nod, her arms (and mouth) full, before turning and heading back towards the stairs.

Finally dismissing the whole thing as an exercise in frustration, at least for the day, she quietly started packing her sheet music into her school bag. Don't know why I keep doing this anyway, my music 'career' is all but over, she thought to herself, feeling a pang of regret. Still, it wouldn't hurt to at least introduce herself to the girl. It isn't her fault I'm distracted today.

She went towards the stairwell, only to catch a glimpse of the pig-tailed girl through the door. From one floor down. . . Maki went through a quick calculation in her head. She must be jumping straight up four meters!

A blush rose to her cheeks, and she quickly retreated towards home and an early bath to calm herself down.

Back on the roof, while Ranma was busy giving Otonokizaka a taste of her unique brand of chaos, Honoka decided that a boy turning into a girl after dropping out of the sky was not grounds to stop practicing.

"Honestly, you're taking this better than I thought you would," Umi confessed after the next run-
through resulted in fewer injuries. "I'd heard rumors about Nerima for the past couple of years, and I really thought you'd want to check them out."

Honoka's eyes widened. "What kind of rumors?"

"Oh no," Umi groaned inwardly. Of course she's interested now. "You want to find out, you just ask this Ranma about it. The stuff I've heard is dangerous and he did just claim to get punched across half the city."

"All right, I will," Honoka gave a quick nod to her dark-haired friend. "And how did we do?"

"...better," Umi conceded. "We've still got a long way to go in two weeks if we're going to be ready in time for Orientation Day."

"Well, I'm sure at this rate we'll manage," Kotori moved back to her starting position. "One more try? Umi, you should do it with us this time."

It was in the middle of the next repeat that Ranma finally made it back to the roof. The martial artist decided it was better to not interrupt their work at the far end of the roof, so at first she just did the repair work quietly, the way she'd observed some of the guys who did the repairs to the Tendo home operating.

But Saotome Ranma was nothing if not a martial artist. And, to her mind, doing things the normal way was so boring. So, when she got to the last few tiles to put down, she slathered some glue on the back, and then leaped four meters into the air to get a good angle, tossing them perfectly into place before landing on top with a burst of ki pushed through her legs to increase the pressure on them. "There!"

Honoka found her attention drawn away from the dance by a flash out of the corner of her eye, looking up to see Ranma all but hovering in the air. Unfortunately, this came at a moment when she was supposed to be switching places with Umi. The other girl crashed into her face-to-skull, sending Honoka stumbling forward while the black-haired girl's hands flew to her nose and teeth with a sharp cry of pain.

Honoka tried to recover from the unexpected shove, planting her ankle at an odd angle and falling to the ground with a much louder shriek of pain.

The first pained sound was dismissed as the simple accident it was, but when Ranma heard the second she turned her head away from the stairwell to the dancers, and winced in sympathy. "Ah, dammit," She ran to Honoka's side along with the other two. "I been injured a few times," she explained to the other two, who were looking skeptical. "Part of bein' a martial artist." She turned her attention to Honoka, who was whimpering. "What hurts, 'zactly?" She suddenly sounded calming, almost gentle.

Honoka bit her lip. "Right ankle. It feels broken,"

"Let me take a look..." The red-headed girl pulled off the shoe and sock, giving it a quick look. "Well, it ain't broken but that's a pretty nasty twist. Uhm...hold on a sec," She pulled out an older model cell phone and quickly took a picture. She quickly sent it off attached to a text message, Hey, Doc. Girl's twisted her ankle, can you give me the basics?

The reply was almost immediate, showing three shiatsu points along with quick instructions. This will let her walk, but don't put more weight than necessary for at least 24 hours - Tofu,

Ranma quickly performed the described treatment, the whole process taking less than a minute.
"Looks like we lucked out. Doc was between patients," he explained.

Honoka's eyes widened in amazement as the pain in her ankle suddenly receded completely. "How did you do that? It's like magic! Are you a wizard? Is that how you change genders? Could I learn to change my shape?! Oooh, what else can you do?"

Kotori and Umi just sighed while Ranma looked decidedly nonplussed. "It's just some pressure points," Ranma explained carefully. "Along with a bit of ki to stimulate them under the skin. I guess you could learn it, don't take much to get that to work, but you'd probably need ten years o' regular meditation if ya don't have the knack."

The disappointment was palpable coming from Honoka, as was the relief from her friends. But it didn't take long for Honoka to bounce back. "Oh, well, thanks. One more time for good luck?"

Ranma's jaw dropped. "Hey, wait, ya can't do that!"

"Why not?" Honoka asked. "I feel great!"

Ranma's head smacked into her hand. "Yer still injured, ya dummy! I just numbed the pain. But if ya try ta dance again you'll be off your feet for weeks tomorrow."

"It's getting late, Honoka," Kotori decided to play peacemaker. "Maybe we should stop for the day,"

"Yeah," Ranma agreed. "Why don't ya do your cooldown stretches?" Everybody stared at her.

"What?"

"Usually we just. . . finish up." Umi explained.

Ranma rolled her eyes. "Ya mean ya don't do any flexibility trainin'? That's gonna be just as important for dancin' as the Art, ya know. Here, let me show ya. . . ."

About an hour later, Honoka found herself leaning on Ranma for support. Not because her ankle hurt, but because it was proving pretty much impossible to disengage from the shorter red-head without tripping again. It would probably have been more annoying if that wasn't all she was doing, letting her chat with Umi and Kotori without any comment of her own, just a sheepish grin every now and again. But, they finally reached her home, a sweets shop named 'Homura,'

"Okay. This is my stop," she chirped, trying for the fourth time to get Ranma out from under her arm. Somehow, this ended up the same way as all the other times, a gentle stumble and then once again she was being supported. "Uh...did you hear me, Ranma? This is my home."

Ranma grinned up at her. "Yeah, I heard. And you live on the second floor, yeah? C'mon."

Honoka looked helplessly at her two other friends. "Uhm, little help here?"

"Hey, you invited her," Umi seemed caught between amusement and annoyance. "Besides, she still owes you a bottle of water."

Kotori just shook her head. "It's a bit late. We should probably head home and study,"

"...okay, bye," Honoka was left nervous with the prospect of. . . "Hey, Ranma, could you do me a favor and not mention you're really a boy? At least for today. I think it'd make too much noise with my parents to have you in my room."

Ranma looked decidedly nonplussed by that, but sighed. "Okay, yeah, I've put ya out enough I
the same ginger hair as Honoka loomed over the pair. "And what's this about inviting a boy up to your room, daughter?"

"Aheheheheh…." two voices said in complete unison. Both distinctly feminine.

Mrs. Kousaka blinked, then leaned in and squinted really closely at the other redhead. "Honoka, do we need to get your eyes checked?"

"Aheh….no mom," Honoka found herself sweating bullets. "Uh, this is Ranma, kinda met her at school, and she is in no way, shape, or form a boy," at the moment she mentally completed, not saying it out loud.

"...and just why are you leaning on her like that?"

Ranma spoke up. "Just a twisted ankle. Doc I know says it'll be fine tomorrow if she stays offa it. So I offered to carry her home, but she didn't want that much help…"

"I see," Mrs. Kousaka just sighed. "Very well dear, why don't you go up to your room with your new friend and I'll bring up some sweet buns,"

Ranma's eyes brightened at that prospect. "Oh, thanks Ma'am! I am feeling hungry!"

Honoka was completely dumbfounded. On a plate in front of her sat her share of the sweets on offer, which had gone untouched. However, the shares that had originally been meant for Umi and Kotori before their late practice had both been placed in front of Ranma. They had lasted precisely as long as it took her mother to close the door. "Wow, these are really good! You make good stuff!

"...ah, yeah. If you promise to taste them you can have mine too…" Honoka said slowly. Ranma picked up the first one and began to chew. "Ah, anyway, Ranma. You seem to know a lot about dancing,"

Ranma swallowed, nearly choking on the treat. "Nah," she said after a quick cough to clear her throat. "But I do know martial arts, and I can kinda see what you're doin' and how it relates."

"Oh." Honoka blinked. "What school do you study?"

"'s a family style. Saotome School of 'Anything Goes.'"

"Umi's gonna kill him, Honoka thought to herself. Well, no, I don't think that's possible. But she'll try. Out loud, she said "That's really interesting. So, who managed to punch you that hard?"

"Eh, it was just my fiance. One of 'em. Got two that really count, I think the last count on total was up to twelve but got most of those settled."

...okay, that's terrifying. Honoka decided to drop that topic for the moment, or at least just accept it. "Sounds like you need some time away from her now and again. Maybe you'd like to come help us out after school some more? If you're not too busy anyway."

Ranma looked a bit startled at the question. "Just what is it you think I can do?"

"Well, you can't join up since you don't go to our school, but Umi's kind of overwhelmed actually running the practices. And your school's named 'Anything Goes' and you said you can see the similarities. Maybe you can learn something from watching us?"
Ranma was about to dismiss the idea, but then the memories of Martial Arts Rhythmic Gymnastics and Martial Arts Figure Skating poked up into the front of her awareness. With just how stupid some of the challengers had gotten, with this new School Idol thing... if she didn't take Honoka up on the offer she could end up completely blindsided later and begging for help. On the other hand, if she did take the offer it was practically a guarantee that there wouldn't be some kind of pop idol challenging her because that would actually be in her favor for once.

For once, that didn't seem like a downside.

"Hey, what's the worst that can go wrong, huh?"

With Ranma back late from his latest trip, Akane had finally gotten worried and went looking for him. More so than the rest of Tokyo, the streets of Nerima were safe to walk at night as long as you weren't somehow involved with a certain pig-tailed martial artist.

A pair of red eyes watched Akane from the shadows, attached to a figure with curves that would make a model jealous. Hard muscle underneath a chonogasm that didn't leave any of it to the imagination, with her long purple hair done up in side buns. She discreetly pulled out a pair of bonbori from... somewhere, sneaking up on the Tendo girl.

This was Xian-pu. Or 'Shampoo' to most of her current acquaintances in Japan.

One of many girls seeking Ranma's affections, it only seemed natural that she eliminate the things holding him back from leaping into her arms. Unfortunately, Ranma had a soft spot for the so-called 'warrior' in front of her, so it had to be done discreetly.

A plan foiled when she saw someone else in the alleyway.

She was taller than Akane, but only by a small amount. Her long brown hair was swept back with a white ribbon, and she was wearing, oddly enough, only an extremely short yukata in a navy blue color, trimmed in pale pink. Her modesty was preserved by a pair of black leggings. Her most unusual accessory, though, was a long bandoleer, currently empty, but holding a halberd shaped like a giant spatula across her back. "Hey sugar!" she said to Akane while, visible to Shampoo but not to the girl being addressed, she hid several small spatula that served her as throwing daggers. "Out late, aren't you?"

This was Kuonji Ukyo.

Akane glared at her by way of reply. "Don't think I don't remember what you did at the wedding, Kuonji," she snapped. "As far as I'm concerned, we're not friends anymore."

"Hey, now!" Ukyo ground out. "I thought I was doing you a favor!" She glanced at Shampoo, giving a subtle nod. "We thought we were doing you a favor,"

Having been made, there was no point in hiding. Shampoo stepped out of the shadows. "Is too true. Violent girl say no want husband."

Akane blushed. "And what if I've changed my mind. I didn't say 'no' did I?"

Both of her rivals paled. Very quickly, they evaluated the options. As one, they came to the same conclusion – if they took out Akane now, the other could win the race by blaming her. Now was not the time. Shampoo sniffed first. "Not change anything. Ranma Shampoo husband."

"And he's my fiance," Ukyo confirmed.
Akane gulped. “Well, he's also missing. Either of you seen the jerk?”

“No.” Both smiled at that. The patterns were coming back after all. There was nothing to worry about. Ranma would be back, and sooner or later he and Akane would be fighting again. Just like always.
Ranma decided, for once, to board the train back towards Nerima. The sun had long since gone down, and while she could negotiate the roofs most of the way, the most direct paths back all went through really built-up areas where a mistake would be a problem, and this time she wanted to think about what had just happened.

Her family and the Tendos would have to be kept out of the loop on this one. There was just no way to explain that she was getting back into the idol game without setting off yet another disaster her life did not need.

She swiped her rarely-used train card across the contact sensor as she started to think back to the scene, soon after her return to Japan from the China training trip where she had gotten the curse, moved into the Tendo home, and found out about the first (or possibly second (or maybe not, it was hard to recall them all)) engagement...

A tall young woman, with straight brown hair halfway down her back. She seemed like she was never without her apron, or a sewing needle, or other accoutrements of her position in the Tendo household. With a face that usually radiated serenity, she was always smiling, even when suggesting the most ludicrous things. Like right now.

This was Kasumi Tendo.

"Now, Ranma," Kasumi had said, as she always did in that kind voice of hers "I know you don't think you'll enjoy it, but everyone loves to sing at some point. I've heard your voice, and it's very lovely,"

"Don't want a 'lovely' voice," Ranma had groused in return. "Besides, why you gotta have me do it?"

"Well, two reasons," Kasumi explained. "One, I think it might be best for you to spend some time with Akane doing something that isn't the Art."

"Don't wanna spend time with 'kane."

"..and the other is that I originally wrote these songs for five parts. Akane and Nabiki have agreed to do it already, but we'd still be short. I could re-write for four, but three would be tricky," Kasumi explained.

Ranma grumbled, but really, Kasumi's cooking alone meant doing her a favor was the least he could do. "Yeah, all right. Just 'till ya find a replacement."

Ranma and Akane opened the door to the unused classroom at Furinkan, then froze next to each other on seeing the 'fifth' member, who Kasumi had somehow failed to mention.

A figure with curves that would make a model jealous. Hard muscle underneath a chenogasm that didn't leave any of it to the imagination, with her long purple hair done up in side buns. Blue eyes
that could go from emotion to emotion at the blink of an eye, and often did. Too often to 'murderous intent' in Ranma's opinion.

This was Xian-pu. Or 'Shampoo' to most of her current acquaintances in Japan.

"What's she doin' here?" Ranma asked. "Ya do know she tried ta help keep me locked less than a month ago!"

"I didn't agree to let this bimbo in either!" Akane shouted, equally incensed.

Kasumi sighed. "I thought she could stand some time away from her shop. She really needs to learn more Japanese before she's ready to start school here, and this might be a way for her to learn." The young woman, normally soft-spoken, briefly went hard. "Now, the one rule for our sessions is this – when we're practicing, everything else is left at the door. If you can't hold to this, we'll cut the practices off."

Ranma shrugged. It usually wasn't her fault when the violence started anyway. Well, usually. "I can manage that,"

Akane grumbled "I can be civil if she can,"

"Shampoo agree. No try get Husband to come home until get back to Nekohanten. That rule, yes?" Akane and Ranma both boggled at this uncharacteristic declaration.

Kasumi beamed at them. "It's settled, then. When Nabiki gets here, we'll get started."

Akane sat down in a fold-out chair roughly. "Well, we're gonna need a name for this little band of yours, Kasumi."

Kasumi just gave her a smile. "I was thinking 'DoCo'..."

The voice announcing the train's arrival at the Nerima station broke her out of her reverie. With a sigh, she hopped over the tracks and down from the elevated platform onto the nearest rooftop. From there, it was only a brisk run to the Tendo dojo, and thus home.

"I'm home," she announced, landing in the courtyard. Kasumi was waiting with a hot kettle, which she poured over her own head. "Thanks,"

"I'm sorry about dinner, Ranma. I had to put the leftovers in the fridge for you,"

Ranma just grinned in response, giving her a grateful little bow before heading towards the kitchen. After that, she seemed to remember something and turned back. "Hey, Kasumi. Someone heard me singin' one of our old songs on my way back home. Promised I'd bring her the sheet music tomorrow. Ya have a copy you can spare?"

Kasumi stopped, surprised. "I suppose it's all right. Just make her promise not to perform it without talking to me first. It's okay to call at home for that."

"Thanks, Kasumi!"

Meanwhile, Honoka had finished all of her 'easy' homework and turned to the math. At the same time, since her laptop wasn't needed for the homework anymore, she decided to start a quick video chat with Umi and Kotori. Of course, the topic quickly turned to Ranma.
"Honestly, Honoka..." Umi said, exasperated. "I never wanted to say anything, but Nerima's supposed to be weird. I don't think getting mixed up with this guy is a good idea. We have enough to worry about."

Kotori sensed an argument brewing, and decided to cut it off. " Weird how?"

The dark-haired girl leaned back from her camera to try to think of an answer that wouldn't have Honoka running off to see for herself. "There's a lot of martial artists in the district. Not like my family, if even half the rumors are true it's like some kind of collection of throwbacks to Tokugawa or something. Jumping onto buildings, freak weather accidents, and that's the normal people. It may just be an exaggeration, but with what we saw this afternoon I don't think so anymore."

Honoka thought about it for a moment. "Okay, Umi, I see this is important to you. How about this? I won't set foot off the train without Ranma right there. She's my friend, so I'm sure he wouldn't let me get near anything like that. Okay?"

Two girls blinked. "Honoka, did you just mix your pronouns?"

The ginger seemed to think about it for a moment. "Uhm, yeah, why?"

Kotori's response came faster. "I don't think he'd like you thinking of him as a girl."

"Well, he is a girl. Unless she's a boy."

Umi found herself just chuckling helplessly. "Right, so, you invited her in. What happened after that?"

"Well, we talked for a bit..." Honoka gulped. "Most of it was pretty normal but Ranma's life is a pretty weird thing."

Umi momentarily felt her blood run cold. "How so?"

"She's like something out of a storybook," Honoka failed to notice Umi getting paler. "He spent about nine years wandering Japan looking for the best martial artists in Japan to train against, along with all this living in the wilderness, never staying in one place long. Then, when they ran out of places in Japan, they went to China and started their way across the wilderness there for a year."

"That was where she picked up the curse. There's this place called, " Honoka paused for a moment, to make sure she got the pronunciation right. "Jusenkyo. Apparently there's a hundred springs, and every one of them curses you to turn into something different if you fall in."

Umi started to furiously type on her own laptop while Honoka continued. "Plus I guess his father's really absentminded or something. Apparently he engaged him to a whole bunch of girls on the road or something. Still took the dowries, which isn't right but I guess most of the claims are settled."

Kotori blinked at this rapid-fire inundation of information. "What was the point of all that?"

Honoka shrugged. "Well, I guess to be the best martial artist she could be. I'd say it worked, if she can get punted across the city like that and not be seriously hurt."

Umi sighed. "Well, I can't find anything on this Jusenkyo place, but I guess with Ranma that probably doesn't mean anything. Still, it's not like he's going to come back out. People in Nerima are really secretive about this stuff, and I guess the signal out there isn't good so there's not much credible stuff online, just rumors and faked vids. I'm just going to forget about seeing him again, and I suggest you two do the same."
Honoka chuckled nervously.

"What's he doing back here?" was the first question, from black-haired Umi.

Ranma was really beginning to regret his decision to help. Sure, Honoka was probably the nicest girl he'd met in over a year, and the fact that she'd never try to kill him was definitely a plus. But Umi was acting incredibly hostile, and even had a faintest tinge of battle aura. "Look, Honoka asked me, all right?" Best to just be honest, he thought.

"And just why did you ask?" Umi's ire was turned next on the ginger next to Ranma, currently in girl-form, on the rooftop. "We don't need help!"

"Actually," Ranma felt the need to cut in. "That's exactly what Honoka thinks ya do need. You're all in decent shape for how long you've been at it, but ya need some more. So, we're gonna try some workout sessions from the old Saotome training handbook," Ranma thought about that for a second. "Well, the basic version. I don't think ya need half the crazy stuff my old man tried."

Umi snorted. "We're doing fine without you."

"Well, the other reason was ta get you some more practice time," Ranma pointed out. "Got somethin' worked out. Need ya ta let me know when it's too much."

Umi's lip curled up, but she couldn't argue the logic of that. "Honoka, okay, fine, we need someone to help, but why... why him?"

Blue eyes met amber. "Because,"

Umi took a moment to consider the idea. "This is another one of your 'climbing tree' moments, isn't it?" she carefully hid her further exasperation, knowing it wouldn't do any good. "Fine. But remember, we need to practice too. How's the ankle?"

"It's great!" Honoka did a few jumping jacks to demonstrate the fact. "So, what's first?"

Kotori was dying. She was sure of it. This boy-girl from the sky was Death come to claim the three of them early for daring to challenge fate.

Without room to run, Ranma had instead started them on calisthenics. That wasn't anything they hadn't been doing. The problem was Ranma seemed to have an... unrealistic standard of "normal."

"You're only on fifty! Come on, we need to hit a hundred before you're finished!"

Kotori tried to keep pushing her arms into the ground, she really did. But it was just impossible. At fifty three they simply wouldn't give another push. She risked a glance over at the other two. Umi was still managing to keep pace, but she had long since lost her smile and was looking completely exhausted. And Honoka...

Still had a strained, painful smile plastered on her face, moving at about half the rate the pig-tailed martial artist was marking out, but kept on going, even still only at forty-five repetitions.

Finally, the boy seemed to notice his charges were having trouble. "Okay, time,"

Kotori collapsed to the ground with a whine of agony, while Umi let out a huff of effort. "He's going to kill us," Umi said to her friend.
Ranma blinked. "Honoka, time!" Kotori managed to roll over until she could see Honoka again, who was still trying to do the exercise. "TIME! Honoka, that's enough!"

"Y..you said 100." Honoka groaned. "F-forty eight."

Ranma rolled his eyes. "Look, that's your goal. We'll get you there, but you're still starting out right. I'll take what you can give." Although the boy couldn't keep just a bit of disappointment out of his voice.

"Forty-n-n-niiiine!" Honoka managed to growl out around her smile. "I...I can't give up now! We have ta.. to be ready... "

Umi and Ranma put hands on her shoulders at the same time, then looked up at each other in surprise. Umi spoke next, gently. "Honoka, you shouldn't expect to be that good right away. Ranma... " She sighed, not wanting to concede this. "I think Ranma's on a whole other level from us,"

"Yeah. What's worth this?" Ranma asked.

Honoka finally took the hint and sat up. "We're trying to save the school from closing down!"

Ranma tilted his head. "Okay. How's the school idol gig supposed to help that?"

Kotori managed to catch her breath. "School idols are really popular right now. If we can attract enough attention to Otonokizaka with our songs, we might get the closure delayed or even canceled."

"That's about the size of it," Umi shook her head. "So this really doesn't concern you."

Ranma winced at that. It really didn't, but... "Yeah, but I don't wanna leave a friend hangin'. I don't really got enough of 'em." Umi tried hard not to look impressed by that declaration, and only partially succeeded. Ranma offered a hand to Honoka to help her up. "Look, I got where you three are at now. I know a guy, maybe he can give me some advice on how not to kill ya when we do this tomorrow. For now, let's run through your routine. Honoka gave me the basics on how to call out the time... "

Ranma's jaw dropped as all three girls groaned in pain one last time, flopping bonelessly to the ground. "I think you meant that as encouragement," Umi managed to get out with her face planted firmly against the roof.

With about half an hour left to go in the session, Ranma's eyes widened. "Oh, yeah, forgot something. Umi, can you take over here? Thanks." Without waiting for a response, Ranma was gone down the stairwell. Umi rolled her eyes. "Right. Take it from the top – One, Two, Three, Four." With Umi clapping out and calling the time, the girls performed each step of the dance, until finally the dark-haired girl spotted something.

"Honoka, have you been doing that all day? You've gotten those gestures backwards. Again!"

Honoka winced and went defensive. "Well, Ranma didn't spot it."

"This is why I didn't want to invite him back!" Umi shouted.

Kotori put a hand on Umi's shoulder, then pushed a step chart into her hands. "...Umi, this is the one you gave me and Honoka. See, hers is backwards."
Umi blinked. She looked up. "Honoka, go through it again?" Honoka quickly made the three pointing gestures of that line in the song. "...dammit. Sorry, that was my fault. How did I not notice 'till now?"

Umi grumbled at Honoka's satisfied little grin.

Ranma slid open the door to the music room. "Oh, hey," That was about all he managed to get out before Maki slammed her hands on the keys, jumping back from the piano in shock.

"Wh-wh-wha?" The redhead stared at him. "This is a girl's school, you can't be around here!"

Ranma blinked, completely puzzled. "Oh, right, I completely forgot about the curse." He walked up to her as he spoke, ignoring the signs of fright radiating from the first-year girl.

This proved to be the wrong thing to say. "Cu-cu-cu-cu-curse!?" Maki stammered, edging towards the corner.

"Ah, geez, it ain't catching or anything," Ranma rolled his eyes. "Look, sorry I scared ya, but I wanted to bring down the sheet music ya asked for."

Maki completely ignored him. "Ge-get out of this school! You're not supposed to be here!" she repeated, starting to get a little of her courage.

Ranma rolled his eyes even further, walking up to her with the folder in hand. "Ah, last time I do you a favor, huh? Listen, I was invited back, you got a problem ya take it up with Honoka, O'course, it'll have ta wait 'till I'm done with her."

If Maki weren't so panicky about the sudden appearance of someone who wasn't supposed to be present, who bore an uncanny resemblance to the girl from yesterday and, no doubt, was much stronger than even that, advancing on her position, she would probably have calmed down enough to consider the situation rationally.

Pity for Ranma that gender-changing wasn't his only curse.

Eri was in a state, to say the least. The news of the school's imminent shutdown had hit everybody pretty hard. It was a particular surprise to her, although in hindsight it shouldn't have been. The school was built to manage over a thousand students, but less than two hundred remained.

Oh, she understood the problems. In this new century, while the private school remained the dominant form of education, some things had changed. Many schools were now mixed-gendered where back when the charter for Otonokizaka had been established segregation of the sexes was the norm. Traditionally-built facilities were an extravagant luxury when competitions could easily be held in public spaces dedicated to the old art forms. She knew about the alpacas, and that seemed to help somewhat, but it wasn't a specialty school with a dedicated animal husbandry program.

It was a simple problem. Japan's population decline was finally hitting home with her generation. Schools were closing everywhere, not just hers, and the field was becoming ever-more competitive. It seemed every school had an edge, something no one in the area could offer. The board of directors at Otonokizaka had bet on students being interested in a long history of tradition and a classical educational program.

And when she looked at the pamphlets for the competing schools, she could understand why that had been a losing wager. But her family had a long tradition too, of going to Otonokizaka Academy.
A significant portion of her family's wealth had been donated to the trust fund keeping the school in operation now – a lucky thing for the current attendees, since without that the school would have had to close without allowing current students to graduate. But she wanted her daughters to go here some day.

She needed to do something to drum up publicity.

But more than that, it needed to be the *right* publicity. Any increase in the school's visibility would help, but not if it violated their long-standing traditions or had the side-effect of making them seem anything less than perfectly dignified. The end result of that might be that the school managed to stay open another year or two, but would then gain a reputation as a place no one wanted to attend, ultimately dooming them.

As far as Ayase Eri was concerned, the sudden appearance of Chinese girls with pig-tails and unnatural strength could only lead to the wrong sort of publicity.

The only thing that could make it worse would be the weird girl's big brother deciding to hang out at the school. The loss of face from something like that would be too much to overcome.

So when she saw a boy in an outfit similar to the girl from yesterday head into the music room, she sprinted down the long hallway to try to tell the intruder off.

Then she heard a shriek. *What was that girl's name? Nishikino!?*

She slammed the door open. "Hold it right there!"

Now, to be fair to Eri, what she saw looked bad. Maki was backed into a corner, with a strange boy very close to her. And given the scream she had just heard, it didn't exactly seem consensual. "I don't know who you think you are, mister, but get out of this school before I call the police!" Her hand was already going to her cell phone to do just that.

Ranma had come to Nerima all but ignorant of modern technology, but a year of living in Nerima had introduced him to the basics. He wasn't *doing* anything, but in this situation he could get in serious trouble if the blonde called the police or, worse, took a picture of the situation. Eri was across the room, though, and an ordinary martial artist would not be able to intercept the phone before she could wield its' terrifying power against him.

Ranma was no ordinary martial artist.

From Eri's perspective, in the blink of an eye a pen had knocked the phone from her hand. The boy shot towards it as it flew through the air, intercepting it before it landed on the ground. With a smirk, he gestured towards the open window with it as if to toss it. "Y..you wouldn't dare! This is the third floor!"

Ranma grinned like a devil, idly fingering the touch-screen on the phone before flicking his arm in a tossing motion. Eri and Maki both instinctively turned to look only to realize the phone hadn't been thrown at all, and Ranma was making his way towards the door at the back of the classroom. "STOP! THIEF!"

The martial artist winced at that, although he didn't stop keying into the phone. He didn't like being compared to his father, and *that* was as close a comparison as one could get. He looked over his shoulder, seeing the pair chasing after him. If he went all out he could get away, but that would mean taking the corners completely blind and, with his luck, he'd run into someone else.

Like that green-eyed girl with the twin ponytails. "Here, take this!" he shoved the blonde's phone
into Nozomi's hands as he managed – barely – to slide around her.

Nozomi could only stare in utter bewilderment as Maki and Eri caught up. "Uh...Erichi," she said to her friend. "I think this is you..." she trailed off, looking down at the screen. Suddenly, she swallowed a loud laugh with a choking sound.

"Wha..." Eri snatched the phone and looked at the screen. The wallpaper on the phone had been changed to a background with the symbol for 'bossy.' "Oooh! I'll get him next time!"

Nozomi didn't bother to restrain her laughter after that.

"Mata hitotsu..." Honoka put as much feeling as she could manage into her solo part, feeling (for the first time) that they really had the whole routine down now.

She then nearly took another tumble as Ranma landed lightly in front of her. "Geez! Don't scare me like that!"

Ranma glanced at the trio. "Uh, look, sorry about this but I gotta run for today. Maybe ya heard the scream?"

Umi held onto her forehead. "That was you?"

"Uh, well, no, it was this cute redhead," Ranma said sheepishly. "But I kinda spooked her, I guess she wasn't expecting a boy or somethin'."

"Well, this is an all-girls school." Kotori pointed out reasonably.

Honoka sighed. "Knew I should have done this as soon as you got here," With that, a water bottle was grabbed from the shade and tossed in Ranma's general direction. "Change back, quick."

Ranma gave her a dirty look, but shouts coming from the stairway convinced him and he upended the bottle over his head. She had barely changed when the door slammed open and Eri came storming through. "You!" She shouted at the new redhead – because Maki was coming up behind her, looking distinctly shell-shocked. "I thought I told you to get out of here!"

"I invited her!" Honoka countered.

Eri's head snapped towards the ginger-haired girl. "You can't invite peo-" Nozomi's hand landed on her shoulder, interrupting her and causing her to turn around. "Nozomi!"

"Students can invite guests as long as they don't cause a disturbance." Nozomi's smile was pretty unnerving. Eri actually went pale at the anger radiating off the normally sanguine girl. "And I'm sure Miss Saotome there didn't cause any problems, am I right?"

Ranma gulped. It reminded him very much of the (very) few times Kasumi had gotten angry, only somehow she knew that this girl in front of her would not be nearly as forgiving. "Ah, right, not meanin' to cause a disturbance here!"

Eri shook her head. "I'll accept that you and whoever that was don't mean to, so I won't call the police if you just go home and don't come back again."

"Wait," Maki said quietly. "I still need my sheet music;"

Ranma gulped. "Uhh...er..."
"She forgot it, but her brother called to drop it by," Honoka declared. "Right, Ranma?"

"Y-yeah, that's it." A grateful look was shot at Honoka.

"...oh." Maki twirled her hair. "Sorry, you should have said something. I guess I panicked."

"It's cool, we're cool," Ranma was really sweating now.

Eri sniffed. "Well, now that that's settled you'll be leaving, yes?"

"Eh, I still promised to help them out. It's a matter of honor," Ranma said firmly.

Umi frowned. She knew these martial artists better than any of the others - she was heir to the Sonoda schools after all. Ranma invoking that was a line in the sand.

On the other hand, the Student Council President looked about ready to flip her lid. Well, this could be a chance to get rid of the stranger before she did any more damage, and maybe earn some points on top. "Very well then, Saotome Ranma. I challenge you to a match. If I win, you agree to depart Otonokizaka High School immediately. Since you got here the first time against your choice and it may happen again I won't make your *never* returning a condition," Eri glared at her, and she hastened to add "But if you should find yourself on school property at any point in the future you must leave by the most expedient route that doesn't involve harming anyone else."

Ranma turned and gave Umi a quick evaluation. The girl's stance, musculature, awareness, even her *ki*. 

"... no," She shook her head. "As a member of the Saotome school I'm not allowed to decline a challenge normally, but I can't take you seriously in a no-holds-barred match."

"WHAT?!" Umi screeched.

Ranma stood firm. "Umi, you'd *die*. No, really, if I went all out on you you'd be a splat on the floor. You haven't done any toughness training at all as near as I can tell."

Eri smiled like the cat who got the canary. Honoka gave Umi a betrayed look, but then realized how she could still save this. She stepped up right behind Ranma and whispered into his ear "You can set your terms for the match, right? Just pick something that's fair and safe for Umi."

Ranma blinked in surprise, as if the thought had never crossed his mind. In all truth, it hadn't – one of the guiding principles of Anything Goes was to win at any cost, after all. To deliberately hand your opponent an advantage was anathema – but if he didn't, he'd lose for forfeiting the match entirely. "Fine, I'll accept your challenge, on two conditions. One, if I win that's the end of this. No more pulling out that rulebook to try to get me kicked outta here when I've still got something to do."

Eri looked about ready to protest, but Umi spoke over any objection. "Fine, and what's the other."

"Terms of the match," Ranma said, glancing to Honoka. "Uh."

Honoka groaned, realizing she'd need to step in again. "Look, there used to be a kempo club, and I know other schools have them and kids don't get sent to the hospital all the time. How?"

Umi rolled her eyes. "Usually formal competition is to a hit, but I *guess* we can do it as a touch."

Ranma blinked. "I ain't done a match like that since I was five, but sure. Four out of five touches, and you can smack me as hard as you want and it still counts. Three touch handicap."

Umi was about to make a snide remark... until she realized that the offer was for her. "No way.
Come on, you're not *that* good."

Ranma just smirked.

Otonokizaka had a dojo, next to the gym. Only the tatami floors made it ill-suited to the dance practice, since they needed to wear hard shoes that would damage them. Normally, the kendo team avoided practicing in here for much the same reason, reserving it for competition days.

Thus the girls were undisturbed as they entered the place. Umi had apparently run ahead and borrowed a gi from somewhere, or possibly even gone home for one. She sat in the middle of the hall, waiting, hair tied back in a tight ponytail, only to stand up when Ranma entered. "I almost thought you decided not to do it after all."

"Nah, we just took the wrong way. Why's the school got a couple of sheep, anyway?" Ranma retained the confident smirk, stepping up to the line marking her starting point.

"I don't know, but they're pretty cute," Umi gave the tiny redhead a bow. "Not too late to back out and just go back to Nerima,"

Ranma flicked her pigtail back. "Something you should know. Saotome Ranma don't lose."

Umi charged at the girl, determined to wipe the smirk off her face. At the last second, she feinted from a straight punch right to the jaw into an attempt to shove her knee past the pig-tailed girl's guard.

It would have worked better if Ranma hadn't seemed to vanish at the last possible second. "Not bad," a voice came from about two feet behind her. She spun around, getting her guard up. "Akane wasn't half as smart the first time she fought me. I might have to take you seriously in a couple of years instead of a decade."

"How...how are you so fast?" Umi felt the blood draining from her face. "Is this magic?"

Ranma shook her head. "Nope, no magic here. You could do it, if you wanted. Now, c'mon."

Umi filed that tidbit away for later and closed the gap between them, lifting her leg up for a series of three vicious kicks to the knee, solar plexus, and head, only for Ranma to casually weave around the first two, then *catch* the last and push, nearly sending her toppling to the ground.

In fact, she *would* have toppled to the ground, but she found herself with an unlikely last-minute savior – specifically, Ranma. "Careful who you're gettin' fancy with, Sonoda, or you could get very hurt." Then she tapped her stomach. "Oh, and point."

"Are you *trying* to humiliate me!?"

Ranma blinked in confusion. "Uh, yeah, actually. Is it working?"

Umi screamed and launched into another assault, punching faster and more furiously than before. Ranma genuinely smiled. "Now this is a little more like it." A punch forced him to move his head aside, and a kick to lean back, sacrificing flashier moves for economy of motion. "See, you're pretty good when you're taking it seriously."

"Die!"

Ranma was forced to the ground by a sudden roundhouse, and then to roll out of the way of a
follow-up axial-kick. She rolled easily to her feet. "You sure you're not related to anyone in Nerima?" The answer came in the form of a measured punch to her mid-section that left just enough of an opening for Ranma to counter by lightly tapping Umi's ribs with her foot.

Eri growled. "...point to Miss Saotome."

Ranma stepped back, regarding Umi with a bit more wariness now. *Gets mad all right, but doesn't lose her cool or make any more mistakes. That's always dangerous. And she's only gotta tap me once. Pops would kill me for agreeing to these kinds of terms.*

Meanwhile, Umi felt an undercurrent of serious fear in her anger. *This girl could easily kill me any time she wants! Why is she drawing this out?* She took a moment to evaluate. *It doesn't matter, I'll beat her. I just have to get lucky once, right?*

"AHHHHH!" Umi shouted at the top of her lungs, keeping her feet on the ground and snapping her arms around in alternating windmills.

"Whoa!" Ranma actually jumped back after blocking several of the swings. "Got some Kung Fu in your style, or you improvising?" he asked, genuinely impressed. "Improvisation, thinking, keeping your head. Well, mostly. Damn, take that back, I'd better start taking you seriously now." Suddenly Umi found herself being tripped by a sweeping kick, landing on her back and gasping as the air left her lungs.

She slowly, very slowly, managed to get back to her feet. "Th..that's three-three, right?"

Ranma gave her a nod. "Do you wanna give up?"

"N..no way." Umi set herself down. "Come on."

For the first time, Ranma launched the first attack. It was still measured, careful, but each blow was coming at her at a speed she could only barely follow with her eyes. And that was the only concession she was getting, having to make sure to think a step ahead to not take the last touch. *I can't let this go on, she thought to herself. If I do, he'll get me sooner or later. But there isn't a single hole in his defense.*

Umi took a gamble.

The next time Ranma went for a kick, she raised her arm to block it from hitting her face. She wasn't strong enough for that, and she knew it, but then she relaxed and ducked under the blow, leading in with her elbow, only to freeze. There was a knife-hand at her throat, not quite touching...

"...I yield." Umi admitted.

Ranma grinned and lowered her leg. "You're better than I thought." She stepped back and offered a bow. "Talk to your sensei about *ki* sometime soon and we can talk about a real match."

Honoka grinned broadly and turned to Eri. "Well?"

The blonde sniffed. "I never agreed to this."

Nozomi gave her best friend a rather shocked stare. "Erichi!"

Ranma sighed. "Well, it was fun, I guess. Sorry, Honoka."

Eri blinked as Nozomi stood up. "Stop. Miss Saotome, I apologize for my friend. You may come to
the school as often as you like, as long as you understand your future behavior will reflect on Miss Kousaka. If there is another incident, as her guest she is the one we will take to the headmistress for punishment."

Ranma gulped. "Okay, I got it."

And in the dojo's storage room, two eyes normally filled with malevolence looked on in speculation.

As soon as the president and vice president were out of earshot, Umi turned and grabbed Ranma by the shirt. The action was so unexpected he allowed her to slam him into the wall. "All right, mister!" Ranma gulped. "We've already lost about a day to your shenanigans. I get that you're trying and this whole mess wasn't your fault, but too much more 'help' like this and you're gonna have to leave!"

"UMI!" Honoka grabbed her best friend and pulled the pair apart. "It's not his fault, so leave her alone about it! And you yourself admitted she did help out!"

Umi blushed. "Th...that's different. We could have gotten a metronome and I'd have spotted the same thing."

Ranma sighed. "Honoka, you're the one who wants me here. Your call, d'you want my help or no?"

Honoka bit her lip. "Well, it's not just my call... Kotori, what do you think?"

Kotori actually squeaked. "Me!? I mean, I... well, Ranma did help with your ankle, and he did make a good point with the flexibility exercises. So I think we should give him another chance."

Umi sighed. "Fine. At least for now. We've still got about half an hour, so let's do those new exercises and get going home."

And as the three idols walked away, Maki, who had been forgotten in the whole conversation, turned to Ranma, with a vaguely dazed look to her from everything that had happened. "Okay. So, why do they keep calling you a guy?"

"Nehemiah...I go to an all-boys school?" Ranma tried.

"Uh huh."

Ranma felt herself sweating, and decided to try to change the subject. "So, if you're writing the music, why do you spend after school by yourself?"

"I...I don't see where that's any of your business!" It worked, instantly putting Maki on the defensive.

Ranma gave her a bright smile. "Well, it seems a waste. Cute girl like you could probably dance with them if you wanted, but even if you don't they're gonna need more than one song. Maybe try to work with us at least? I mean, I'm not in the group but it looks like I'm gonna be hangin' out with them."

Maki blushed at the compliment, and turned away to try to hide it. "I... I don't really like music like that."

"Then why'd you ask for Kasumi's sheets?" Ranma leaned with her back against the window. "At least think about it."

Maki smirked at her. "Only if you join up too."
"I can't," Ranma shot back. "I don't go to this school, remember. Just helpin' out."

Maki swallowed. "Ah...right...but you will be there?"

"At least as long as Umi don't try to kill me."

Maki chuckled at that. "Well, okay. I'll try to show up now and again."

Ranma walked through the front door of the Tendo home, slipping off her shoes. "Hey guys, sorry I'm home late again."

Instead of Kasumi's voice, she was answered by another girl. With her hair styled into a bob cut around brown eyes that gave her a certain sensuality, her almost-eternal smirk was one of the few things that could drive Ranma to distraction. Even worse, from Ranma's perspective, she was physically on the same level as the Otonokizaka girls. Worse, because she had her own ways of getting to him and he had precious few defenses.

This was Nabiki Tendo.

"It isn't me who you need to apologize to, Saotome," she said in a dry tone. "You missed the takeout."

Ranma paled. "Takeout?" Now, if one was not familiar with the Tendo home, one might think the human vacuum that is Ranma Saotome would be disappointed at missing a meal. But this was not the case, because there could only be one reason for the Tendos to spontaneously order takeout.

"Akane saved you some of her dinner."

Ranma gulped. "Yeah, uh, Honoka fed me," he said haltingly, although tonight she hadn't.

"Honoka?" Nabiki blinked, rapidly. "Another fiance? Seriously? And you took food from her?"

Ranma laughed. "Trust me, Nabs, Honoka's no fiance. Well, probably. She'd probably laugh if ya said it though. Maybe I'll tell her tomorrow."

"And just who is Honoka then?" another voice asked, coming around the corner. It was, of course, Akane. She was wearing one of Kasumi's frilliest aprons, and her cell phone was in her hand, the plastic cat case visibly deforming in her hand.

Ranma groaned. "Ah, look, just someone I met when ya punted me towards Akiba yesterday. Oh, yeah, thanks for that by the way, you know I don't like that ward."

"Ranma!" Akane shouted. "That is not the issue here! I'm only gonna ask one more time! Who Is Honoka?"

“Yes, son.” A woman in a traditional red and golden chrysanthemum kimono, carrying a rather familiar tube slung over her back. Her hair, while not quite the same shocking red shade as Ranma’s female form, was nevertheless just as striking, and her face was split with a broad grin. “Who is Honoka?"

Ranma gulped. "Ah look. Okay, she hurt herself practicin' yesterday. I sent an email to the Doc and managed to get her fixed up, and I noticed some flaws in her routine so I offered to help her figure out the warmups and stuff."

Nabiki frowned. "You're not a master, Ranma. You're not allowed to teach."
"Ah, I ain't showin' her the Art, Nabs. Just some exercise type stuff ya can pick up anywhere."

Nodoka seemed to consider this. “Perhaps you should explain in more detail?”

Ranma sweated some more. “Ain't a lot more ta tell.” Can't talk about the idol thing. “Honoka and her friends weren't doin' some real basic stuff. Stretches, cooldowns, ya know. Coulda gotten hurt real bad, instead of just a trip.”

“And her friends?” Nodoka seemed interested now. “Where is this?”

Ranma swallowed. “Ah, some school. Otonokizaka, I think?”

Nabiki's eyebrows raised. “That's a pretty nice one. No UTX, but you need some serious money to get in. Oh, and you need to be a girl.”

Nodoka brightened immediately. “So of course you're sneaking in to be with your new 'friends.'” She gave Ranma a wink. “Such a man my son is.”

Akane was staring at her with narrowed eyes, Nabiki gave her a warning cough. The younger sister looked at her, startled, but Nabiki coughed again and shook her head. It's just Nodoka being Nodoka. Nabiki thought, willing her sister to pick up on it for once.

Akane gave Ranma one last stare, but the tension from everything that had been happening lately got to her. It wasn't Ranma's fault that his mother insisted on saying these things. Fhinnall, she just sighed. "Okay, fine. And I guess you couldn't say 'no' to food. It is you after all."

Ranma grinned. Whew, dodged that bullet.

"You sure you don't need anything?"

Ranma nodded rapidly. Akane's cooking could only charitably be compared to toxic waste, since it usually wouldn't kill you.

Akane smiled sadly. "Well, okay then... " And then she brightened. "Oh, I know! You can have it for breakfast!"
Chapter 3

Sunday. The one chance a week for students to get out of their responsibilities and obligations and go out and have some fun. Thus, the salarymen and travelers of the usual commute give way to teenagers of all stripes in the busy Tokyo train stations, and Eri was no exception. Sipping at her fruit juice, she looked around for her best friend and partner in Student Council business.

She rolled her eyes when a pair of hands reached up to cover them. “What are you, twelve?”

“Oh, you love me,” Nozomi grinned and stepped next to her. “So, what’s on the agenda today?”

“Well, I needed to get stocked up for summer, so I thought we could go shopping together,” Eri explained. “Forget about this idol stuff for a bit.”

Nozomi shrugged. The season was coming up, she really needed to get it done too. “Shibuya, then?” She took a few steps when Eri nodded, but a flash of bright red striding towards the map. “Huh? Is that…”

Eri found herself struggling to keep up, the crowds having a mysterious way of parting for her friend but closing in behind her and presenting a difficult obstacle. “Nozomi!”

By the time she had reached the map, Eri found herself staring at Nozomi and . . . “YOU!”

The pig-tailed boy who had stolen her phone looked over at her. “Ah, great, Ayase.”

“Don’t ‘Ayase’ me! You . . . you . . . “

Nozomi put a hand on her shoulder, getting a jump and a yelp, followed by a glare when she saw the other girl shaking her head. “Remember, Nishikino said it was her mistake.”

“I’m not sure I believe that,” Eri groused. “Might just be covering for changing her mind or something, which is no excuse for that. . . “
Ranma felt his confusion grow. “No excuse for what? What’d I do this time?!”

“Nothing,” Nozomi said with a small amount of annoyance. “Eri’s just upset that she was wrong and wants to believe you were forcing yourself on Maki.”

Ranma shook his head rapidly enough to cause his pigtail to noticeably fly around. “Wasn’t doin’ nothing like that! Yeesh, Akane’d bash my skull in, and I can’t say I would blame her for that one.” He turned his attention to the map again. “Ekiba...Ekiba...”

Nozomi grinned. “Heading to the amusement park? And isn’t there still one out in Nerima?”

“Yeah, but Akane wanted ta hang out at this one today…” Ranma shrugged. “Fair enough, I guess, but I don’t know how ta get there.”

Eri blinked, then rolled her eyes. “Head down to platform 4, then take the train on the left.” She turned away, towards her own train without intending to listen to the response, but Nozomi smirked and raised a finger to her lips.

“That sounds like way more fun than shopping, and I do have some extra money this month…”

Ranma seemed a bit surprised, but shrugged. “Well, it ain’t a date or nothin’. I guess if ya wanna come and try ta talk to her or somethin’ you could.”

Eri found her arm being grabbed in a rather...affectionate manner. “Oh, I think we can manage to convince her,” Nozomi said in a half-purr.

Eri tried to get loose. “Don’t I get a say in this?!”

“Nope.”

<SCENE BREAK>

Meanwhile, back in Kanda ward, a phone rang. And rang. And rang. Honoka tried her best to sit up,
but every muscle in her body screamed at her that this was a mistake. “Get some rest, he said,” she mumbled. “You’ll feel better on Monday, she said.”

The phone’s ringing finally stopped, and she slipped back into a fitful sleep.

<SCENE BREAK>

Akane tapped her foot. “Why didn’t I just lead him here?” she asked out loud, but she knew the answer. While she let him think otherwise, she _wanted_ this to be like a real date. Ever since their return from the last trip to China . . . she ruthlessly quashed thoughts of that horrible time. “I can’t believe he got lost.”

“Yo, Akane!” Her heart leapt as she heard the voice of her exasperating fiance, she turned to look . . . only to see him being closely followed by a pair of girls. She didn’t recognize either, but it didn’t stop her heart from falling. _Oh dear god, that blonde is absolutely amazing, and I think the dark-haired girl has a bigger chest than Shampoo!_ She felt a familiar bile rise in the back of her throat. “Hi, Ranma. Who’s this?”

“Eh, this is Nozomi and Ayase,” Ranma shrugged. “Met them out in Kanda, and . . . “

Nozomi, possibly sensing the imminent hostility, immediately threw her arms around Eri and pulled her into a close snuggle. “Well, Ranma’s a friend, so I thought we’d make it a double-date.”

This sudden declaration made Akane nearly jump out of her skin. She completely missed the way Eri was trying to struggle out of Nozomi’s vine-like wrap around to stare at the dark-haired girl in dismay. “Double...date? Aren’t you a bit old for that?” Eri ceased her struggles at the sudden news, and gave Nozomi a questioning glance, to get a wink in return.

“Wait, who said anythin’ about a date?” Ranma asked, the news completely blind-siding him.

Nozomi chuckled. “Well, a girl asks her fiance out to the amusement park, what do you think it’s for? But when this boy got lost, well, I just had to help him out and then this seemed way more . . . interesting than clothes shopping.”

“But...but...you’re both girls!” Akane finally blurted out.
Eri was never quite sure what caused her to respond to that with “It’s a Russian thing,” A blatant lie, but if Akane bought it, so much the better. At least now she’d get a chance to see why Nozomi was so insistent about being nice to this weird boy.

Fortunately for her, Akane did seem to buy it. “Well, okay, I guess...but try not to do anything too embarrassing or get us kicked out, okay?”

Nozomi nodded, finally letting Eri out of her grip. “Deal. I’ll go get us tickets.”

“I’ve got mine and Ranma’s,” Akane said.

<SCENE BREAK>

“That was the worst thing you’ve ever done to me,” Eri grumbled. “Now I’ve got to spend all day pretending to be your girlfriend. I hope there was a point to this.”

Nozomi just gave her most mysterious smile. “There was. I wanted to see what the Saotome’s home life is like. They both live with her, you know.”

Eri raised an eyebrow. “Her?”

“Akane, I think Ranma may have mentioned.”

The pair moved up to the front of the queue, before Eri came to a sudden realization. “Wait, which Saotome’s Ranma? I thought that was the sister.”

A lesser plotter might have frozen, but Nozomi just gave a little grin. “I’m really not sure. Call it a slip of the tongue, but I think it’s the boy. Don’t know what the sister’s given name is just yet, but I guess we can find out.”

<SCENE BREAK>
Akane glared at her fiance. “I can’t believe you let them tag along with you!”

Ranma held up his hands defensively. “Hey, Toujou ain’t too bad!” he exclaimed, taking an instinctive step backwards. “As for Ayase. . . well, she’s a pain in the neck at the club but I think we’re agreeing to disagree. And anyway, it’s a free country - I couldn’t just tell’em they couldn’t go somewhere just ‘cuz we were going to be there.”

“Ranma…” Akane stopped, visibly swallowing and trying to get her anger under control. “I wanted to spend time with you today. This thing with Otonoki won’t last forever, and. . . we’re important, right?”

The implication went right over the martial artist’s head. “Akane, ya are important, but Nozomi’s kind of a friend too. She ain’t a fiance or anything, and I don’t think she’s tryin’ ta be like Kodachi.”

Akane snorted. “Well that’s obvious. She’s a worse pervert than you.”

Ranma closed his eyes. “Well, I guess she was grabbin’ Ayase like the old letch. But I ain’t seen her do that with anyone else, so. . . “

“.

Akane shook her head. “Whatever, Ranma.” She spotted the rather distinctive pair of Otonoki girls heading for the park queue. “Come on, they’ve got their tickets.”

<SCENE BREAK>

Kotori found herself being bodily hauled out of bed by her mother. “Oh, Kotori,” her mother groaned, a little in exasperation but mostly out of exertion. “You can’t stay in bed all day, it’s not as if you’re sick…”

“Mama…” Kotori’s own whimper back was almost pitiful enough that her mother relented. Almost. “Everything hurts. We did so much exercise last night. Just put the computer in my bed and I’ll get my homework done, I promise.”

A shake of the head was her only reply. “First you force yourself to take a nice hot bath so this doesn’t happen again tomorrow. I won’t have my daughter missing school due to exhaustion. That can wait until you’ve gone professional.”
“Moooom!”

A grin. “I’m sure you can do that, if you really put your mind to it. Now, bath, breakfast, then you can lay back down if you really need to.”

<SCENE BREAK>

The long queue threatened to strain Ranma’s patience. Five minutes stretched out into ten, and then fifteen before they finally reached the front and swiped their cards over the sensor. “Eh, I don’t get why it was such a big deal ta come out. . . here.” His eyes widened, but only slightly, as his senses went haywire. All around, stores he would have identified as examples of various Western styles of architecture (were he inclined to think of such things) lined the avenue, tempting people to stop and browse the shops up the avenue that was not as long as it looked leading up to a fairytale castle. “Bwu-bwu-bwu…”

Eri stared at this reaction. “What, never been to a park like this one?”

Akane rolled her eyes. “Wouldn’t surprise me.” She grabbed his wrist. “Come on, Ranma. What should we do first?”

Nozomi gave it a thought, glancing back nervously towards the entrance. “Well, there’s a boat ride over there.” She pointed to a spot on the brochure map blindly. “Why don’t we start there and work our way around?”

“What? If you didn’t want to come, why stay?” Akane snarked at her, seeing the mysterious girl’s attention clearly on the exit.

Nozomi frowned. “Well, one, I spent twenty thousand yen on this date. Besides, I thought I saw something.”

Eri shrugged, although she idly noted the way the two Nerimans tensed when the word ‘boat’ was mentioned. “Uh, sure. Boat sounds good.”

Ranma gulped. “Uh...yeah, that’s fine.”
Nozomi gave the skies a glance as well before they rounded the corner.

<SCENE BREAK>

Eri reflected that it was probably the single most uncomfortable amusement park ride she’d ever been on. And that included the time she’d gotten stuck in a roller coaster next to Nozomi for two hours on the big class trip last year.

The ride itself was a simple, sedate affair. Ostensibly, everyone sat down in a large, slow motorboat. There was an operator at the front of it to steer the thing and provide canned narration for the twenty or so tourists who were gently carried through a series of scenes with primitive robots. It was a nice warm-up to some of the more stressful rides later, or maybe a way to calm down after getting off some of them.

At least, it should have been.

Instead, Akane was steadfastly refusing to look in Nozomi’s direction, although she wasn’t giving Eri quite the same level of cold shoulder. For her part, Nozomi was just smiling serenely, commenting on this or that panorama for Ranma’s benefit - a practice that wasn’t doing anything to endear her to the Tendo girl.

And Ranma needed the assistance, because he was standing in the middle of the boat, refusing to listen to the ride’s operator and keeping his eyes closed as if, at any minute, he might be dumped into the water. Water which was clearly boiling acid, if one believed the expression on the boy’s face.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were aquaphobic?” Eri asked. “We could have done something else.”

“I ain’t scared of it!” Ranma shouted back, his eyes closed.

Akane glared at him. “You should have just told them, jerk.”

Ranma’s eyes rolled. “It wasn’t an option.”
“Told us what?” Eri asked, eyes narrowing. Nozomi put a hand on her shoulder, and gave a gentle shake of her head. Eri sighed. “Okay, fine.”

Ranma blinked, giving Nozomi a questioning glance and getting a subtle nod and mischievous smile back in return.

Akane saw her chance. “Look, maybe you guys can go get on the log flume after this? Ranma and I can sit it out.”

It was Eri’s turn to give Nozomi a glance, but then she shrugged. “No, I think we’ll be sticking with you today.” Whether I want to or not.

Suddenly, the boat was sent rocking as one of the animatronic displays sent water spraying into the boat. Ranma jumped almost three meters straight up to avoid it, leaving Eri to get drenched by the sudden spray. “Hey!” she shouted at him, grabbing for the safety rail as he landed and nearly sent the boat tumbling the other direction, but not quite over.

Just as everything seemed set to start stabilizing, a loud, low sound that Eri didn’t recognize signaled another shudder sent through the boat. Finally stressed beyond its’ limit, water sloshed in over the side, the boat finally toppling into the water. Ranma suddenly put his arms around Akane and leaped for the island. Eri took that as her cue and leaped for the edge and into the stagnant water of the artificial stream below, finding the water barely came up to her chest. Nozomi lazily floated next to her, eyes closed serenely and smiling as if it were just another day. “What the...What was THAT for, Saotome!?”

Ranma gently rubbed at the back of his head as a duck floated lazily away on the water.

<SCENE BREAK>

“This is all your fault!” two voices shouted at him.

Ranma was well used to one of those voices, to the point where he almost, but not quite, tuned it out. But someone else saying it at the exact same time was enough to get his attention. “Hey! That stupid thing was about ta spray me!”

Nozomi frowned. “Be that as it may, Ranma, there were better ways for someone of your skill to
At *that* Ranma actually winced. “Okay, okay. I’m sorry, all right?”

Nozomi’s frown deepened. “Properly, Ranma.”

A blink. “Huh?”

Nozomi sighed, but it was Eri who asked “Were you raised in a cave or something?”

“Don’t knock it ‘till you try it,” Ranma retorted.

Eri was about to ask what he meant by that when Nozomi gave him one of her smiles. “Just bow and apologize properly, all right? I’m sure you’ve seen it done.”

Ranma seemed to get what was being asked. Slowly, with a great deal of reluctance, he bowed slightly to them. “Sorry for gettin’ ya all wet and ruinin’ the ride. At least they let us stay in the park.”

“No doubt...” Nozomi pointed out “...because the damage to the *bottom* of the boat can’t possibly be explained by your actions.” She shrugged. “Let’s avoid further incidents, shall we?”

Eri smiled, relieved at the topic change. “Someone mentioned the log flume?”

Three voices shouted “NO!” at her. Eri stared at Nozomi, surprised by the force of her objection. “Is there something wrong with it?”

“Yes.” Nozomi cut in before the other two could protest. “The cards said ‘no.’”

Eri gave her a pointed look. “They did not.”

“Do you want to argue?” Nozomi smiled at her. “Perhaps the haunted house…”
Akane gulped nervously, but refused to show weakness to these two. “Uh...yeah, sure.”

<SCENE BREAK>

Eri dug her fingernails into her hand to try to distract herself from just what a monumentally bad idea this was. The queue was spooky enough, passing through a graveyard, and made no better by the haunting organ music being piped through the whole area. The only thing that made it reasonably bearable was that Nozomi was gripping onto her hand like a vise, a reminder that this wasn’t real.

Putting up with Tendo’s disapproving glare was worth the reassurance.

Trying not to pay too much attention to her, her attention was drawn to the back of the queue where a boy wearing a surgical mask caught her eye. With his long hair, he could have been some kind of musician, or maybe a model, but the mask and a pair of sunglasses obscured his face enough that she couldn’t be sure. In fact, she wasn’t sure, but . . . just in case she gave Nozomi’s hand a little tug, before nodding to the back.

A gesture that didn’t go unnoticed. Ranma glanced at them. “See somethin’, Ayase?”

Nozomi took a discreet glance, then nodded. “I definitely saw that boy at the entrance. Anyone you know?”

Akane stamped her foot. “Honestly, we’re here to have fun, can’t you even get that right?”

Ranma ignored her for just a moment to take a look. “Don’t think so. Just relax, guys.”

Eri took the advice, but noticed the way Akane deflated at the word ‘guys.’

Eventually, they made their way up to the front and found themselves shuttled off into a large room, surrounded by bookshelves and portraits, like a very old western mansion. Which, of course, was what it looked like on the outside. She didn’t know what else she was expecting.
The door slamming shut behind her with a loud, ominous crash, followed by the sound of a heavy bolt falling into place, wasn’t even in the top hundred. But the worst part was the complete and total darkness.

She screamed.

This was not a yelp of surprise or shock. Ayase Eri’s scream was one of primal terror, the kind that should have been easily audible through the door but no one answered. As a response, the room was plunged into a panic, with small children wailing as a disembodied voice started to speak, all but drowned out by the noise.

Suddenly, it all stopped. A hand had covered Eri’s mouth, and strong arms had wrapped around hers, holding her in place. She hadn’t even realized she had been beating on...another bookshelf! Her eyes had adjusted to the dim light, but there was no way out! They were trapped. She tried to scream again, but whoever had her was holding on tight.

“Ayase!” Ranma’s voice growled in her ear. “It ain’t real! Just calm down, all right?”

Eri slowly felt herself calm down enough to respond with a nod. Slowly, Ranma let her go. “You all right?” he asked.

When she nodded, Akane surprised her by speaking up in a gentle voice. “Are you sure?”

“That...just...startled me, is all.”

That was when the corpse of a man dropped out of the ceiling, hanging by his neck, while the voice from earlier laughed maniacally. Eri ran off through the newly opened door in a blind panic.

The remaining three peered around the corner. Two costumed ride attendants were sprawled out against the railings as small, individual cars moved along a track continuously at the boarding area. A bust had also been dislodged from its’ spot, obviously some heavy plastic rather than stone by the way it wasn’t shattered into dozens of pieces by its’ fall. A few paintings had been hastily pulled off their balancing points and hung at precarious angles, although whether that was normal or not was debatable given the rest of the attraction. At first, no one was moving, but eventually when the next batch of riders arrived they started stepping off, looking around curiously at the state of the exit and entrance lobby.
Akane was the first to speak, giving Nozomi a look. “Shouldn’t you go after her?”

“Nah, looks like she escaped, and I think I want to ride this thing.”

Akane blinked at her. “But...but...that’s your friend out there!”

“And I trust her.” Nozomi said back, smiling.

Akane blushed, then bristled. “And what if I don’t trust you with my fiance, huh?”

Nozomi shrugged. “Why wouldn’t you? He’s a boy, do I act like I like boys?”

Ranma swallowed. “Akane, uh, maybe ya should calm down…”

“I AM CALM!” the indicated girl shouted, before taking a deep breath. “I am calm Ranma,” she repeated, and this time she was almost convincing. “What do you think?”

Ranma swallowed. “Eh...Ayase’s a big girl.” He gave her a look. “Besides, I know ya don’t like things like this either. If yer worried about her, why don’t ya go and check?”

Nozomi grinned. “That sounds ideal.”

Akane bristled, but realized she was trapped – Nozomi may have been a pervert, but the odds of cold water finding Ranma in here were low and she wasn’t interested in boys. And...she really didn’t want to stay here. “Okay, fine. But Ranma. Behave.”

<SCENE BREAK>

The remainder of the haunted house was completely tame, at least as far as Ranma was concerned. The illusions on display were certainly unnerving, but mostly because there was a certain something to the supernatural he had learned, over the past few years, to detect. It was almost an instinct, to the point where phantasms floating in the air without triggering that sense was almost worse.
But Nozomi seemed utterly calm next to him, so he relaxed a bit. He thought about it a bit more. “Say, you actually learn anything at that shrine maiden job?” he asked her.

“Enough.” She glanced around to make sure before declaring “It’s all fake,” Nozomi confirmed. “You realize you have to tell her eventually.”

Ranma smirked. “I could say the same. Why’d you come out here today?”

“Partially to get Eri off your back, at least a little,” Nozomi admitted. “I was also curious. A chance to observe the wild Saotome in its’ natural habitat.”

“Oh, har-dee-har-har,” Ranma said back, not bothering to disguise his sarcasm. “Learn anything, sensei?”

Nozomi considered. “Plenty. She’s not your girlfriend.”

Ranma blinked. “Huh? ‘Course she’s my fiance.”

“I said ‘girlfriend’ not ‘fiance.’ There’s a difference.” Nozomi explained patiently. “Maybe she could be, but…” The normally unflappable girl shrugged. “Or maybe it’s just us. She seemed to have an unusually strong reaction.”

Ranma sighed. “Yeah, she gets like that. I just wish she’d listen. She’s been better lately, but….”

Nozomi smiled up at him. “Well, I’m sure it will work out.”

Just then, a pipe burst above them, dumping cold water all over the pair.

Ranma spluttered, then looked up. “Ah… I can explain.”

Nozomi grinned lecherously at her. “Oh, no need. I think I like you better this way. . . but we’d
better get you some tea before we catch up with the others.”

Ranma shivered.

A moment after the pair had moved on, the small kunai lodged in the pipe dropped to the ground.

<SCENE BREAK>

It was coming up on ten when Umi, used to hard workouts, finally managed to drag herself out of bed and half-crawl to the bathroom. Without much preamble, she poured cold water over her body and then sank into the tub, slowly feeling the worst of the soreness ebb away. Once that was done, she did some light stretches in the family dojo before excusing herself from her usual martial arts lesson with her own father. Instead, she dialed up Honoka. After the line disconnected, twice, she switched tactics and tried Kotori. “Morning.”

The pained voice of her friend on the other end should have been expected. “Oh, Umi, you’re alive.”

“It was just a workout,” Umi said. “Although that was a lot yesterday, I have to admit. Can you get in touch with Honoka?”

“No, she’s not picking up. Do you think she’s . . . ?”

Umi’s eyes narrowed. “She dragged us into this. She’ll make it to the performance day if we have to prop her corpse up on stage!”

“. . . it’s . . . nice to hear you so fired up, but I think I’m going to stay home and relax today,” Kotori murmured. “If you want to come by, call first, okay?”

“Right, right,” Umi said absently, before hanging up. She was on a mission now.

<SCENE BREAK>

Eri felt a cold drink being pressed into her shaking hand. “. . . thanks, Nozomi,” she said shakily...only
to nearly drop it when the last voice she would have expected answered.

“It’s okay, Ayase.” Akane took a seat on the bench next to her. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

Eri glared at her for a moment, then sighed. “I didn’t think it would be that bad,” she said quietly. “I knew it would be dark, but I wasn’t expecting... to be that out of control. That boy following us, and then... “

Akane smiled. “Hey, it’s all right. After a year with Ranma, I guess nothing phases you anymore.” For a few minutes they waited, then she finally said “That stuff about being your girlfriend... is it?”

“Back in first year,” Eri said, shrugging. “We’re still friends, obviously, but I thought she was mostly past this.”

Akane thought about it for a moment. “Then why go along with it? I mean, you’re just as embarrassed as I was, right?”

Eri smirked. “Nozomi’s playing one of her hunches again, I think.” When Akane gave her a skeptical look, she shook her head. “Nozomi’s always had a... knack, I guess. Sometimes she uses it just for the sake of her own warped sense of fun, but there’s usually a point to it. And the thing is, I’ve never known her to be wrong.”

Akane gulped. “So you think...”

Eri gave it another moment’s thought. “If Nozomi says we need to be here today, I’d say humor her.” She finally raised the glass to sip at the juice.

Akane gave this some consideration. “Do you actually... “ she trailed off, letting the question hang.

Eri nearly choked on her drink... then thought about it seriously. “Can I decline to answer that? All-girls school, and I’m so busy with student council business I’ve never really had time to think about it outside that last date. I mean, I’d rather have a boyfriend, but... “

Akane shrugged. “Good enough for me. I know it happens. Yuka and Saiyuri were almost
unbearable back in middle school for six months.” She grinned, to let Eri know she was (partially) joking.

Eri smiled back weakly. “Yeah. Do you mind Nozomi’s... antics?”

Akane thought about it. “Now that I know she’s just playing? Go ahead, I guess.”

“Right.” Eri took another sip of her drink. “And thanks, Tendo.”

“Call me Akane.”

<SCENE BREAK>

Maki sighed in exasperation. She had told her parents she wanted to go to the amusement park today with her friends and they couldn’t get her out the door fast enough. The problem, she realized later, was she’d never gotten anyone’s phone number but Honoka’s, so she couldn’t send a text to anyone else. And apparently Honoka had forgotten her phone or something.

So here she was, wandering about the best amusement park in the greater Tokyo area. Alone. Before this whole mess had gotten started, that wouldn’t have really bothered her. But today, for some reason, it did.

Which was why seeing a certain other redhead, in Chinese clothing, suddenly lifted her spirits. She jogged over to the kiosk where she and Toujou were standing in line. “H-hey.”


“What? I like this place,” Maki said back. “What’s wrong with that?”

“Uh...nothing.” Ranma gulped slowly, glancing at Nozomi in a small panic.

Maki frowned a bit at the exchange, but Nozomi just smiled. “So, Apollo is short on inspiration
today?”

That got a weird look from both of them. Ranma may have missed the reference, but Maki picked it up. “Isn’t Apollo a god, not a goddess?” she asked with a slight smile. “I mean, she looks like a goddess to me.”

“At the moment,” Nozomi murmured under her breath. There was something in the way Maki was looking at her charge that made her think that this was about to get messy. “Ranma, I think Maki’s looking for some company.” She pointed at a nearby queue for a ride with some cars going into a dark tunnel. “I’ll get your tea and we can all meet back up behind the castle for lunch.”

Ranma blinked, and glanced at Nozomi suspiciously...but really, there was no good reason not to. “You game, Nishikino?”

“No problem,” the named girl said. “You can call me Maki. And sure.”

<SCENE BREAK>

Eri sighed. “What the heck’s keeping them? The hau...that thing doesn’t take this long.”

Akane chuckled, but wisely refrained from commenting. “Text her?”

Eri already had her phone out, and was just waiting for a reply. Her face went paler for a moment, something Akane only missed because Eri was already pretty fair-skinned. *What’s Nishikino doing here, and more importantly, why would Nozomi send her off with Ranma when he’s on a date? Okay, okay Eri, you can do this. “Nozomi says they’re stopping for hot tea.”*

Akane blinked, looked like she was about to say something...but then something odd happened. Eri noticed her stop, and take a deep breath. “Okay. It’s fine.” The words sounded more like the was trying to convince herself than Eri. She blinked, but Akane held up her hand. “Ranma’s got a weird problem with cold water. Nozomi probably needs the tea to warm up, and Ranma won’t leave a girl in trouble.” She smiled. “Well, since Ranma’s not here, want to try the log flume ride while we’re waiting?”

Eri nodded and sent a text along. *Don’t meet up. Get tea, we’ll go to castle in 30.*
The text sent, they hopped into the queue. It was getting close to afternoon, and the heat was driving everyone towards the water-based ride. Ducking through the wooden buildings, Eri reflected that it was a lot nicer to be with Akane now that her hangups weren’t constantly on display.

Akane smiled up at her. “So, what’s Ranma doing at your school, anyway?”

“Honestly, I think he just came by to drop something off.” Eri shrugged.

Akane smacked her head. “I mean the other one. Ranko, when they’re together.”

“. . . they have the same name?” Eri asked. “Aren’t they brother and sister?”

Akane shook her head. “Cousins, actually, but they were raised together by Ranma’s father on a training journey in the family style.”

Eri stared at her in utter disbelief. “People still do that?”

“Ranma did,” Akane said, giving her a half shrug. That pretty much put an end to the conversation until the pair reached the end of the line. Sitting next to each other, Eri couldn’t help but be aware of the way Akane edged just a bit further away from her.

But after that, they were, once again, surrounded by music, colorful animatronics, and distracting lights and Eri quickly let herself get lost in the whole thing rather than immediately contemplate the more disturbing aspects of what she’d just learned. Until they were traveling up a conveyor belt to the ‘long drop’ that had so worried Ranma. Just then, the mechanism stopped.

“What’s going on?” Eri asked.

Akane frowned, hearing a strange repetitive ripping or tearing sound, a second at a time. Slowly her eyes widened. “Oh no! We’ve got to get out of here!”

Eri stared at her. “What?! Are you crazy? There’s no walkway!”
“Someone’s cutting the belt!”

Eri paled, and this time there was no missing the change in her pallor. She pushed against the ‘safety’ restraint with all of her might, but had only barely gotten it moved a few inches when Akane braced against the seat and shoved it hard enough that the metal screamed in protest. They flipped over the front bar, and ran the few feet up to the top of the long artificial hill. While there was a stream of water running over plastic down the middle, along each side was a length of giant chain, like a bicycle, which would tear up any unfortunate limb that came in contact sliding down. “There’s no way we can get down that!” she screamed. “It’s not safe!”

Akane winced. She looked back down, and closed her eyes. “I...I can try it. It’s just like a waterslide. I’ve done balance training, and Ranma could definitely do it.”

“Are you sure?!” Eri screamed in disbelief. But another snapping sound could be heard, and the belt under their feet shifted. Whatever was happening, they only had seconds.

Akane swallowed. “I don’t know, but we can’t stay here.” She swallowed. “Just one thing. You’re going to have to pull me out once we hit bottom.” Eri looked like she was about to object. “I can’t swim, okay!”

Eri winced, but nodded. Akane slung the taller girl over her shoulder like a sack of potatoes. “We’re going to get wet at the end,” she warned, before jumping down. Just as Akane made the jump, the conveyer mechanism snapped, sending their log-boat and the one behind it crashing backwards, into the pool at the bottom, while Akane managed to stick the landing. Then, they were off, Akane barely managing to skid in between the two lengths of industrial chain. She wobbled forwards, then backwards, nearly losing her grip on Eri just seconds before they hit the bottom, splashing down into the meter-deep pool at the bottom. Eri stood up, then grabbed a flailing Akane and hauled her to her feet. The Tendo girl had the good grace to blush.

“...we...we made it.” Akane was grinning widely, like a loon. “I...actually saved someone...and got out of it...and I didn’t need that jerk’s help!” Eri was about to ask what she meant, before her mood dampened on seeing a white duck flying through the sky. She belatedly pulled out her cell phone, then hit it twice. “Dammit. Guess the water was too much for it.”

Eri winced, but pulled hers out. “Mine’s good.”

“Can you text Ranma about a white duck?” Eri raised an eyebrow at that, but Akane just sighed.
“He’ll know what it means.”

Eri shook her head. “I don’t have his number...I’ll send it to Nozomi to pass along.”

<SCENE BREAK>

Nozomi was nursing her own, cold, tea when the crashing sound came. “Oh no!” She started to run towards it, but she was fighting against the crowd doing what seemed like the sensible thing and getting away from the collapsing ride. She was just about pushed over by a mother desperately cradling a baby in her arms when suddenly she felt someone grab her and pull her into a side-alley. “Ranma?” she asked, before turning around.

It was definitely not Ranma.

A young man, wearing an extremely loose and long-sleeved shirt and pants. His hair was as long and luxurious as her own, and his face was rather handsome if one could discount the...extremely thick glasses on his face. He seemed puzzled. “Are you nearsighted too? I’m not Saotome.”

“Oh..sorry.” Nozomi said. “I was just surprised, is all.”

The boy nodded. “I take it you know him, then. Well, it’s all the same to me, I suppose. The more girls going after him, the less likely he is to steal my shampoo.”

Nozomi nodded, deciding to not ask why this boy was so worried about that prospect. Maybe he was vain? She still wasn’t sure how Ranma stealing it followed, but she decided not to question it. “I have to get to the log flume,” she said instead.

“Ahh, I wouldn’t worry too much,” he said. “I was flying overhead when the accident happened. No one was hurt, although it was a near thing. Tendo managed a feat I would have sworn was beyond her ability. At least, I’m pretty sure it was Tendo.” He shrugged again. “At any rate, I suggest you either wait here or go to wherever you’re supposed to meet them, and they’ll be along.”

Nozomi nodded. “Thank you again for your help.”
Mousse watched her go, before shrugging at the odd acceptance the girl had had of his flying. Obviously she’d been hanging out with Ranma for too long.

<SCENE BREAK>

Ranma would get Toujou for this one.

It wasn’t the creepy way the tiny figures moved. She’d seen dolls get up and walk. Nor was it the relentlessly cheery tune that continued to play over and over in the dark tunnel. Not really, although she sort of realized that normally it would have bothered her tremendously.

No, what was bothering her was the redhead in the seat next to her. Purple eyes stared down at her with an intensity that Ranma normally associated with attempts on her life. She felt like she was at the center of this girl’s world, trying not to squirm under the scrutiny. Especially with the lack of battle aura, it was downright disturbing. “Would ya stop that?”

Maki turned her head away to hide her blush. “Stop what?”

“Stop lookin’ at me like that.” Ranma said, for once recognizing that she needed to keep quiet due to the ride.

Maki’s response was a soft snort. “I’m not looking at you like anything.”

“...yeah, sure,” Ranma said in a grumble. Sighing, she realized that there was probably only one good way out of not being on the receiving end of something she knew she didn’t want to deal with. She started it off with the obvious question. “So, I know about Honoka and the others, but why are you mixed up in all this mess?”

Maki’s reply was a little too quick “What do you mean? I’m just helping out, that’s all.”

Ranma smirked at that. “I’m ‘just helpin’ out and I wouldn’t say I’m not involved. So spill.”

“Ehh?” Maki swallowed. “Look, you’ve been on the other end of Honoka wanting something from you! Besides, they were just going to make idiots of themselves without me. This isn’t even my
favorite type of music, you know?”

Ranma chuckled. “Okay, point about Honoka, but you wrote a darn good song.”

“Uh…” Maki was grateful for the darkness to hide her blush. “Thanks, but it was really nothing. Your songwriter...Kasumi was it...I’d like to meet her some time.”

Ranma gave a soft chuckle. “I’ll see what I can do, but no real promises.” Just then, her cell phone beeped. “Ah, man, Toujou says there was a problem. Maki, can ya look after yourself when we get off?”

“Huh?” Maki clued in quickly though, and gazed down into the water. “Boyfriend you need to rescue, superhero?”

Ranma tried hard not to throw up at that suggestion. “I ain’t no superhero... but yeah, I might need ta help Ayase and my... friend out.”

Maki caught the slightest hitch in Ranma’s voice. “So, no boyfriends?”

“Absolutely not.”

And as the ride pulled into the dock, Maki was smiling again. “Go on. I’d just slow someone like you down in this situation.” As soon as the doors opened, Ranma was off before the attendant could get out one word, jumping right over Maki’s head. The young musician followed more-or-less normally, a smile on her face.

<SCENE BREAK>

Eri tried vainly to rub the brown stains out of her blouse. “Well, these clothes are ruined.” She glanced around at the office. “Maybe we can get some free merchandise out of this,” she joked, but even she realized it was a little flat.

The security office, by contrast with the park, was simple drywall. Eri and Akane were forced to sit still while the investigation went on, but eventually the head of security came back. A tall man,
muscled without being anything on the boys Akane knew, put down a short sword, still glistening from the mix of water and oil it had been dumped in. “We found this in the maintenance area. Do either of you girls know anything about it?”

Akane frowned. “It probably belongs to a Chinese martial artist, goes by the name of Mousse. We’ve been seeing him hanging around today, but this doesn’t seem quite right. Normally he’d be after my fiance, and he’s not this subtle.”

The security guard paled. “Wait, you mean people making an attempt on your life is normal?” Eri stared at her in shock from the declaration as well.

“Not my life, no.” Akane missed the shocked stares from the other two. “In any event, this didn’t work, so he’ll probably be done for today.”

“Nonetheless…” he said “I’m afraid I’ll have to ask you to leave, miss. For the safety of our other guests.”

Eri swallowed. “Wait, our friends are still in the park. We should go get them.”

The officer looked reluctant, but nodded. “If you can’t get them on your cell phones, fine. But please, leave quickly. If there are any more incidents, it will be a lifetime ban.”

<SCENE BREAK>

Nozomi had been waiting on the drawbridge when Akane and Eri finally caught up to her. “Oh, hey,” she said, looking a little pale. “You’re all right? I couldn’t get any info out of the park people, but. . . “

Eri smiled. “We’re fine, Nozomi,” she said. “But we have been asked to leave. We’ll need to go retrieve Ranma.”

Nozomi swallowed. “Ah, I think Ranma said something about catching another ride. Eri, I think if you head back towards the log flume you’ll find him. Also, Ranko’s at the park today too, I think she has his cell phone number.”
Eri blinked at that. “Your premonition’s sure on overdrive today…” she said suspiciously, only to get one of those infuriating ‘mystic’s smiles’ back in return. “Okay, fine.”

Once the blonde was around the corner, Nozomi turned to Akane, looking serious. “First, yes, I know about the curse. It doesn’t bother me, but Ranma’s quite a good friend to several people I consider important. If anything is done to compromise his happiness, I will be rather unhappy myself.”

This was not what Akane had been expecting to hear. “What?! Excuse me, I don’t see where it’s any of your business!”

“Then let me explain,” Nozomi replied, calmly. “Otonokizaka Academy is currently facing difficulties. Several people, including Eri, have ideas for helping. I had some of my own, but more importantly, there are several girls in the school who will benefit regardless of whether the plans succeed in helping the school. It was for that reason that I… nudged Kousaka Honoka into taking action.” Her smile grew a bit. “I admit I didn’t expect Saotome, but Honoka has chosen, whether wisely or not, to attach Saotome’s star to her own.”

Akane sniffed. “Well, then, if you want him, what’s stopping you?”

Nozomi blinked. “Are you even paying attention? First, no, I don’t actually want him. Or her, if you’re going to be semantic about it.” Akane shot the third year a look of surprise and some revulsion. She took a deep breath. “Let me try this again… Okay, not mentioning the specifics. She’s obviously got some hangups, and with the way Ranma acts… if I mention school idols I can’t remotely tell how she’ll react.”…Saotome Ranma, for whatever that means, is now essential to the best plans I have been able to come up with for my school. These plans do not mean him any harm, and in fact, require him to be in the best condition he can be.” She smirked. “Which is a very nice one, I will admit, and you’d be a lucky girl if you would admit it to yourself.”

“What’s THAT supposed to mean?” Akane screeched.

Nozomi sighed, but continued on. “The point is, I want Ranma to remain happy. I admit there’s little I can do about anything you might want to do to him, but if it’s within my power I will make it happen. Right now, that boy cares about you, and anyone with two eyes can see it.”

Akane blushed. “I wanted to marry him, you know.”
Nozomi smiled. “If that’s what he wants, I have little problem with it. If that changes, I’m on his side in that too.” Akane stared at her as if she’d changed into a man. Nozomi looked back at her with a serene smile hiding the slowly sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. “Okay, let me ask one more question. You’ve said what you want. Imagine you were asking for it at a shrine. What would you be willing to give up to marry that boy?”

Akane blinked. “Wait, what? Why should I have to give up anything?”

“...I see.” Nozomi finally let her apprehension show.

Akane was glad someone did. And she couldn’t wait to get away from this awful ‘date’.

<SCENE BREAK>

While that was going on, Eri found herself chasing after a redheaded girl bounding back towards the section of the park with the faux-wooden buildings that led to the log flume. “Wait!”

That got her attention. The ‘original Ranma’ as she was thinking about it, having run into the girl first, stopped bounding and turned around. “Oy, Ayase, what’s goin’ on here?!”

“Someone tried to kill Akane, that’s what!”

Ranma blinked. “Dammit, this is gettin’ way out of hand.” She sighed. “Guess that explains why the log flume ain’t working. Gee, and I sure wanted to go.” The last bit was said with a sarcastic drawl. “I’m guessin’ Akane’s okay or ya wouldn’t be runnin’ around like this.”

“...no, you’re right.” Eri conceded. “She actually got us out of that mess before we got hurt.”

Ranma raised an eyebrow. “Ya mean the tomboy managed ta save herself for once? Heh, knew she had it in her.”

The blonde groaned. “You’re one to talk.”
“Hey, I have an excuse,” Ranma said. *Or three* she thought, but didn’t add. “Anyway, looks like today’s a bust.”

Eri sighed. ‘It’s barely noon. Nozomi and I will need to get back to shopping…” She swallowed. “Look, it’s not that I don’t like you, but. . . “

Ranma smirked. “How about we agree ta disagree, hmm? I ain’t in it for your school or whatever, I just have a friend who needs help.”

“I guess…that’s fine.” Eri conceded. “There’s also the thing with Nishikino. Tell your cousin or whatever. . . just. . . . don’t let something like that happen again, all right?”

“Uhh...yeah.”

<SCENE BREAK>

Maki strolled through the main square, snacking on an ice cream cone. One would think a pigtailed redhead who likes to travel at window height would be easy to track, but Maki had quickly lost her in the crowds.

On the other hand, those old-fashioned Chinese silks were unmistakable, even at ground level. So when she saw the boy she thought was Ranma’s brother, she ran up to him on the way out. “Hey!” she said, panting and short of breath. “Do you know what happened to your sister? I wanted to meet back up with her.”

Suddenly, she realized she wasn’t just talking to The Boy, but also Ayase, Toujou, and . . . “Uhm, who are you again?” she asked the last girl, who was glaring daggers at her.

Akane snorted. “Couldn’t I ask you the same thing?”

“Hey, whoa, what did I do?” Maki asked, indeed taking a step back.

Ranma swallowed nervously. “Ah, Akane, this is Maki. She’s in the club I was helpin’, ya know?”
Maki’s eyes crossed. “Uh…”

Nozomi rolled her eyes. “The one day, not all the time,” she ‘clarified.’ “And no, his cousin has been asked to leave.”

“Oh.” Maki sighed, disappointment obvious in her expression. “I guess that’s fine.”

Akane rolled her eyes, and started pulling Ranma towards the exit. “Maybe we can do a movie or something.”

Maki watched the four go, then sighed and went back into the park, trying to get Honoka on her phone again.

<SCENE BREAK>

In Honoka’s bedroom, a phone rang for the fifth time that day. Very slowly, a hand snaked out from under the covers of her bed, groping ineffectually for the device for a few seconds. As soon as her fingers wrapped around it, it was hurled, hard, at the wall and the noise stopped.

“Honoka, it’s almost one!” a voice called.


Suddenly, she found herself being hauled out from under the covers. “Move, Honoka!” snapped a voice that was not her mother’s.

“U-Umi?” Honoka stammered, before noticeably twitching. “Oww...lemmie go!”

Umi wasn’t having any of it. “Come on, we need to get you into the bath now, or you won’t be able to move right tomorrow either.”
“Uwah…” Honoka groaned, being dragged. “Umi, that hurts!”

Umi just sighed. “Of course it hurts, Honoka. Kotori hurts, I hurt. But you’ve got to trust me, all right?”

Honoka winced, considering. “Okay…”

<SCENE BREAK>

They had just made it to the edge of the park, turning onto a shopping thoroughfare, when Ranma felt Nozomi gently tug on his shirt. Glancing at Akane, he trailed back minutely, only to feel a few bills shoved into his hand. “Sorry...take her to a movie. *This* one,” she hissed, the last bit even lower as she pointed at a schedule for the nearest cinema on her cell phone. Ranma raised an eyebrow, but Nozomi gave him a wink and a nod.

The martial artist returned the nod when all hell broke loose for the last time that day.

Nozomi suddenly shrieked “LOOK OUT!” and shoved Ranma aside. His danger sense flashed, as he became aware of a projectile - probably a smoke bomb judging by the shape, arc, and where it was going to land - and glanced to Akane. But then he realized Nozomi was already diving that direction, but Ayase was still in the way. Enhancing his speed with a sudden burst of *ki*, he gently scooped her up by the waist and leapt to the top of a nearby bus stop.

Time seemed to recover, as the area where they had been standing exploded into an acrid red smoke. Ranma stared in disbelief. “No way, that ain’t Mousse. He don’t go in for the poisons.”

Eri stared at him in disbelief. “Wait, if not him then who?”

Nozomi frowned. “Wait, that nice boy? He said he was just watching today…”

“That about does it...but then who…?” Ranma’s puzzlement was cut off by the realization he could hear Akane’s voice, but it seemed to be muffled somehow. He looked...only to realize Akane’s head was still buried in Nozomi’s expansive bust. “Ahh...ya can let her up now.”
Nozomi complied, and had to immediately fend off a series of light (from Akane) slaps. “Get off me you weirdo!”

“Oi, that’s gratitude!” Ranma snarked. “Toujou just saved your life, Akane.”

Akane blushed, suddenly realizing just how close she’d come. “Uh...sorry about that.

Nozomi just got to her feet with her usual smile. “Not a problem. For me, anyway.”

Ranma helped Eri to the ground, and the blonde sighed. “Look, we should get back to shopping. Ranma, remember what I said. No more trouble at school.”

“Got it Ayase...” Ranma said, watching as the pair retreated. He turned towards Akane. “Hey, uh, look, I still got some money left. Ya wanna go catch a movie?”

Akane blinked, surprised. “Uhm...okay. Which one?”

“I’ll tell ya when we get there.” Ranma said, glancing around one last time. “You’ll like it, trust me. But the streets got ears, ya know?”

<SCENE BREAK>

Two girls finally stepped off the train away from Ekiba. Eri wasn’t even sure which stop they got off at, she just looked for a station with relatively few people and dragged her friend out of the doors. “Nozomi, this is insane!”

Nozomi, for her part, dropped all pretense at cheer and looked out across the tracks as the train pulled away. “I quite agree. Can you get me some tea? I really need to think.”

“No-zo-mi!”

The darker-haired girl wasn’t dissuaded. “Erichi, please. I realize you deserve an explanation, but I need to think.” This declaration startled Eri so much she went to the nearby vending machine and
fetched two bottles. Handing Nozomi the milk tea, she opened her own mocha coffee can.

“For the record, 160 yen,” she muttered, but waited patiently for Nozomi’s brain to catch up with the events of the day. It took several minutes of them drinking together, slowly and in silence, before they finally looked at each other. Eri went first. “You’re being ridiculous, you know.”

“Shall we just skip the argument, then?” Nozomi’s smile was back, but Eri shook her head.

Setting the bottle aside, she turned Nozomi to face her. “This is so much worse than we imagined, Nozomi.”

“I’ll say,” came the unexpected response. “No wonder they’re so completely...” she waved her hand in a gesture. “If that was a typical day, at least. And that Tendo girl is worrisome.”

Eri glared at her. “That was at least partly your doing, and you know it. Did you have to provoke her?”

“Yes.” It was not what Eri had wanted to hear, but at least it was expected. “I had to know, and know what Kousaka is thinking.”

Eri sighed. “Did you at least find out?”

“Well enough.” Nozomi frowned more deeply. “I’m also going to have to figure out how to break it to Nishikino.”

Eri finally gave up, taking another deep pull from her drink before looking back at her ‘girlfriend.’ “What about Nishikino?”

“She’s crushing on Ranma,” Nozomi admitted. “I may have... encouraged... it a little.”

Eri facepalmed. “Which one? Ranma or Ranko?”

“Yes.”
Eri stared at her in total disbelief. “Nozomi!”

“I didn’t realize everything about Tendo, all right?” Nozomi held up her hands defensively. “I thought it was... well, normal stuff, not this.” Her smile returned, slightly. “That said, and whatever I said to Tendo, I’m on Maki’s side here, I think.”

“That’s assuming I don’t get the chairwoman to kick...” she seemed to collapse in on herself. “That’s just wishful thinking. If the Saotomes decide they want to be somewhere, I haven’t really got a chance of forcing them, do I?”

Nozomi shrugged. “You can try being nice about it, but if you want them gone, you’ll have to work through Honoka.”

“And Kousaka will say ‘no’ because that’s just how she is.” Eri rested her head against the other girl’s shoulder. “Please, be honest with me. How much of this did your predictions really tell you?”

Nozomi sighed. “Not much. The Fool suggested following a blind opportunity, and I took it.”

“. . . and do they say we get out of this?” Nozomi winced at Eri’s question, and pulled out her deck. A quick shuffle, and Eri found herself holding three cards dealt neatly out of the middle of the deck. “The Ace of Cups?”

“The beginning of love. It could mean the love between Tendo and Saotome, but...” Nozomi said carefully, and got Eri’s nod of confirmation – she understood. Too many variables, could mean anything. The next card was the Six of Swords. “Change...whatever happened today, it should be prompting all of us to go back and think things through, to begin again from a new place.”

“So you’re saying I should just... accept this?”

Nozomi shook her head. “No, just think about it. The right answer might be to grow more firm and try harder. I doubt it, but I can’t make your decisions for you. The cards advise, we decide.” Finally, she flipped the last card out. “The Queen of Wands. In the end, it all comes back to her.”

<SCENE BREAK>
Honoka had been forcibly carried out of bed and to the dining room table. A cold breakfast was laid out in front of her, which she stared at listlessly. She slowly lifted up one hand to try to grab her chopsticks when she heard a sound like every sore muscle in her body cracking at once. Bonelessly, she slid out of her chair and to the ground.

Umi just sighed and gently propped her back up. “I’m not your mother, I shouldn’t be having to take care of you.”

“I’m sorry,” Honoka said, before catching the soft smile behind the exasperated sigh.

<SCENE BREAK>

Eri shook her head. “We are doomed.”

<SCENE BREAK>

After buying the tickets (and being very careful to make sure Akane didn’t see what movie had been picked, Ranma came over to her, with a single bag of popcorn balanced on his head and two sodas in his hands. “Here, hold these, would you?” Akane took them, and then Ranma picked her up, keeping the last treat balanced on his head.

“Hey, what are you doing?” she exclaimed, but Ranma just smirked at her and carried her to the emergency stairwell.

“Easiest way ta make sure no one knows what theater we go to.”

Akane frowned. “What, are you embarrassed to be seen with me?”

Ranma shook his head. “Nah, just gotta shake’em off. Now, up we go.”

Tendo Akane barely managed to restrain a shriek as she found herself suddenly being lifted faster than any ride at the park could have managed, Ranma bouncing off the flexible handrails as they
went up floors in seconds, before finding themselves on the right landing. Ranma kicked the handle and flipped open the door with a casual ease, slipping into the hallway and closing the door behind them.

The whole feat took less than ten seconds. And, judging by the bag of popcorn, Ranma hadn’t spilled a single kernel.

“Whew...come on, it’s theater fifteen.”

This early in the day, the theater was largely deserted, but Ranma led them to the back row. The popcorn was set on the large armrest between the two middle seats, and Ranma smiled. “Your seat, M’lady,” he said in an exaggerated, upper-class-twit accent.

Akane made a face at him in response. “You sound like Kuno.”

Ranma winced. “Right, not doin’ that.” They took their seats just as the lights dimmed and the previews started, letting them enjoy the darkness in a companionable silence, although Ranma’s eyes stayed on the doors, looking for any light.

None came. They were the last to enter the theater. Safe.

Images of an idyllic mountain countryside came up on the screen, and Akane’s eyes widened as she realized that it was the same romantic movie she’d been wanting to see with her friends. “Oh...Ranma?” she looked at him, but he just gave her an easy grin back.

She gripped his hand in hers, the popcorn forgotten.

<Chapter End>
Honoka's room was pretty typical of a modern girl's bedroom. Western-style bed in one corner, a bookshelf full of manga, and a low table in the middle of the room that could be moved out of the way easily. Ranma had definitely approved of the softer yellows the decor favored, but it was, on the whole, just typical.

What was not typical was the conversation the previous night. Umi was at her wits' end, and unfortunately Honoka was on the receiving end, as usual.

"Honoka, this is too much!" The ginger was backed into a corner, while Kotori stared on in amazement. Umi had never been this mad before. "I knew that boy was trouble, and somehow he reduced us to a farce of a samurai drama and got out of trouble! I get the feeling that you and he had a long talk last night, and now you are going to sit down and tell us everything!"

Honoka chuckled nervously. "I'm not sure it's my place to say. A lot of it was pretty personal."

"HE TURNS INTO A GIRL!" Umi shouted at the top of her lungs, not caring who heard. "If he's not embarrassed enough about that to hesitate, he's got no shame, so spill."

"All right, all right." Honoka sighed. "Just don't shout, my dad would have a coronary if I invited a boy up here."

"Ugh, fine." Umi took a seat at the table.

"Right." Honoka coughed. "So, I think I mentioned that he spent the past decade basically living in the wilds and out of dojo." She swallowed. "Umi, I really don't feel comfortable talking about this. To Ranma most of it wasn't a big deal, but it would have been pretty private to anyone else."

Umi's glare didn't waver for a second.

"Okay, fine. Ranma didn't go into a lot of detail, but what she did say was already pretty bad. Her father pretty much put him through every nightmare training scenario he could come up with. Most of it he wouldn't talk about, but there was a mention of his idea of 'toughness training.'"

Umi shrugged. "Well, that's not too bad, I guess. I mean, punching sand or stone would hurt but I've done a little of it."

"She had to run through a gauntlet of swinging oak branches when he was seven, swinging at a high enough speed to break bones. I only got him to say that because I needed an explanation for how he could manage to survive being tossed over half of Tokyo on a regular basis."

Umi's expression softened. "Oh god... "

"There was also the fiancées. As in multiple. You knew about that too, I think." Honoka swallowed. "I'm kind of guessing here, but I think Mister Saotome arranged most of them, knowing full well about the others."

Umi's resolve finally broke. "Oh. I see." She sighed. "I guess your heart was in the right place. As usual. But still, he may need help, but you realize he's dangerous, too, right?"

"Not to us."
Kotori frowned. "Honoka, Umi's right. Ranma's father sounds like a dangerous man. I'm not sure we should get mixed up in this."

Honoka frowned. "Maybe, but we can't leave this alone either."

"Then call the police." Umi leaned in close. "This is the sort of thing they're there for."

"But we can't prove any of this. If Mister Saotome's been getting away with it for ten years he's got to be covering up the evidence." Honoka pointed out. "And I admit half of it's just me guessing."

The three girls sighed. "Well, there must be something we can do. With Ranma taking over training I have some free time on my hands," Umi finally said. "I doubt there's much, but I'll go online tomorrow and see what I can find. And maybe if we can convince him to get help Honoka will be able to let this go before we get into real trouble."

Kotori nodded. "I'll ask my mother, too. She's the principal, so if there's anything that can be done she'll probably know about it. It's her job after all."

Honoka smiled at her two friends, tears forming at the edges of her eyes. "Thanks, guys. I knew you'd know what to do!"

"No you didn't." Umi said with a smile. "Or you'd have just asked."

Honoka suddenly stood up. "We have twelve days left until our first live performance, so let's focus on that!"

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Ranma's bedroom was a minimalist affair, a guest room that had long since ceased to be for 'guests.' Shared with his father and mother, the ancient dresser was now filled with the later's clothing, with all his real possessions aside from a number of 'disguises' for his girlform that he could abandon in the closet were kept in a large rucksack.

Ranma himself was laid out on top of the futon, the room a bit warm, as the sun was just peeking into the room. This was when a large man, especially around the middle, grabbed him. The older man wore a gi that, while once a pristine white, had long since become a dingy gray from long wear on the road.

This was Saotome Genma.

That the fact that he had just tossed his son into the Tendo Dojo's koi pond was not the worst thing you need to know about him says entirely too much about the Saotome family in general, and Genma in particular.

"I won't have you running around dishonoring your fiance with other women, Ranma!" he shouted. "And you won't get out of your obligations either!"

Ranma's head poked out of the water. "I don't got time for this this mornin'. I gotta head over to Kanda again."

"I forbid it!" Genma snorted at him. "You are nowhere near ready to teach the Art. Quit trying to get out of this!"

Ranma snorted in disgust. "It ain't the Art, and last I checked you'd already admitted that I'm better than you, so what does that say 'bout you bein' ready to teach?"
"They're completely different things, boy! I'll give you your mastery test when I think you're good and ready, and not before!"

Ranma stepped out of the pond, walking slowly towards her father. "Oh, really? And just when is that going to be, huh?"

Genma smirked. "Not until you've shown you can uphold your responsibilities at the least. Why, eager to get started?"

"If it gets you off my back, sure, why not?"

Genma barked a triumphant laugh. "I'll schedule the priest for this afterno-" he was abruptly cut off when Ranma tripped him, then tossed him into the pond she had just left. "Grwofrof!" he finished. Which might have seemed odd, but he had just turned into a giant panda.

"Shoulda seen that comin'. We can spar before bed tonight, Pops!" Ranma said as she walked towards the baths.

Kotori sat at the table, shoveling some scrambled eggs into her mouth as part of an early breakfast, as they all were these days. What did surprise her was her mother sitting across from her suddenly.

"Mom?"

"Dear, is there something on your mind?" she asked, pouring herself a cup of coffee.

Kotori quickly swallowed her own tea. It was now or never. "Mom. . . if I met someone, she's our age. . . if I thought there was. . . something wrong at home, would there be anything we could do?"

"Is this about that Ranma girl?" Kotori squeaked in surprise at that razor-sharp question. "My dear, you're both my daughter and one of my students. I know everything." Another yelp, but then she decided to stop teasing her poor daughter. "Unfortunately, there isn't a lot I can do. I can ask her own headmaster to look into things. Do you know what school she goes to?"

"Ah...I think it was Furinkan High?" Kotori said, not quite sure of her memory. But she knew she'd gotten it right when her mother turned pale and very serious.

"Furinkan. I'm afraid I only know it by reputation, but it's a very poor one. They'll take almost any student, and the discipline issues are legendary. If Ranma attends that school, I fear she has very few prospects indeed." The principal looked at her daughter very seriously. "And it also means there is nothing we can do. The school won't intervene in Ranma's life."

Kotori gulped, searching her mind for ideas. "...maybe she could come to Otonoki?"

Her mother looked completely surprised by that idea. "Well, I suppose as things are I might be able to persuade the Board. There's a fairly substantial scholarship budget that's basically untouched." Kotori brightened. "But there are still obstacles."

"What?"

"First, the parents." Mrs. Minami took another sip of her coffee. "Either her parents would need to agree, and the way you're looking at me I doubt that, the authorities would need to take her away from her parents, or I would need something to persuade the board to overlook the lack of permission quietly."

"And is that it?"
Kotori got a serious stare in response. "You're also going to have to tell me who that boy was. I won't have casual violations of the rules, daughter."

Another nervous gulp. "Uhh...Mom, can I tell you after school? It's not that I don't think you should know, really, but you are not going to believe me so I'm going to need a video."

Ranma had not just taken almost two entire afternoons off, but was now skipping his morning spar (or technically rescheduling it) with his father to make it to a distant ward early as well.

If Akane were driving, this wouldn't be allowed to stand. One heated discussion and this 'Honoka' girl would be forgotten like yesterday's news.

Nabiki, on the other hand, smelled profit.

She wasn't quite sure yet how. Oh, sure, she had a long stretch of successful schemes getting money from Ranma's various bouts of misbehavior, ranging from the sublime to the ridiculous. Snapping lewd photographs of Ranma for Tatewaki Kuno's amusement before posting them online (with the face carefully censored or edited to avoid charges), betting pools on the various bouts, extortion from the fiances...really, it was all a matter of creativity and seeing the possibilities.

Ranma may have learned the basics of a net connection in a year, but Nabiki was a master. A given name, a ward, and the knowledge that it wasn't martial arts related (but obviously physical) and she had it in about an hour.

Otonokizaka's School Idol unit. Mu's. And the obvious lead was Kousaka Honoka. A little more research identified the nearby shrine the photos of them in their workout clothes was obviously taken at. So Nabiki caught an early train, before the crowds.

It wasn't as if Furinkan bothered with attendance anymore. She wasn't in Miss Hinako's homeroom so no one would even care.

Nabiki arrived at the side entrance to the shrine only shortly before Ranma had greeted Umi at the end of her morning jog - being in the best shape, she was naturally the first to arrive. Nabiki moved up to be within listening range with her trusty camera phone, making sure to clip on the analog focusing lenses to get a good video from this distance. She also discreetly set up a directional mic on the ground pointed at the only place open enough for a workout, and settled in to wait as the dark haired idol jogged easily up the stairs, not even really out of breath.

"Hey, Ranma," Umi bit her lip. "Look, about yesterday..."

Ranma laughed. "Yeah, it was a good match wasn't it? I was surprised to get a half-decent fight out of you. Ya ain't even on Akane's level, but that handicap was maybe a bit more than I shoulda given up. Never really thought about that before."

There was a choke of surprise. "Wait, you're not mad I tried to get rid of you?"

"If I got mad about that I wouldn't have nearly enough sparring partners," Ranma laughed it off, although he did suddenly look a little hurt.

Umi shook her head. "You know, I really don't get you."

"Eh, not a lot to get. By the way, Nabs is eavesdropping on us."

It took a moment for Umi to process that. "Wait, who? One of your fiances?"
Ranma shook his head. "Nah. One of her sisters. Tendo Nabiki. It's complicated, but she's probably lookin' for blackmail material."

Umi thought about that for a moment, then nodded, glancing around. Nabiki went pale when the girl turned and came straight towards her, starting to pack up almost immediately.

She had just gotten the microphone hidden in her book bag when Umi rounded the corner. "Excuse me, recording us isn't appreciated. It's also illegal, just so you know."

"Prove it." Nabiki smirked.

Umi chuckled. "Oh, I can. You see, a friend of ours works at this shrine as one of the maidens. Did you remember to check for the security cameras? Trust me, you were there long enough to have shown up."

"Well, you didn't actually tell me 'no' before now, so I haven't done anything wrong," Nabiki tried to dodge.

Fortunately for her, Umi wasn't that aware of the law. "Well, you have been informed. Do not spy on any member of Mu's or we will be talking to the authorities. Whether that's before or after I tie you up depends on how annoyed I am."

Nabiki considered that for a moment. On the one hand, that 'martial artist's duty' stuff usually protected her... but on the other, Umi seemed like a more modern girl and she wasn't actually threatening harm. Although she could spin it that way later. "Have it your way, Sonoda."

She was gone by the time Honoka and Kotori had ascended the shrine's steps, panting and gasping for breath.

Honoka groaned, leaning heavily on the railing in the stairwell leading up to their rooftop practice after school. "I don't feel so good."

"It's kind of your own fault." Umi groaned out as well, but then added "...is what I really want to say, but there's no way you could have known about this. I don't know if we can handle two more weeks..." she trailed off as the tableau on the rooftop came fully into view. It wasn't much, except for one simple problem.

The heavy gymnastics mats, she could understand. Ranma was ludicrously strong, even as a girl, so if she'd gotten there before school ended (and this was a possibility) she might have had time to drag them all up. Might.

But the balance beam was just too long to have fit through the stairs. To manage that she'd have had to have lifted it straight up. "Ranma?! How? Why?"

"...isn't it obvious? Ya could use some balance training and I didn't think you were ready to walk on the fence. 'specially not four floors up, I could probably catch ya but I didn't think you'd go for it." Ranma seemed puzzled at the boggling.

Kotori tilted her head. "Uhm...where did you get that?"

"It was in the gym storeroom. No one seemed ta be using it." Ranma just seemed to be puzzled, but then noticed the three girls were collapsed in a pile. "Uhh...ya know what, I got an idea. We did enough this mornin', let's take it light today. Just do warmups, then run through the performance twice ta keep it in your heads. After that, field trip."
"Field...trip?" Honoka managed to raise an eyebrow even through the pain.

Ranma chuckled. "Yeah. Doc I know who sees a lotta martial artists. I bet he can fix ya up and figure out what we're missing besides you just not being in shape. He's the one who fixed up your ankle the other day, in fact."

Kotori took a heavy pull of water. "Uhm, before we head out, Mom wants to see you."

Ranma never liked being called before the principal, headmaster, dean, or whatever the idiot in charge of the school was called. Although this office was a bit nicer than most, with a full tea service set out for her along with a few small sweets. Kotori, Honoka, and Umi were all standing at the back in silent support. "Miss Saotome."

"Teach," Ranma's reply was her best attempt at formal - not very good, but she did add a small bow. "Kotori said you wanted to see me?"

"Yes. The incident yesterday was a little much to just ignore, but I can overlook it if you can tell me who that boy was who instigated it. Kotori just said I wouldn't believe her, but I think you know who he is."

"..ahem." Ranma chuckled nervously...until the kettle's contents were upended over his head. "OW! It don't need ta be THAT hot!"

Honoka just grinned at him. "You were going to try to lie, weren't you?"

Mrs. Minami had found herself collapsed into her chair in shock. "Wh..how…" "...wouldn't you?" Ranma asked Honoka dryly, gesturing to the woman. Who seemed to be going into shock.

Honoka tilted her head. "Hmm...I think so, now that I see this."

"...so Miss Saotome was the boy the whole time," The principal finally recovered. "Erm...which is she?"

"I'm a GUY dammit!"

"Both!" Honoka shouted at the same time, causing the pair to look at each other. "Well, you said there's no cure, so you're both!"

"Uhh…"

The Principal shook her head. "Since it gives me a way to overlook this whole thing and it seems to be important to my daughter, I'll be taking Honoka's side on this issue. While you're at my school, young lady, you will remain a girl. Is that clear?"

"Well, it ain't completely up ta me," Ranma said slowly. "But I'll carry some water so I can change back quick, that all right?"

"That is...acceptable."

Maki stepped off the train, sniffing, behind the other four girls. "This is supposed to be about your dancing right. So the question I have is, why do *I* have to come along?"
Honoka grinned. "Well, I thought you could stand a break. Why do you have to spend every afternoon alone in the music room?"

Maki just sniffed again. "Because I like to," Ranma chuckled at that. "Hey, what's so funny?"

"Nothing." Ranma chuckled some more. "Just three days ago if you'd told me I'd be givin' up my spare time to do somethin' like this I'd have laughed in your face. Probably best ta not fight it." She paused. "Okay, look, the Doc couldn't get away from his office and he's doin' us a favor anyway since he doesn't have anyone to look at today. I didn't want ta bring you to Nerima, so stick close. And if I tell ya to run, don't argue. Things don't usually get that bad, but this can be a dangerous part of town."

Everybody nodded at that sudden declaration. They spent the next few minutes leaving the train station in silence.

Honoka grinned. "Well, it's nice to get closer to five members. Maybe you can perform for the concert!"

Umi groaned. "We absolutely don't have time to add a fourth member now, I'd have to rework the whole routine!"

"Actually," Maki glanced to Honoka, who nodded her encouragement. "If you can track down a keyboard and an amp, I could do the background live if you wanted to try it."

Umi thought about that for a second. "It might help."

Honoka nodded. "If that's what you want to do."

"Wh-what do you mean?!" Maki blushed profusely. "It's not like I wanted to be an idol or something, you just needed my help!"

Unfortunately, at that point Ranma had gotten so distracted by the conversation and looking out for incoming threats that she had forgotten to check the route. So she was surprised to hear a voice call out from a nearby shop. "Ranchan."

"Oh, great. Ukyo, I ain't in the mood and I gotta get to Toufu's clinic," The pig-tailed martial artist turned to the girl who had just stepped out of the Okonomiyaki joint that had, up until a moment ago, seemed unremarkable.

She was taller than Honoka, but only by a small amount. Her long brown hair was swept back with a white ribbon, and she was wearing, oddly enough, only an extremely short yukata in a navy blue color, trimmed in pale pink. Her modesty was preserved by a pair of black leggings. Her most unusual accessory, though, was a long bandoleer, currently empty, but holding a halberd shaped like a giant spatula across her back. "Oh no Ranma, honey, you don't get to waltz down the street with four girls and not explain yourself!"

This was Ukyo Kuonji.

Honoka rolled her eyes. "Fiance?"

"Uh...yeah." Ranma turned to Ukyo, but the unfolding chaos was temporarily halted in its' tracks by a shout of dismay.

Everyone turned, to see Maki pointing straight at Ukyo. "Y-y-you can't do that! She's a girl!"
Ukyo facepalmed. "You didn't tell them, jackass?"

"Well, I told most of 'em. It just kinda... slipped my mind. Sorry Maki." Ranma had the good grace to look sheepish.

"Tell me what? That you're already engaged!?"

Ukyo blinked, surprised. "Wait, what the heck's going on here?"

"How can two girls be engaged?" Maki screeched. "My life was just fine three days ago! Three days ago people did not jump improbably high distances, boys did not suddenly appear in my school with apparent intent to sexually assault, disputes over school rules were not settled with martial arts matches, and the weirdest thing I had to deal with was a second-year fangirl!"

Ranma rolled her eyes. "Ukyo, better get the hot water."

Maki continued to rant while the idols tried, in vain, to shush her and keep her from making more of a scene until Ukyo reappeared with the kettle, pouring it over Ranma's head and restoring him to his natural form.

It took Maki another thirty seconds to notice. "Wai...the boy fro...that wa..."

Umi reflected that it was a good thing she worked out. Maki was heavier than she seemed.

"Ranchan, why didn't you tell that girl about the curse?"

Ranma looked down at his feet. "Well, three days ago I didn't think I'd see her again, and then it just didn't seem important until it didn't come up. Anyway, that's Maki, the girl holdin' her up is Umi, and these are Honoka and Kotori." Ranma paused. "Look, why don't ya hand her to me, we're losin' enough time as it is. Ucchan, you want an explanation have Konatsu look after the shop."

Ukyo frowned for a moment, then nodded. "I've got a couple of hours before the dinner rush and the prep's all done." She called back to the shop to the pretty girl dressed similarly to herself. "Konatsu, watch the store for a couple of hours?"

"Yes ma'am!"

"Okay, we're ready to go," Ukyo jumped ahead of the group to casually walk backwards, which is probably a lot safer when you're carrying around a weapon that large. "So, who are they really?"

Honoka shook her head. "Well, Ranma already told you our names, but I'm Kousaku Honoka. These are Sonoda Umi and Minami Kotori, and that's Nishikino Maki. And we're Otonokizaka's School Idol group, Mu's!"

"And just how did Ranchan get mixed up with you guys?" Ukyo did not seem impressed.

"Oh, he just dropped in," Honoka grinned.

"And you're sure you're not more fiances?"

Honoka actually giggled at that. "Nope. My parents never bought a kid," Ranma shook his head. "Is it really so weird that I'd be friends with someone without havin' to marry'em?"

"YES!" Ukyo shouted at him, starting to get angry. "Ranchan, you're my fiance!"
Umi was the one rolling her eyes now. "That's up for debate, but it's not our business. I guess Ranma's been in a school idol group before, and since Honoka doesn't know when to quit and I kinda screwed up the training regimen he's helping us out until our first live performance."

"Umi!" Honoka whined at her old friend.

...who was completely unsympathetic. "It's true. Without Ranma you'd be laid up in bed through orientation and you know it."

"Well, she'd probably be fine by the day of the performance," Ranma interjected, deciding not to point out that he had kind of been responsible for the injury in the first place.

Ukyo took the time to think about this. "Look, sugar, I guess as long as it's just a couple of weeks I can live with it. Maybe we all need a break after that fiasco with the wedding. Just be sure it's worth it."

The Nerima train station was deserted as Rin stepped off the train. Today she was wearing an oversized red and cream-colored polo shirt and her cargo pants, the ones with a strap over her shoulder to hold them up. Her green eyes glanced back and forth, then signaled to Hanayo behind her, who stepped off the train behind her with a very slight roll of her eyes. "Rin, you're being ridiculous." Today, Hanayo had chosen to wear her brown skirt with the blue flower-pattern sweater.

"Kayochi!" the reply came with a slight whine. "You don't know what this district's like. They were kicked out of all the intra-city school competitions for cheating..." She saw Hanayo's skeptical look. "People were getting hurt, and there was a lot of stuff that shouldn't be possible. I never got into a competition with them, but I'm not letting you go to this place alo-nya!"

Hanayo whimpered slightly. "Okay, okay, but this is where the famous underground idol group did all their performances, and I heard a rumor they're getting back together."

Rin sighed. "The group that hasn’t done a show since last Christmas, and that one by invite only? That's why we're out here?" She held up her hands. "Okay, okay, where are we going?"

<SCENE BREAK>

Rin wasn’t impressed. "A dojo?"
“Not just any dojo!” Hanayo cried out with an unusual intensity. “I used the photos and compared them to pictures of Nerima, and used satellite images from the web to find the streets around the building in the music videos. It took days because they never registered on Love Live so I had to go through the old school idol forums and most of them have closed and the image searches don’t turn up much. I’m not even sure the name was CoCo, there’s a professional group by that name too. But it has to be this dojo!”

There was a very long silence between them. “Hanayo, you’re scaring me.”

“Challengers in the back,” A bland voice said. “See the sign?”

Rin blinked, and read the sign the girl in the Furinkan owner had indicated. “Those wishing to challenge the owners in savage combat”. . . “

“Yeah.” The girl said blandly. “Now, go on, shoo.”

“Nabiki!” Another girl admonished her. “Don’t listen to her, you don’t look like challengers to me.” She came up and bowed in greeting. “I’m Tendo Akane. Can I help you?”

Hanayo grinned at her. “Well, we were looking for where the idol group is performing next week.”

Akane and Nabiki both blinked in surprise, looking at each other. Akane spoke first. “So... you came to our house?”

Hanayo blushed. “Er...well...”

Rin rolled her eyes. “I’m sorry, she gets like this sometimes.”
Hanayo pouted. “But I was so sure they’re here. I mean, it’s on the internet...”

Akane thought about it for a moment. “You know, how about I take you around to where they could actually have concerts? There should be a poster up or something.”

<SCENE BREAK>

Kotori sat on the medical bed, while the tall man with the glasses carefully looked her over. He gave her a nod. "Well, Miss Minami, you certainly seem to be perfectly healthy. You don't have much of a ki reserve, though, so I can't clear you for any 'special training' Ranma might come up with.

Kotori giggled at him. "I don't think that will be a problem, Doctor Toufu. We're dancers, not martial artists."

"Then you're quite brave to come out to my office," Toufu chuckled. "Now, up you get. Just let me make some adjustments, here... can I have your email?" Email addresses were quickly swapped, and Toufu sent something with his tablet. "Now, we don't have a long time, ideally we'd have started this a month or even two ago, but if you ask your parents to prepare meals according to this plan you'll be in the best possible shape for your concert. Now, if you could send in the next...patient."

"I really am sorry to bother you," The blonde said as she stood up and bowed.

Toufu just laughed. "Oh, it's no bother. Really, it's a nice change of pace to work on patients who aren't suffering from injuries or the aches of old age. Not that I mind them, of course."

"...does that happen often?"

Toufu frowned, looking troubled. "More than I'd like, but the degree of injury is such that it's hard to get the authorities to believe me. I've also suspected for awhile that there's someone exerting influence to make sure any reports are lost."

Kotori frowned briefly. "Well, thank you again, Doctor."

"Please, send in my next patient."

Kotori returned his smile, and then stepped out into the hallway. "It looks like I'm all right. Honoka, I think you were next."

Maki was frowning at the list on her own phone. "I'd gain weight eating this."

"Well, not if yer workin' out," Ranma pointed out. "It's up ta you,"

Kotori glanced at Umi. "Ranma, are any of your fiancés... uhm, how do I ask this?"

Umi glanced at the office. "Is this about last night?"

Ranma's eyes narrowed. "What about last night?"

"Nothing!" Kotori coughed. "I guess... are any of your parents, well, important people?"
Ranma blinked, obviously genuinely startled by the question. "Well, there's the Kunos, I guess. They got a lot of money, that count?" With a nod, he frowned and thought further. "Mister Tendo is on the city council too."

Umi and Kotori exchanged a meaningful glance. "Thanks, Ranma, that helps."

"Uhh...anytime?"

There came a shriek from the examination room. Umi put a hand to her forehead. "Guess Honoka just got her diet."

Rin shook her head in a total lack of surprise as they took their seats at what had to be the last cafe in Furinkan. “Nothing,” she said. “Kayochi, I think this was a waste of time.”

Hanayo was busy tapping away at her cell phone. “I know it was in Nerima!” she said, scrolling frantically over the posts, her eyes getting ever more intense. “And so it has to be them!”

Akane sighed herself. “You know, it would help if we knew what we were looking for. A name, maybe?”

Hanayo blinked. “Wait, you mean you don’t know?!” She leaned across the table, taking Akane’s hands, much to the older girl’s shock. Hanayo’s eyes sparkled as she gushed out “They’re nothing less than the biggest name outside Love Live! Their CD’s are legendary collectors items, and their music videos would make any idol fan’s life complete! For six months they brought the professional idol world to their knees, but then after the new year they just vanished!” Akane got the very real feeling that the girl holding her hands in a vice-like grip wasn’t really seeing her anymore. “Oh, to attend just one of their concerts….”

Akane stared in disbelief at the display. Rin didn’t seem to be doing much better, and finally said. “The name, Kayochi. We need to know the name.”

Hanayo grinned nervously and settled back in her seat. “Er...right. The legendary idols are -”

“OH HO HO HO HO!!!!”
Akane growled. “What’s she doing here?”

There was no need to ask who ‘she’ was. A black ponytail hanging off one side of her head, almost in defiant contrast to her intentionally aristocratic bearing. A lime-green leotard, showing off a trim and slender figure. And a voice that could grate steel into shavings.

This was Kuno Kodachi.

“I see you think to rise above your common station, peasant. But know that I, Kuno Kodachi, the Black Rose of St. Hebereke’s schoo - “

“Hey!” Rin shouted, interrupting the girl before she could work up to a good rant. “I remember now, you’re the one who wrecked the entire gymnastics circuit two years ago!”

Kodachi sniffed. “I was simply better than the common rabble. It’s obvious, if you think about it.”

“It wasn’t a fight! You brought weapons to a rhythmic gymnastics meet!”

Kodachi smiled nastily. “I was busy inventing the form of Martial Arts Rhythmic Gymnastics. If the others didn’t wish to participate, they should not have come. Thus, I triumphed, as is my right!” And then Kodachi laughed again, forcing Rin to cover her ears. “If you object to my methods, are you challenging me?”

Rin looked like she was seriously considering it, but caught Akane’s frantic waving out of the corner of her eye. “No.”

“That’s what I thought.” Kodachi smiled. “Very well. As I was saying, Tendo, your attempts to
rise above your station will avail you not, for the star of Otonokizawa is truly falling if these girls will
deign to speak with you.”

Akane sighed. “If I agree, will you go away?”

Kodachi seemed taken aback by this. “Well, I am gratified to see you acknowledge your superiors,
so yes, for the moment, I think I will. Adieu!” The restaurant was suddenly filled with a storm of
black rose petals. Rin and Hanayo winced at the inexplicable dramatic breeze, covering their eyes.
By the time they could see again, the strange girl was gone.

Hanayo looked around the room in an obvious daze. “Does that happen often?”

Akane’s head sunk into her arms. “All the time.”

<SCENE BREAK>

The inside of 'Ucchan's' was a pretty normal setup, a bar around the hibachi-style grills for making
the Okonomiyaki, with several tables and booths. It was all finished in polished wood. Honoka
reflected that it actually looked kind of fancy as she stepped up to the bar. Luckily it was still a bit
before the real dinner rush would start. She consulted her phone and sighed, taking her seat. "I'll
have a pork with all the veggies," she said to the waitress standing behind the counter.

Konatsu, as she had been called by Ukyo, bowed. "Of course, miss. Please wait a few minutes."

It took almost forty minutes, during which she patiently played a few games on her phone, but
eventually the plate was planted in front of her. "Here ya go." Ukyo said with a bright smile, moving
on as quickly as possible until Honoka reached over the grill to grab her wrist.

"Wait. I think we got off on the wrong foot."

Ukyo stopped. Of course, she could break the girl's grip without a moment's effort, but something in
her voice stopped her. "All right, sugar. As long as you understand that Ranma-honey's mine."

Honoka shook her head. "I have no idea why that's your first thought."

Ukyo stopped, completely surprised. "That would make you the first," She took in Honoka's
completely puzzled stare. "Wow, you really don't get it, do you? Listen, sugar, Ranma's not a boy
you want to get mixed up with."
She was about to clarify why, when Honoka interrupted. "That's what everyone keeps telling me."

"Well, it's true." Ukyo grinned, sliding her an extra soda. "On top of me. There's Akane, the violent maniac. She'll pound Ranma for just about any reason. But the other girl you really have to watch out for is Shampoo."

"I need to watch out for soap?"

"...no." Ukyo groaned. "Shampoo is a girl from way out in China. She's from a tribe of absolute savages and has the craziest laws. If you beat her in a fight, she'll hunt you down to the ends of the earth and kill you. And her stalker, Mousse, is even worse. He's blind as a bat so even if he cared about innocent bystanders he might stab you with those chains by accident."

"And then there's Ryouga, who wants to kill Ranma-honey over a bread feud of some kind. I don't know all the details there." Honoka's eyes were wide as saucers by now.

"And that's not counting all the weirdos just passing through. Half of them want to kill Ranma, maybe a quarter want Akane, and the rest want to marry Ranma's girl side. Really, you're the first one who's even tried to convince anyone you're not any of them in months."

Honoka gulped. "And what was that about a wedding?"

Ukyo gulped. "Something Ranma and Akane's fathers cooked up. Ranma took my dowry, but his father seems to want to have him marry Akane for some reason I don't really get. They don't even like each other, so it all went pear shaped when everyone heard about it." Ukyo gave her a speculative look. "Ranma didn't mention any of this?"

Honoka's head shook. "Not really. He kind of glossed over a lot of it, but he didn't seem to want to talk about it, and I can guess why. It must be rough."

Ukyo briefly looked troubled. "I guess...anyway, the dinner rush is starting. Enjoy your okonomiyaki." She flipped the pancake to Honoka's plate with a practiced gesture and moved on to other customers.

The last destination Akane could think of was the local stadium. No one could quite remember why it had been built in the district, but it was a rather humble sight compared to the concert halls in the central city districts, only seating a thousand compared to the massive crowds that could be handled elsewhere. It was also devoid of the interesting architectural flourishes of those buildings, or even an exterior park to segregate it from the rest of the city to allow the crowds somewhere to gather. Just a large, stone structure that could be almost anything if you didn’t know what you were looking at, only distinguished by a sign by the four-door ‘front entrance.’

Hanayo pouted as she looked over the posters pinned up in a display case. “Nothing.” She brightened. “They might not have put one up! I’ll go check in the office.” She ran off, leaving Akane and Rin behind.
Akane gave Rin a small smile. “Is she always like this?”

“No. I gave in because she’s never *this* passionate, but she’s spent all afternoon dragging me and a stranger around another district and...” Rin threw up her arms.

“Hey, it’s okay,” Akane said in her best soothing voice. “It’s nice to see someone who isn’t obsessed with martial arts for a change.”

Rin was about to answer, when her ears picked up a nearby conversation. Two boys, probably from the local high school, were walking past. Their clothes, bearing, and appearance were all utterly bland, but what caught her attention was what one was saying. “Yeah, the girl’s hot, but it looks like she’s got a boyfriend.”

“Nah, dude, she’s totally a tomboy,” the other said.

*It’s just some guys on the street.* Rin felt her heart break a little. *They could be talking about anybody.* Before her thoughts could go any further down that line, though, she heard a growl next to her. “Uh...Tendo?”

“Call me a tomboy, will they?” Rin took a step back as a wave of palpable anger seemed to roll off her.

Rin swallowed. “They were probably talking about me...” she tried to point out.

“That’s even worse!” Akane snarled. “You’re way too ‘cute’ to be a tomboy. I’ll show them, insulting women like that!”

Rin put a hand on her shoulder. “Woah, hey, it’s okay.”
Akane blinked. “Uh...well, okay, if you say so.” The girl visibly calmed down, almost seeming to turn on a dime. “Uhm...it is getting kind of late, though. You should probably head to the station. Will you be all right?”

Rin grinned. “It’s fine. I’ll see you around.”

Akane bowed slightly. “Likewise. Seeya.”

<SCENE BREAK>

The next afternoon, on the roof, Maki continued to boggle at the transformation. "So, hot and cold water?" She leaned against the bars at the edges of the rooftop. "Sorry about before, but Honoka's right and you should really have thought ahead and just 'gone girl' the whole way."

Ranma, meanwhile, was busy doing her own stretches, which largely seemed to consist of slowly doing a splits in the middle of the rooftop. "Yeah, in hindsight that was kinda dumb. Sorry I scared ya."

"It's fine, it's fine." Maki considered for a moment, then started running through a stretching routine of her own. "Are you planning to stick around after the concert?"

"I'm not sure." Ranma admitted. "I have ta say that Kanda's a nice place to hang out after school. And I guess it ain't like I was doin' much. Get home and do my spar instead of just when I wake up when Pops decides to ambush me."

"...your father attacks you in the mornings?" Maki reflected that she was getting used to these casual declarations of mayhem far too quickly.

Ranma shrugged. "Actually don't mind that bit too much, decent awareness training."

"You have one weird life," Maki finally settled on. "Thanks for the sheet music, by the way. It was interesting. Who wrote it? I don't recognize the name."

"Ah, yeah, Kasumi's Akane's older sister," Ranma shrugged. "I think she wrote 'bout half the songs we did."

Maki nodded. "I noticed you never put any videos on the web site."

"Web site?"

"Love Live," Maki explained. "It's a central social networking site for school idol groups. You can post songs, videos, leave messages for fans. It's basically how the whole thing really took off, I think."
It gives you all the tools you need to be like a real idol group, although one of the rules is that you can't make any money."

"Oh, rules. Guessin' ya have ta be a student, right?" Ranma nodded to herself, more than to Maki. "That explains it. Kasumi don't go to Furinkan, neither does Shampoo, so we did it for fun. We did do some recordings, on the school's old video equipment, couple'a live concerts, but we didn't get fancy or nothing."

"Ah. I see." Maki finished up her stretching out. "Anyway, shouldn't the others be here by now?"

"Yeah, they should be..."

---

Eri managed to restrain herself long enough to get back to the student council's office on the first floor. When they got there, she made sure the doors were shut and locked, then pulled down the blinds before turning slowly around.

The vice president didn't need to be able to predict the future to see where this was going. "Nozomi. Would you please stop that?" Eri said, sounding genuinely hurt. "I'm trying to help the school."

"So are they, Erichi," Nozomi said calmly.

Eri paced back and forth. "I don't have any problems with their sincerity, you know. I really do think they want to save the school. It's their methods and you know it! And this... this Ranma. Where they heck did they dig her up anyway?"

"Actually, she fell from the sky. Like an angel from Heaven, believe it or not," The dark-haired girl said with a rather serene smile.

Eri glanced at her sidelong. "Wasn't Satan also an angel fallen from Heaven?"

"Technically, I suppose," Nozomi shuffled her tarot cards. "Would you like me to do a reading?"

Eri sighed. "This isn't the time for that. Do you have any idea why the principal isn't putting a stop to this mess? She has to be aware of it."

Nozomi shook her head at her friend's stubbornness. "I know she forbade you from doing anything directly, but they're not. Not really. Besides, the five of them seem to be having fun with it, and that's the important thing."

"It's not supposed to be fun!"

Nozomi smiled. "Are we still talking about saving the school?"

"O-of course we are!"

Nozomi pulled up one of the blinds. "I wonder..."

Eri was about to respond when Nozomi stopped immediately after opening a window. "Nozomi? What's wrong?"

"Shh...I think I hear something." There was another pause as she put her ear down to the gap in the window to listen "What the heck? There's screaming, and... well, it's not the boy."

"What are they saying?"
Nozomi's nose scrunched in confusion. "What a haul?"

"Huh?"

The sight would have been familiar to residents of Nerima, but in the Kanda ward no one had seen it before. At the head of the crowd was what could only be described as a wizened old man. His head bald save tiny tufts of white hair along the sides, atop a body that seemed entirely too small for it and shrunken a bit further from age. Despite his obviously advanced years, he held a huge bundle over one shoulder, and was moving ahead of a crowd of Otonikizaka students.

This was Happousai.

And at the head of the crowd chasing him was Honoka. "GET BACK HERE YOU PERVERT!"

So it would seem that some things were the same regardless of which part of Tokyo you were in.

"What a haul! WHAT A HAUL!" Happousai cried out in sheer joy, even as a silky undergarment flew free from his bundle, floating through the air.

The crowd was just enraged further.

Umi caught up, having retrieved a bow and quiver of arrows from the school's archery range. "I'm sure he's involved somehow!"

"Yeah, probably!" Honoka managed, anger giving her a stamina that would have been unthinkable before Mu's. "How's your aim?"

"I think I can hit him. No telling how much damage it'll do with a target tip!" Umi shouted, pulling out an arrow and nocking it. "I'll have to stand still to line up the shot, though."

Honoka considered that for a moment. "Maybe you shouldn't!"

"He stole everyone's . . . I am not going to say it out on the street!"

Kotori finally managed to catch up. "Just make him give them baaaack!"

Finally, a certain pigtailed martial artist caught up to the crowd as well. "Dammit! Shoulda known the old freak would turn up sooner or later!"

Umi glared at her. "So you do know him!"

"Yeah, he's the grandmaster of my school!" Ranma was frowning at the bow. "Maybe you'd better let me handle this. I don't really wanna kill him."

"I do." Umi countered.

Ranma sighed. "I don't know for sure, but I think he needs ta do stuff like this to live. But if it'll make ya happy, go ahead and take your shot. before we get outta the residential area!"

"With pleasure!" Umi planted her feet and pulled the arrow back. She only took a moment to take aim with a deep breath before letting fly. The shaft flew true, until at the last second Happousai seemed to sense the danger and bounded up higher, landing on top of a nearby building.

Ranma did the only thing she could and vaulted up after him.
What must be understood is that, to most people, Tokyo is a twisting maze of thoroughfares and side-alleys, broken up only by the few businesses one might frequent. This came from its' origins as a feudal city - the streets designed to confuse attackers and carried forward to the modern day. But to those who could travel the rooftops, it instead became a series of islands separated only by narrow rivers, an open field of travel and combat.

Having taken to these rooftops, Happousai was making a beeline for one of the few havens of possible safety close by, the high towers of Akihabara's Electric Town district. Ranma growled, expecting a trap, but followed.

The old Master leaped down into the streets, dodging around the cars and crowds. Ranma was forced to follow or lose track of him, weaving through the crowds of tourists and shoppers. Then Ranma noticed several of the workers at the district's maid cafes hanging out in front of their restaurant. "Clear! Get outta the wa-"

He was cut off when something he expected to happen, didn't. Normally, the freak wouldn't be able to resist flipping up the girl's skirts. But instead he ran on by. "...what?" Ranma nearly stopped chasing him - something was up.

It turned out to be Happousai, who found a space between two tall buildings and began rebounding off of them in an effort to get away, slowly ascending with each jump. *Well, two can play that game,* Ranma thought, starting to make the same leaps.

However, when she got to the rooftop things were not quite as she expected. Happousai wasn't making the leap to the next roof, but instead had assumed a casual sitting position with his bundle next to him. He had also pulled out his pipe and was attempting to light it despite the high winds. "Ranma m'boy," he said, sounding serious, so Ranma elected to warily approach half-way across the rooftop.

"Old letch, don't tell me you want to talk."

Said letch shrugged. "I think it's about time, don't you. I'm not getting any younger, and this isn't as much fun as it used to be."

"Yeah, right."

Happousai chuckled. "Well, I guess I can't blame you for not believing me, so here's the deal. You think you're ready to be a Master? Don't bother denying it, even if you don't think so. You wouldn't be teaching these girls if you didn't think you could."

"Of course I'm good enough." Ranma barked out a laugh. "I can give you a run for your money."

"Don't flatter yourself, sonny," the old master said as his pipe finally lit. "You've got a long way to go before you can beat me in a fair match and you know it. . . but you don't need to be that good."

"What's it to you, anyway? Pops won't make me a Master 'til I marry Akane."

Happousai grinned. "Well, it's too bad he doesn't get a say in the matter. First time we met, I made you my student, and that means you get to be a master on my say so, not your father's."

Ranma just turned around. "I don't care about that. Just leave this part of Tokyo alone. It ain't like Nerima and I don't got time ta chase ya all over the whole city."

"Oh, really. Do you think you can stop me?" Happousai cackled at the implied challenge. "Sounds like fun."
"I can try." Ranma's voice carried a hint of finality to it.

Happousai took pause at that. "This new attitude wouldn't happen to have anything to do with Phoenix Mountain, would it?"

"What's it to you?"

The master took another moment to think about this new bit of information. "Ranma, m'boy, killing a man changes you. Never mind that Saffron got up afterwards. You killed him, and by every account you meant to do it. This isn't behavior becoming of a martial artist."

Another snort. "Like you care anything about that."

"Sit down!" Happousai's voice carried a sense of authority that would not be denied, and Ranma found himself kneeling in a way he never had before. It took a lot for the old man to put aside his lechery, but it seemed he was serious for the first time in a long time. "I know I'm not the best behaved old man, but I do care. Think about it, m'boy. I could do a lot worse for my simple pleasures than I do. I hold myself back, and no one gets hurt. Not really. That is one of the things you still need to learn."

"All right, fine. So what is it you want me to do?"

Happousai grinned in a way that set Ranma's teeth on edge. "Oh, you're already doing it. Normally there's all these ceremonies to test your skills and patience, but really. I named my style 'Anything Goes' for a reason. What is the first principle of our school?"

"Evaluate, Adapt, Overcome, and Steal," The answer came almost automatically.

Happi cackled in triumph. "Exactly. There's no point in testing your skill in the Art - even if you're not as good as your father, and I understand that's not the case, you're so good that any evaluation of your skill at the Art is meaningless. So, let's apply the principle. The tools at hand won't work, so I'll adapt.

"Just keep doing what you're doing," the master continued. "And we'll see if you can learn to teach the Art by teaching 'your' girls."

"Huh? I can't say I get it." Ranma found herself scratching her head. "But one condition. Hands offa them. I can't work if you're gonna be doin' this every day."

The Master laughed. "Oh, agreed...but there is one other thing." A folder flew into Ranma's hands. "What's the point in teaching if there's no goal? If your girls do well enough in that, I will award you your Mastery, and the right to found your own school."

"And what do you get out of this?" Ranma asked.

Happousai laughed his most lecherous laugh. "Why, I get the chance to see and maybe even touch my lovely student in one of those miniskirts!"

"Why you..." Ranma went to tackle the old letch, and found her limbs tangled in his pipe, and being sent flying off into the horizon with a scream.

Honoka's bedroom. Ranma sighed as he climbed in through the window, having found hot water somewhere along the way.
Honoka grinned at him good-naturedly. "I thought the first time a boy climbed in that way would be more romantic," she said quietly, still wearing her workout clothes. "Did you get them back?"

"Afraid not," Ranma said, troubled. "Honoka... I..." Finally, he just presented the folder Happousai had handed him earlier in the evening.

The ginger girl took it and read it. "Love Live Music Festival... Ranma, this is it!" she whispered in hushed, excited tones. "If we can enter this, we'll be sure to attract enough attention to keep the school open!"

Ranma's jaw dropped. "I...hey, you're right. I guess that makes this easier to ask."

"Huh?"

"The old man..." Ranma's shoulder sagged. "He said if you girls win the festival's competition, he'd give me my Mastery certification. I can't say I get what he's playin' at, and it's probably no good, but..."

Honoka sagged a bit at that thought. No matter what, it meant pulling everyone further into the chaos that was Ranma's life - even if they told him to go away, this would still be on and no doubt more trouble would find them. "We'll talk it over with the others. After the live show. Let's make sure we can put something together and pull it off before we set our sights this high."

"Gotcha. It's late, but I thought I'd let you know." Ranma glanced out the window. "Seeya tomorrow, then?"

"Always."
A few days later, the now-familiar rooftop workout was underway. "Okay, guys," Ranma said. "I think one hundred situps, four sets of twenty five should cover it. I wanna check something, can you do it yourselves?" At a series of affirmatives, she went to Honoka's book bag and pulled out her laptop.

Umi gasped her exasperation. "Aren't you going to stop her?"

"Why?" Honoka shrugged. "He's been doing her homework on there anyway, apparently she did all of it by hand before so I've been letting her use my laptop so he'll have enough time with all the travel back and forth."

"It wouldn't take so long if he didn't run." Kotori pointed out, sitting down to start her set.

"I only been doing it 'cuz you insisted," Ranma groused, bringing up the pink-themed Love Live web site. "Now, let's see...I feel like I'm forgettin' something."

"SWEET-O!" Happousai's cry of delight echoed through the Nerima streets, skipping merrily ahead of his usual crowd of admirers and their varied projectiles.

"Eh, can't be too important," Ranma concluded. "Looks like ya got about twenty people followin'..." She thought about that for a moment. It didn't seem too bad, with the school's light population. Then she blinked as Maki pointed at a bar along one side. 'Top Groups,' with the name A-RISE at the top. She gave her a curious glance, but clicked. "...we got work ta do," she concluded.

Maki chuckled. "If you want to get to the top spot, we do. That's probably not realistic."

"Oh, just you watch, Maki," Ranma gave one of her trademarked cocky smirks, cracking her knuckles. "Saotome Ranma don't lose. Speaking of which," Ranma glanced up at her fellow redhead. "Got any more songs for us in the works?"

Maki gulped, realizing just how close Ranma's face was and inching back. "Uh, I've got a few ideas, but I'm going to need lyrics."

"Oh," Ranma blinked. "Uh...who did the lyrics we got?"

"...that...was...me..." Umi grunted out between reps.

Ranma nodded. "Can ya talk ta Maki after practice, then?"

Furinkan High School, much like the rest of Nerima, could be called a relic if one were feeling particularly charitable. While the same could certainly be said of Otonokizaka, there was something of a difference of type. Otonoki, while it had been quite careful to move with the times, had done so in a way that did its' best to preserve a traditional feel. Wifi routers hidden in the ceilings, paying traditional craftsmen to maintain facilities that could have been managed more cheaply, extensive landscaping, it all added up to an intentional picture of a Japanese high school that had probably never truly existed, even in the pre-War era it was trying very hard to project. In short, the word that might have been used to describe it was "vintage."
Furinkan had obviously been built in the post-War era, at a time when the government simply did not have time for luxuries and every school was built to almost the exact same standards. The color of the brick might have varied, but in the end each was a simple box surrounded by a fence meant to keep students in more than intruders out. And Furinkan hadn't so much tried to project any appearances as the school hadn't been renovated since its' construction, probably in the early 70s.

If Otonokizaka was vintage, Furinkan was just old.

Which isn't really to say it was run down. By some miracle, despite being in Nerima, a focus of the local martial arts community, and run by the Kuno family, the grounds were kept in almost exactly the same condition as they were when the school was erected. It was simply that, other than making the fence a bit higher in a vain attempt to keep the inma- er, students locked up during the day, no one had bothered with any improvements. It stood, much like the rest of the district, a monument to a history no one really cared about because any attempt to move forward would inevitably be destroyed anyway.

Such destruction often came in the form of strangers, such as the girl in the surgical mask, sunglasses, scarf around her head, and heavy sweater over an Otonokizaka uniform waiting just outside the gate as school clubs ended. In the late spring. Since this heralded new trouble, usually aimed at Ranma, most of the Furinkan students passing intentionally paid her no mind aside from comments just within earshot, but the girl didn't budge.

Until Tendo Nabiki came strolling out, when she struck. "You should know your lead singer's betraying you!" she shouted, pointing her finger at the other girl.

Nabiki raised an eyebrow. Even by her standards, this was... well, not strange at all, come to think of it. "I haven't got the faintest idea what you're talking about."

"I know who you are, Tendo Nabiki! Third singer for DoCo, the famous underground idol group!"

Nabiki scrunched her nose. "That? We haven't done a show since Christmas, and we're not planning on it. Also, I was not 'third singer'. Whoever you are, just get lost. Ranma can do whatever he likes."

And as Nabiki walked off, the stranger stood there, finger still pointing, puzzled. "...wait, 'he'?"

Ranma looked over the rankings, but found herself hampered by the website's organization. It looks like they're not set up for the tournament yet, she thought to herself. Still, it seemed a good opportunity to look over the competition.

It was a virtual parade of skimpy costumes and, frankly, mediocre singing. Ranma quickly got to work on evaluating things.

Two minutes later, she realized that she had no idea how to deal with ranking the various potential opponents. Well, ain't like I haven't gone to the old ghoul or the letch for advice when I needed it before. Gonna need ta find my expert this time, though. She briefly entertained the idea of Cologne, Shampoo's great-grandmother, in the outfits on the screen in front of her.

Specific descriptions have been withheld to protect the sanity of the reader. You're welcome.

Kasumi was out shopping when the stranger jumped out in front of her. "Your lead singer is betraying y-" This was as far as she had gotten, because at this point Kasumi shrieked and ran. This had nothing to do with actual panic, of course. Kasumi was well above that.
But she knew trouble when she saw it, and she knew Ranma wasn't going to be home for dinner again. It was getting to be so regular she was starting to stagger the meals for him.

No, the shriek was simply to attract attention. Every merchant in the market was now staring at the strange girl, in fact.

The girl realized her imminent danger and fled.

After recovering, Ranma turned back to the problem at hand. There's no hint of the tournament on the damn site. So I gotta guess. She thought back to the rules in the flier she'd been handed by the old lech.

In short, the festival was to showcase the best School Idol groups in the country. There were thousands of schools, and in the past year almost any school that admitted girls (and a few that didn't, Umi's remark on the subject having been wrong) had a club now. There had to be some way to determine who to invite, and that was what the tournament structure was meant to deal with.

The first round of selections was set to be a straight popularity contest. The top hundred schools in the country would be pulled from the list on a certain date and placed into the first circuit for "National Stars."

Once that happened – in early summer, the rankings would be zeroed out and divided by region. Mu's, if they hadn't made the first circuit, would then have to compete within the Tokyo prefecture. That ain't good, Ranma thought to herself with a frown. She pulled up the regional listings and quickly went back and forth with the nationals. Lot of the top 50 teams here.

The second round entries were also more competitive - The first circuit would be 'played' in a tournament structure to narrow down the participants still further, but it would only be two or three rounds for them. The second circuit, on the other hand, would be set up for single elimination - every team that met a certain popularity threshold would compete by putting on a streamed or live performance across from an opponent, and votes received within a certain time frame would be used to determine the winner. We don't even know how many songs we gotta put on. That would continue until there was only one group left in each of the prefectures, the "Regional Stars."

Which was the other rub – while they could build their popularity by covering popular songs, the two circuits both had a rule that for every official performance the song had to be brand new. The national circuit wouldn't be bad, but the regional could be brutal if they had to do too much. Especially on Maki and Umi, as the composer and lyricist.

If they didn't make either of the first two rounds, to make it an even 75 groups, six others would be picked from the new top 100 overall by lottery. The odds on that were so long Ranma dismissed it out of hand.

The best thing would be to aim for the second round, Ranma reasoned. But...the idea of forfeiting the first stuck in her craw, even if it wasn't likely to work.

"Your lead singlargh!"

Shampoo blinked. Is the road a bit rougher than usual today? she thought to herself, in Chinese, as she rode her bike down the alley on the way to her next delivery.

Ranma was forced to come to a sad conclusion. I ain't got the head for this stuff.
"Trouble?" A voice said from right behind her ear. Ranma jumped straight up almost a meter, which wasn't impressive until you considered that a moment before she was hunched over a laptop.

*How the heck did she do that?!* Ranma thought, finding herself in a ready stance facing Nozomi, whose arms were crossed behind her back. She forced herself to relax, noting with some pride that Honoka had obviously noticed her move but hadn't stopped dancing. *Heh. She don't make the same mistake twice.* Out loud, she said "Nothin' I can't handle. Any problems, Prez?"

Nozomi seemed amused. "I'm only the Vice President, Ranma." This proclamation was met with a shrug.

"You're the sane one, so you're in charge."

Nozomi gave her a disappointed frown. "Please don't be too hard on Eri," she murmured. "It can be fun to tweak her nose a bit, but she really wants what's best for the school."

"Then why won't she let us get to work?" Ranma asked. "At least without doin' everything she can to poke into our business. And anyway, why the heck are we doin' this on the rooftop? I could clear a classroom of desks and put'em all back at the end of the day."

Nozomi frowned. "Well, this isn't actually the Idol Research Club."

"Oh...wait, hold on," Ranma picked up the folder and looked through it. "Honoka said somethin' about needin' five members. We got four, since I don't count....this what she was talkin' about?" A quick nod, and Ranma checked the entry rules for the festival contests again. "Dammit!"

"Language, Miss Saotome," Nozomi grinned. "See, if you're going to say things like that, say them where Eri will hear. It will annoy her to no end."

"I'll keep it in mind," Ranma smirked, but then turned serious. "Right. Know anyone who's really into this stuff? I gotta admit I got no clue."

The number ended, and Umi, as the only dancer not gasping for breath, teased "What, living in a cave your whole life?"

"I wish," Ranma said, sounding rather sincere about it. "But that ain't the poi-" She caught Honoka trying to wave her off. "Eh, never mind. I'm sure the concert will get some more attention."

Nozomi smiled. "Well, there is Yazawa Nico," she said with a glance to the others. "But I think talking to her now wouldn't be a good idea." Ranma looked like she was about to ask about that, so she pulled up her deck. "But anyway, I was going to offer to do a reading for you." The Vice President of the Student Council gave the girls (and one half-girl) of Mu's a smile that belonged more to a mystic than a highschooler. "And my readings are *never* wrong."

Everyone quickly gathered around, and Ranma found a deck of cards in her hands. "Please, shuffle. I'm curious about you in particular." Ranma shrugged, quickly riffling the cards together at a high speed. "Please make sure to flip them around every time."

Once the cards were shuffled to Nozomi's satisfaction, she sat down on the roof and laid out the first card. "The Fool," Nozomi nodded, mostly to herself. "In the past, you have been, or have seen yourself, as the hero of your own story," Ranma snorted, although she did look intrigued. "However, as you can see, the card is reversed – if it were upright, it would be facing you. Many ill-advised choices have led you here, although they may have turned out for the best."

Ranma chuckled. "You got *no* idea, lady."
"Lady...I like that," Nozomi grinned at her, before flipping the next card. "The High Priestess, also reversed." A rather speculative glance. "Well, it's not likely repressed femininity." Ranma choked on some of her own spit and Honoka fell over laughing, her legs kicking in the air. Umi looked maybe two parts exasperated and one part amused. Kotori was shaking her head and smiling, and Maki was just twirling her hair. "This may be a hint of refusing to see potential answers in front of your face."

The third card. "As for your future..." Temperance. "Well, it looks like there was nothing to worry about." At the raised eyebrow and noises of confusion she favored them with another serene smile. "This card emphasizes the importance of working together with others. You may have a long way to go, but you're on the right path." She gently indicated the puzzled ginger who was just getting up from where she had been paralyzed with a fit of giggles. "And that concludes the reading. Remember, the cards guide us towards the future, but it is us who makes sure that future is born." She stood up. "And with that, I really do need to get to work. Paperwork to fill out and all that."

Tendo Akane was out for her afternoon jog, talking on her cell phone casually despite moving at a light run. "Movie on Sunday? Yeah, sounds great!" She paused. "Uhm, we'd have to do a different one though. Ranma already took me to that one.

The voice on the other end, belonging to her friend Yuka, took on an amused tone. "Really? Ranma?"

Akane blinked, then laughed herself. "I know, sounds weird, but he couldn't have had any prompting. Maybe he's finally getting with it."

Yuka sounded skeptical. "Is this the Akane I've known for the past two years?"

"Maybe. . . " Akane would have shrugged, but she would have lost her grip on the phone. "But, well, it's been a long year. Besides, he's changed a lot you know."

Yuka just laughed. "Maybe a triple date, then?"

Akane laughed back. "Even if I wanted to, Ranma's spending most of his time this weekend in Kanda," She didn't sound mad, and in truth she wasn't. She had been having some very mixed feelings since the failed wedding plot. Ukyo had left out a few things about it in her explanation to Honoka. The fact that she had agreed to it was easily enough missed, since Ukyo hadn't been present for that part and, before the battles on Phoenix Mountain she probably would have tried to refuse.

She had almost made up with Nabiki over sending invitations to the entire ward, and then stealing the wedding presents. Family was quite important to Akane. But trust was still lost.

The cask of Naniichuan, carrying the polar opposite of Ranma's curse and, therefore, the cure for anyone with said curse, was less understandable. It had almost been lost, and then Happousai drank it. She hoped it did something horrible to the old lecher.

The other fiancés sabotaging the wedding was par for the course, but no, what really had Akane's temper with them set on low simmer was that they'd significantly upped the ante. From Shampoo....well, she was a barbarian that didn't know better.

Ukyo, on the other hand, had taken it to a whole new level. Her response to Yet Another Zany Scheme had been to pull out bombs that could have injured bystanders. The duty of all martial artists is to protect the weak, not blow them up over a stupid argument.

As a result, Akane labored in blissful ignorance of Ranma's activities a few neighborhoods over.
And then the whole thing with the amusement park. The Toujou girl was bizarre in the extreme, but in hindsight Akane had to admit to herself that she wasn't especially dangerous compared to most of the weirdos in her life, and Eri had been downright polite. The romantic movie afterward had also been delightful, almost too much so. How had Ranma known what movie to pick?

"Hello, Earth to Akane," Yuka's voice cut in to remind her that she was drifting off into her own world in the middle of a conversation.

"Yeah, sorry, what were you saying?" Akane mumbled sheepishly.

Yuka's exasperation couldn't be more obvious. "Akane, you know he's a total lech, right?"

Akane bit back her resentment at the suggestion, although she would have been hard pressed to explain the emotion if asked. "Look, it's not like I own him. If Ranma picks up a hobby, I think that's a good thing."

"Right. And this 'Honoka' girl doesn't bother you at all." Yuka sounded skeptical.

"Not at all." The reply was clipped, betraying an inner irritation. "It's like he doesn't know she's a girl."

Yuka paused for a moment. "Do you have a picture?"

Akane was about to reply when a weirdo jumped out in front of her. "You should know your lead singer's betraying you!"

It took a few moments for Akane's brain to catch up – after a year of Ranma nothing truly phases you, but Akane didn't really have a mental shorthand for 'random accusations of betrayal.' She finally settled for tilting her head. "Excuse me, do I kn…" she trailed off, realizing. "Wait, take that stuff off."

"Wh...why should I?" the girl asked, clearly shocked.

Akane rolled her eyes. "Because that's how normal people deal with things?" she asked, albeit with a certain sense of resignation that this was going to turn into another fight.

She was quite shocked, then, when the girl pulled off her scarf and sunglasses, shaking out her twin pigtails. With the surgical mask removed, and the jacket pulled off, she looked...well, like a cute high school girl, with her red eyes and fairly short stature. Akane couldn't help but note she was nearly flat-chested, but something in her bearing made it almost impossible to mistake her for a boy.

This was Yazawa Nico.

Akane's jaw dropped in recognition. "You're the Otonoki girl who was at all our concerts!"

Nico's attitude immediately changed. "Oh, wow, you remember me!"

"Of course I remember you," Akane grinned. "But we didn't really have a lead singer, except on certain songs."

Nico frowned. "Well, I guess for an independent group it's fine to break a few rules. That's where all the experiments take place." She shook her head. "That's beside the point. Saotome Ranma's starting her own idol group!"

Somehow, this new information failed to make any more sense. "Ranma wouldn't do something like
that. Heck, he hated performing….well, mostly he hated the costumes."

Nico blinked. "Ranma? About yay high?" She asked, holding out her hand and getting a nod. "Red hair, pigtail?" Nod, nod. "A boy?" Akane nodded again, not really feeling like explaining Jusenkyo to the girl. "I guarantee it's true!" Nico declared, deciding to get back to the point. "She's been training girls at my school in dance, giving away your sheet music, everything!"

Akane shook her head. "We disbanded DoCo. The sheet music's hardly a secret, and Ranma already explained that he owed them a favor. Something about an accident." She gave a shrug. "Thank you for your concern, but it's fine."

"That isn't what I heard," Nico had a smile on her face that belonged on a member of the Heavenly host itself. "Something about her winning a martial arts match for the lead singer spot."

Akane felt something snap. Ranma had promised. This wasn't supposed to be about martial arts. And if he lied about that, what else was he lying to her about?! "He what?"

"Oh, and I also heard she tried to force herself on the club's composer." Nico said, deciding to twist the knife that extra 90 degrees. Sure, she didn't know Ranma considered herself a boy, but that seemed like a good way to spin the rumor.

Akane felt, her temper flare, but immediately calmed herself down. "Thank you for telling me, miss. Do you know where they practice?"

"On the roof of Otonokizaka Academy."

Maki, somewhat reluctantly, ran the cold water from the shower over her body. "How did you talk me into working out with you?"

"I think your mistake was saying 'I could do that if I wanted to' in front of Honoka and Ranma," Umi said from her own shower stall in an amused tone. "After that you were pretty much doomed."

Kotori's voice came out in a whine. "I don't think it's hurting any less today."

Honoka was groaning as well, but a little more optimistic. "That's because we're doing almost as much as we did the first day when Ranma nearly killed us."

Umi seemed to be taking it a little more in stride. "Well, he is taking advice from that doctor now. He said this was the 'crash course.'"

Honoka tried to ignore a particularly annoying twinge in her ankle. "I really hope so." She brightened a bit at a thought. "I'm gonna stop off at the cafe on my way home, anyone want to come?"

"Sure!" Kotori replied with a chirping cheerfulness.

Umi sighed. "HONOKA! Stick to the diet!"

"...I know." Honoka said in a voice that very much implied she did, and didn't like it. "I'll just get black coffee. That's on the list."

Maki rolled her eyes, and Umi's response confirmed what the redhead suspected. "Then wait at the gates for me. I'm going to go get Ranma from the roof. You'll stick to that diet if it kills the both of us."
The trip to Kanda took about an hour on the train, passing through the intervening wards in a blur and slowing down just enough to give a good view of the ads that Akane didn't really care about. She pulled out her phone and started looking things up on her way over. A quick check of Otonokizaka's web page revealed that it was almost as outdated as Furinkan's, but the club list did go to a link to the school's Idol Research Club. But the link had last been updated two years ago, and none of the members was named 'Honoka' so she quickly dismissed it.

A few more searches only turned up outdated concert dates, most of which hadn't actually happened, and that Nico girl featured prominently in each of the announcements. *Hmm...suspicious...* She thought back to the day she'd finally confronted Ranma over his new 'hobby'.

Ranma had been on the couch, giving the 'Private Wars' video a serious watch-through, when Akane had found him. "So, Ranma, checking out the idols after all?" She was using her best, sweetest 'I'm not mad, really' voice.

"Eh, it's not *bad* stuff..." Ranma said, definitely caught sweating.

Akane turned it off before turning towards him, putting her fists on her hips. "Ranma, you've been acting really weird lately. I mean, even for you."

"Ahh, not *this* again Akane," Ranma rolled his eyes.

Akane narrowed her eyes. "You missed dinner three days in a row." She sighed. "Ranma, I thought things were getting better. Do you remember Phoenix Mountain? Saffron? Maybe something you said?"

"Gee, Akane, of *course* I remember!" Ranma groaned. "Don't you think you're overreacting?"

"I don't know. You seem to be awfully obsessed with this 'Honoka' girl." She started to let some of her real anger creep in. "After seventeen fiances, doesn't a girl have a right to be suspicious when the boy she wants to marry suddenly starts disappearing every day to spend time with a new girl?"

Ranma rolled his eyes. "Fine, what do you want to hear?"

"Just tell me about her? Is she pretty?" Akane said, forcing herself to appear calm again.

Ranma scratched his head. "I honestly don't think I thought about it. Seems kinda weird...I guess, maybe?"

Akane raised an eyebrow. "You didn't think about it?"

"I swear it's the truth." The pig-tailed martial artist rolled his eyes. "Anyway, it's pretty much exactly what I said. You can even ask Doctor Tofu, if you want. He's helping me out."

Akane growled. "So what is this about? Is it at least another challenge? Some kind of Martial Arts Idol Dancing?"

A shake of his head. "Akane, I promise ya, I ain't showing her the Art. I ain't even qualified."

"Hmph." Akane sniffed out. "So she's just some girl. I bet she's a knockout."

Ranma paused. "Well, if you're gonna make me put her on a scale, she ain't as hot as Shampoo, and *definitely* ain't as cute as you can be."
Akane felt a blush rise to her cheeks. "R-r-Ranma? Do you really mean that?"

"Yeah, of course."

The praise managed to bring Akane's temper down from near-boiling to almost nothing in a second. "Then what is going on?"

Ranma shrugged. "It's just like I told ya. It was partly my fault she got injured, and I noticed some pretty basic problems with her workout so I gave her some advice, and she pretty much offered to give me some free food if I'd help her out a bit further with her routine."

"So, you mean like gymnastics or something?" Akane guessed, knowing that Ranma was experienced with a number of athletic fields beyond the Art, as a side effect of the various things that happened around them.

Ranma gave her a quick look. "Yeah, somethin' like that."

"And the video?"

Ranma gulped, but Akane managed to keep from jumping on him. "Eh, she don't have a leotard yet, asked me for some ideas."

Akane frowned, considering that. "Well, I guess you know more about how to make a girl look good than you have any right to. Does she at least know about the curse?"

"Yep!"

That was good. Almost no girl would put up with that bit of perversion. "How long is this going to last?"

Ranma thought about it. "Well, the show's in a couple of weeks, so I'll probably be going over every day until then. Might head over now and again after that, not like I'm gonna turn down free food for a bit of advice and it's nice to hang out with someone who doesn't want to kill me or marry me."

"So, she's a friend, and nothing more?" Akane asked, one last time.

Ranma laughed. "Akane, I promise, nothing going on there."

"Well...if you're sure..." Akane brightened. "Bring her by some time! We can have dinner! I'll even cook."

Ranma wisely refrained from comment, for once.

Akane was just wondering if she'd been tricked when the train pulled into Akihabara. The prominent poster for A-RISE's 'Private Wars' single caught her eye at the same time it caused a twinge of jealousy. I wish I could look that good. Maybe then Ranma wouldn't do these things... she was about to ruthlessly put down the thought, when she noticed a QR code in the corner, large enough to scan from the train. In an attempt to distract herself, she turned her phone's camera on it, only to bring up the same Love Live web site that Ranma was studying. She quickly looked up Otonoki's registration, and instead of Nico's group there was a picture of three girls in the school's uniform, and their names. But one stood out.

"Kousaka...Honoka." There wasn't any easy way to identify which girl was which, but in all truth it hardly seemed to matter. Each one was gorgeous in Akane's estimation, with an easy beauty she
could only dream of.

In all truth, Akane was hardly unattractive herself. She had, after all, once been the target of a literal horde of ‘hopeful boyfriends’ trying to defeat her for her hand in battle. But at times like this, she couldn't really give an honest estimation of her own abilities.

So the realization that Ranma had been blowing her off to hang out with three girls of this caliber was like suddenly picking at a wound that had almost, but not quite, healed over. It opened.

Nearby passengers edged away from Akane in alarm as the case on her phone, then the phone itself crumpled in her grip.

The sun was setting visibly up on the rooftop. Ranma couldn't help but note there were somewhat fewer groans of agony that day, at least. She sat with her legs sticking out from between the bars, hanging over the ledge. The girls were still sweating way more than she was (and there was no way she was borrowing the school showers anyway) so they had gone down to change without her. She was surprised when she felt a bottle of cold water up against her ear. Umi took a seat next to her, holding it out. "You okay? You seemed...distracted. And intense. Upcoming challenge or something?"

"Nah," the pig-tailed martial artist took the bottle and drank a gulp. "Just lookin' at something."

Umi leaned back. "Does it concern Mu's?"

Ranma decided not to answer. For a short while, neither said anything, until Umi finally decided to speak up. "Ranma, about our duel...what did you mean when you said I could do that?"

Ranma looked surprised. "You mean you don't know? I told you to ask your sensei about ki."

"Don't make fun of me!" Umi snapped back. "That's just an old legend! Stop talking about fairy tales and just tell me your tri..."

Umi trailed off as Ranma's eyes closed and she took on a soft blue glow. "Does this look like a legend to you?" She dismissed the aura a minute later. "Whew, that takes a bit out of you to do consciously." She brushed off her brow, and seemed to consider the topic for a moment in light of the rules Happousai had laid out. "Why don't you tell me what you do know then?"

The long-haired girl recovered, trying to recall those old tales. "Ki is the energy that flows through all living things, and most physical things. Everyone has it, and everyone can hypothetically use it."

Ranma nodded. "Not quite right. Everyone's got some ki in'em. But to actually use it you need a lot. There's special exercises you can do to increase it, but that usually takes decades. Trick is, some people don't need to. It's kinda rare, but if you have the knack you can use it to make yourself stronger, tougher, faster. That's how I can take being punted across the city like you saw."

Umi tilted her head. "And you think I might have this talent?"

"I'm sure ya do. One of the first tricks you can learn is to sense it, and I didn't even have to teach you that one. Otherwise you couldn't have seen my aura at all." Ranma gave her a cocky grin. "Too bad I can't tell ya more."

"Well, what can you do?" Umi asked.

Ranma thought about it. "Well, a whole bunch of things, but there's a couple interestin' ones. One, I
learned how to control my *ki* with emotions. I use my confidence for a technique called a 'Moko Takabisha'. It's a lot like one of those projectiles ya see in the movies and video games, I guess." When Umi nodded, she thought a bit more. "I got one other trick. Maybe we can work on it some time if you can get yourself ready."

Umi raised an eyebrow and nodded at her to continue. "The basic version's called a Hiryuu Shoten Ha."

*Heaven Blast of the Dragon*, Umi mentally translated. "How does it work?"

Umi noticed Ranma's tone change, the affectations all dropping until she sounded more or less normal. "The first part is emotional control, and along with it control over your *ki*. You need to learn how to drop your emotion to almost nothing, and then less than nothing. *Ki* is normally hot, but if you can invert it it becomes cold. It's still the same energy, though. This step's called the 'Soul of Ice.'

"After that you start to lure your opponent into a spiral," Ranma continued. "Keeping yourself calm, and your opponent fired up. Once you reach the center...pow! Instant tornado."

Umi nodded. "The temperature differential...I guess shaped by the *ki*, because otherwise that would be utterly ridiculous."

Ranma chuckled at her, voice returning to the normal hyper-masculine speech patterns she usually assumed. "Sunset's always a great time to finish trainin'. Something about this time of day just makes you feel good, like you know you've made it."

"Heh. I can understand that, at least." Umi took a drink of her water. "We're going to have to pack up soon."

Ranma chuckled. "I was actually considerin' camping out up here for a night. The gate would make it hard for the cops to bother me and I'm used ta packing stuff up."

Umi gave her a sidelong glance. "What, don't feel like heading home tonight?"

"Eh, sometimes I don't," Ranma forced herself to admit. "I mean, I'd hate ta leave Pops, and especially Mom and even Akane. But sometimes I could really use a night or two ta myself, like the old days on the road."

Umi briefly wrestled with a bout of indecision. On the one hand, she still wasn't sure about having this guy – and Umi wasn't really under any impression that Ranma was anything but despite her current figure - around. But at the same time, it would be impossible to get rid of him as long as Honoka wanted him to stay. The best way to change that would be to figure out how to get Ranma to want to. Not necessarily the fastest, mind. She came to a decision. "Why don't you?"

"Why don't I what?"

"Take a break?" Umi asked. "Maybe get away from that school of yours? I hear Furinkan's terrible."

"Eh..." Ranma shrugged. "It's home."

Umi contemplated that answer for a moment, until a feminine scream pierced the twilight. They glanced at each other and spoke the name together in horror. "Honoka!"

The three girls were feeling a bit less like the walking dead by the time they were ready to leave the school. There was a somewhat unpleasant surprise in the form of Eri waiting for them at the door.
"Well, I can't fault your work ethic," she was forced to admit. "Just make sure you're done in time for me to lock up, or you'll be locked in next time."

"Y-yes ma'am!" three voices replied in unison, all three girls being addressed coming to immediate attention and bowing in apology. When they stood up, Maki realized something. "Who is that at the gate?"

None of the girls would recognize Akane by sight (Ranma didn't believe in the cell phone except as an emergency tool, apparently, and had no pictures of Akane on his outdated camera-phone) but it didn't take Honoka long to put the pieces together as the youngest Tendo stalked across the yard on seeing her.

"President," Honoka addressed the blonde without looking at her. "I think you're about to see why Ranma's been hanging around here after school."

Eri was about to say something, but it was too late. Akane had already walked all the way up the path and stopped in front of them. "Is one of you Kousaka Honoka?" Up close, it was plain that the trip over had only seen Akane's temper grow. While she wasn't violently angry, her fists were balled up and her eyes narrowed, as if the slightest offense might set her off.

Eri stepped in front of the group. "It doesn't matter if she is or not. Tendo, calm the hell down, will you?"

"Ayase, this doesn't concern you. I demand to know where Ranma is!" Akane shouted back at her. Honoka put a hand on Eri's shoulder. "Let me deal with this," The blonde was startled for a moment, but stepped aside. "I'm Kousaka Honoka." She introduced herself with a polite bow. "As for Ranma, if Umi hasn't stopped to chat I expect he'll be down in a few minutes."

She was about to say more, but the other girl chose that moment to interrupt with a snide comment of "Another one of his admirers I'm sure. Or should I say her admirers?"

Eri blinked. "Wait, 'Him'? Which Ranma are we talking about, Ranma or 'Ranko'?"

"We'll explain later," Maki hissed under her breath.

Honoka sighed. "Tendo, as I already explained to Kuonji, I find the whole idea of being Rannma's girlfriend to be a joke. She's a great guy, just not really my type, and I'd prefer to avoid this kind of entanglement as much as possible. Ranma has every right to choose her friends without your approval. You don't have to like me, but please respect your fiancée."

The word choice seemed to have been a poor one. "Ranma is a boy. One Hundred Percent!" she hissed. "He is a man and don't you forget it, Kousaka Honoka. And I won't let you do. . . whatever it is you're doing!"

Maki finally couldn't keep her mouth shut anymore. "What, like treating her like a decent human being? Showing her what it means to trust someone and be trusted by them? Because from where I'm standing, you're doing a lousy job of that."

Maki was about to go on, but Honoka raised up her hand again. "Maki, thank you, but I can handle this." Her eyes never left Akane's. "But she makes a good point, Miss Tendo. Before Ranma dropped in she was really .-." she started again, but Akane snapped.

"If you're not doing something, why do you keep calling him a girl?!"
Honoka backed away a step in shock. "Because he is a girl! At least enough of one!"

Akane looked like she was working herself up to a good screech, when Eri interjected herself. "All right, that's enough. Both of you," she added the last bit towards Honoka, although with a wink of her eye where Akane couldn't see it. "I may not understand what's going on, Tendo, but whatever your problem is this isn't the way or the place to handle it."

She continued before letting Akane get a word in edgewise. "As for you, Honoka, if you're really making some designs on this girl's fiance, letting it get so out of hand it comes out in the courtyard is unbecoming and would be grounds for disciplinary action."

"Bu-but I'm not! He's just my friend, Eri!" Honoka protested.

Akane snarled. "Oh, like you really expect me to believe that, Kousaka! You act like I haven't heard this song and dance a hundred times before! Of course 'it's not like that!' All of Ranma's floozies are the same! He wins one little fight and suddenly you're all swooning over him! I bet you 'don't even know his father!' And then you let him get away with shaming some poor girl! What will her family say?" The sarcasm in her rant was heavy enough to bludgeon a charging boar into submission.

Eri stared at the girl in an amazed horror. "Tendo! I have no idea what you're talking about, but I'm telling you for the last time, get out of here."

"Well, I'm onto your little scheme!" Akane ignored her, stepping towards Honoka. "I, Tendo Akane of the Tendo School of Anything Goes, am officially challenging you, Kousaka Honoka. If I win, you give up on Ranma and leave us alone!"

Honoka took a step back, fear creeping into her voice. "Akane, calm down! I don't even know Kempo!"

"Like you expect me to believe that!?" The idea was ludicrous to Akane, that Ranma would ever even be interested in who didn't study the Art. Obviously all that stuff he'd said was just more lies.

"I'm telling you, I can't!"

Akane darted forward, launching a punch. Honoka screamed, instinctively grabbing her book bag and bringing it up into the path of the blow, faster than she'd ever have thought she could do, faster than even her physical training could account for. Akane saw it too, and pressed home, following through on the strike to try to punch through the added object. *And Ranma always told me punching bricks was useless.* The inane thought would have been funny in better circumstances. The ginger's feet slid backwards and there was an audible *crack* of plastic shattering and the sound of metal shearing. Honoka's eyes widened as she realized she was unbalanced and slowly falling. There was a flash of pain and then darkness slowly fell over her vision.

Kotori's eyes widened and she started to back away in dread while Eri looked on, helpless to do anything in the face of this oncoming juggernaut.

Umi's eyes widened when Ranma suddenly held out . "MOKO TAKABISHA!"

A yellow lance of *ki* shot from her outstretched hand, impacting against the ground between the two "combatants" with a thud not unlike a pillow or mat hitting the ground. Ranma suddenly grabbed her around the waist, pulling them up and over the railing. She screamed, but they landed a second later, unharmed, Taking a moment to make sure Umi was upright before disengaging from her, Ranma started walking towards her fiance. "Akane, what do you think you're doin'?!"

"I could ask you the same question, pervert!" Akane shouted. "I trusted you dammit!"
Ranma just sighed in resignation. "What the hell brought this on? Seriously, Akane?"

"I should have realized!" Akane screamed at her. "You were just making an excuse so you could hang out with these...these..."

"Akane, we're way past that right now." Akane gasped in shock at the cold tone of Ranma's voice. "If Honoka's okay..."

Maki quickly looked her over. "Ranma, she's fine, I think."

"I think' ain't good enough. Call Doctor Tofu, I'll take her straight over..."

Akane screeched. "RANMA!"

"Akane, you just punched out someone with no training!" Ranma snapped at her. "This is serious!"

"It's all YOUR fault! You shouldn't have been hanging out with her!"

Ranma winced. "Akane, stop. Just...stop. A martial artist's duty is to protect the weak. You know that, so why are you making excuses?" When Akane could only stammer for a moment, Ranma's eyes narrowed. "You always wanted me to take you seriously. Fine. You're about to get what you wanted."

In almost any other circumstance, Akane would have been thrilled to hear that, but in her current state of mind she just heard more mockery. "Why start now?!"

"Because now you're a threat to everyone around you," Ranma settled into an easy ready stance, letting off a blue aura.

Akane wasn't intimidated in the slightest, charging down the path and launching a haymaker that was easily ducked around. "I thought you were going to take me seriously!"

Ranma didn't respond. In all truth, she couldn't afford to. Akane was far from the strongest of Nerima's martial artists, but when she was this angry she was instinctively tapping into her ki, making herself stronger and faster. Three more punches were easily dodged as she tried desperately to find a way past her guard that wouldn't require killing her. Experimentally, she responded to the next predictable combination of punches with a weak kick to her solar plexus, eliciting a gasp of pain.

"Dammit, she still ain't done proper toughness trainin'. She can take more of a hit than Umi but if I go all out I'll kill her. Ranma danced around several more punches, sensing Akane's ki rising further with every miss. Dammit! I don't think I've ever seen her this mad before! In her male form she could have taken a number of these hits, but the change increased her speed at the cost of strength and endurance. This was rapidly getting to be similar to fighting Ryouga while she was a guy, if Ryouga weren't nearly as tough.

If only that lack of toughness weren't specifically the problem. She racked her brain for a solution. The Hiryuu Shoten Ha would do it...but it would still bust her up pretty bad, and it could kill her if she landed wrong.

Akane wasn't idle during Ranma's musings. She took several more wild swings at the pig-tailed girl, which were all easily dodged around. "FIGHT ME DAMMIT!"

Ranma found herself beginning to perform the spiral. Best chance. Maybe I can catch her before she lands. "Ya dummy, I said I'd take you seriously, but I really don't wanna hurt you too bad either!"
"Oh, like you care about that!" Akane followed Ranma in, too enraged to notice the pattern. "If you didn't want to hurt me you wouldn't keep chasing skirts all the time!"

Ranma groaned. "Why is it that you always assume the worst, even when ya know that ain't it!?"

Another clumsy punch was launched, this one fast enough to force Ranma to need to block. "Because I'm always RIGHT!"

Kotori looked like she was going to speak up, but Umi silenced her with a gesture.

Ranma shook her arm out. *That's going to bruise later, at least. Might be a hairline fracture.* Akane was speeding up while Ranma found her maneuverability starting to be constrained by the steps of the technique. *I'm good enough to not need Akane right there, but I gotta control this exactly. Best to start with a clean pattern.*

Umi quickly glanced around, then noted the nearby covered walkway. Ranma had drawn the fight far enough away that they could just make it. "Ayase! Help me with Honoka. Everybody, we need to get under the walkway now!" She kept her voice down, to avoid tipping off Akane as to what was going on. Eri helped to heft the semi-conscious girl and they all started for the spot Umi had indicated.

*Good going, Umi,* Ranma spotted them making a run for cover, and turned her attention back to Akane. "Akane, for the last goddamn time, there isn't anyone else!"

"Then why won't you say it!?" Akane tried another high kick, which connected with Ranma's ribcage. "You said it right after Saffron!"

"What?!" Ranma ducked under an axial kick, taking the last step backwards. "What do you want me to say that I haven't already said!?"

Akane landed a fist in her fiance's solar plexus. "Once isn't enough!"

Umi finished tucking the barely-conscious Honoka up against the wall, taking cover herself and covering her head. The other girls followed suit.

Ranma sighed. "I'm sorry, Akane. I'll have to be." The other girl's eyes widened as her rudimentary *ki*-based perceptions went haywire. Ranma executed her first - and only - punch of the fight. An uppercut that just barely scraped Akane's chin. It didn't even break the skin.

"HIYRUU SHOTEN HAAAAAA!"

The shaped, charged *ki* in contrasting patterns whipped together, both tapping into Akane's center. The girl felt her very breath being stolen as the winds rose, carrying her up into the sky in the 'coils of the dragon' for the first time. It was a level of agony she'd never expected to experience. *He's...he's really trying to kill me!* Akane thought to herself as she flew up above the roof of the school, off into the sky.

Suddenly slim, but strong arms were wrapping around her just as she felt consciousness fleeing. The direction of her flight changed, and she was being brought back down to the ground. She looked up, only to see that, somehow, Ranma had flown up the whirlwind after her, canceling it out and bringing them both back down to the ground safely.

She wasn't sure whether she wanted to kiss him or kill him, but it didn't matter because her eyes slipped closed instead.
Ranma landed and gently laid the girl in his arms flat on the ground. He could sense her *ki*, barely there, well below the levels a normal person would have, but steady. She'd be fine. He glanced up at the Otonoki girls. "Everyone all right!"

Kotori's voice came back, sounding very unsteady. "Honoka's not waking up!"

"Damn!" Ranma sprinted over to the girl and carefully checked her over as best he could without removing her clothes. "That bump on her head looks nasty."

Eri already had her phone out. "Ranma, stay put. This is officially more than I can handle on my own."

Ranma's eyes narrowed. "Who you callin', Ayase?"

"An ambulance, and then the police. One of my girls was assaulted," Eri explained simply. "And your *friend* there," she continued, with a sarcastic emphasis on the word "...doesn't look too good either."

"No cops." Ranma's decree was simple and final.

Maki stared at her in shock. "But...Ranma, my parents own the closest hospital. They're going to find out about this, and I can't let Honoka just go untreated."

Ranma rubbed her forehead, checking the girl over again. "No injury to the neck I can find. She's safe to move. I'll carry her to Doctor Tofu."

Umi shook her head. "That's halfway across the city. You'll never make it faster than an ambulance, the trains take over an hour and someone will notice!"

"Then I won't *use* the trains! If I push I can get her to the Doc in thirty minutes, how long would it take an ambulance to get here?"

Maki bit her lip. "About that long, since it's rush hour, and maybe another twenty to get her to a specialist. Which IS what she needs to see!"

"We get a specialist involved, the cops get involved, and then Akane goes to jail. No way I'm letting *that* happen to the tomboy!"

Eri blinked at the sheer vehemence in Ranma's voice. "What is she to you, anyway?"

"My fiance!" Ranma shouted back.

Eri felt her world spin again. "But you're both girls..."

"Argh...this ain't the time for that." She started to pick Honoka up. "Maki, your parents own a hospital, so I'm guessin' you got some money. Get Akane to the doc's clinic, the hospital can't help her anyway. I'll let Honoka settle this."

Umi glared at him. "And if Honoka dies?"

"The cops can have *me* when I'm done with Akane for this screwup, 'cuz I can't let her wander around if she's gonna be punching people out at random over me." Ranma leapt to the skies and was gone.

Eri stared in shock, realizing the only physical evidence of the localized tornado was a few leaves on the ground and, of course, the unconscious girl. "What do we do?"
Maki sighed and walked to Akane's side, checking the girl over. "Well, I can't find anything wrong with her." She pulled out her cell phone.

"Who are you calling?" Kotori asked, worried.

Maki sighed. "The cab. No obvious injuries, so all they'd do is run tests."

Umi sniffed. "Well, I hope whatever Tofu puts her through is at least as uncomfortable as the hospital. Otherwise she's getting off too easy, going to him."

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Honoka awoke to the feeling of the wind whipping past her. She looked up at her rescuer, carrying her bridal style across the rooftops. "Ranma?"

The pig-tailed girl looked down, seeing Honoka's eyes looking back, bright and clear. "Oh, good, you're awake. Had me worried for a second there."

"How is -" Honoka started, but Ranma cut her off.

"They're all fine." She confirmed. "Akane's had her ki used up, that should keep her out of it 'till well past midnight if I'm any judge."

"...can we get down now?" Honoka said, making the mistake of glancing below and seeing nothing but empty street two floors down.

Ranma shook her head. "You took a pretty good tumble there. I want the doc to check you out."

"Why not an ambulance?"

Ranma gulped. "Honoka, I don't want anything to happen to Akane over this."

Honoka swallowed nervously. "Because she's your fiance? Ranma, she tried to kill me."

"Dammit, you think I don't know that! She's dangerous, and I got a plan to deal with it, but..." Ranma trailed off helplessly.

Honoka's hands clenched instinctively into an angry fist. "Are you sure this plan will stop her from doing this to anyone else?"

"You don't make this easy, do you?" Ranma frowned, taking a few minutes to think about it. "Yeah, I can promise that. Old man Tendo is gonna flip but I think he'll come around when he hears the only alternative was you pressin' charges."

Honoka seemed to accept that, turning her eyes to the sky above.

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Akane's world managed to come into focus, and she sat up ramrod straight. "Where am I?"

"You're in my office, Akane," The stern voice of Doctor Tofu said to her, just as she realized she recognized the room.

The youngest Tendo breathed a sigh of relief. "So Ranma did bring me here."

"No, Akane. He brought Miss Kousaka here, because he deemed her in more immediate need of medical attention." Tofu said sternly. "Young lady, you are in a lot of trouble."
"Wh...what?" Akane stared in disbelief, her jaw hanging slightly open.

Tofu shook his head. "I examined Miss Kousaka, and luckily for you she only seems to have a bit of a bump on her head. Otherwise I wouldn't have much choice but to report this."

"Re-re-re-report?" Akane couldn't believe what she was hearing. "Doctor Tofu, it wasn't that bad."

The young doctor held up the remains of a laptop computer. "This was in Miss Kousaka's book bag. Otonokizaka's book bags, incidentally, are made of a heavy padded leather and you also did this through a number of her schoolbooks. If that blow had landed, Miss Tendo, an untrained girl like Honoka would have been dead before she hit the ground."

"I...I did that? But I..." Akane stared at Tofu in complete shock, not able to think of anything to say.

"Luckily for you, Ranma and Honoka managed to persuade the other witnesses not to press charges. Assuming the school doesn't, there won't be any legal action taken," Tofu's tone indicated some distaste for the situation, and a deep resignation. "Akane, I hope you understand when I say I wish things could have been different. Ranma....asked that, as grandmaster of Anything Goes..."

"NO!" Akane shrieked. "Don't! Anything but that!"

"Too late, Akane," Happousai's voice came, seemingly from nowhere. "Even I wouldn't sink that low, you know. You just struck a girl who couldn't defend herself in anger, without even bothering to check on the situation first. Ranma wanted to be here to do this, but the Doc here didn't think it would be a good idea...so!" Akane suddenly felt a weight on her back, but instead of the usual groping, she suddenly felt a burning near the small of her back. "The Ultimate Weakness Moxibustion."

She spun around, trying to punch the little pervert off her back, but found she couldn't get leverage. "W...no!" Akane struggled as Happousai hung on, before the manipulated pressure point took effect and she slowly collapsed, screaming in panic and outrage...until she realized the old man wasn't taking advantage of her predicament to molest her.

Instead, he simply bounced off her back and onto the nearby medical bed, smoking his pipe. "Don't worry about little old me, sweetie. This is about the Art...well, and your lack of it. Ranma wanted you kicked out of the School, but I decided this was a better idea. Prove to me you've learned some self control, and I'll reverse it. No challenges, no tricks. If I'm dead, well, Cologne and the good doctor here know the counter too. Persuade any one of us that you can handle the responsibility, and you'll be good as new."

"Don't worry Akane," Tofu added. "Ranma already called the Dojo to have someone come to pick you up..."

Maki leaned back against a light pole, talking into her phone She had tried home first, but when no one picked up she had decided to call her mother at the hospital where she worked. "Sorry, Mom, I know I didn't call. It was an emergency."

Her mother sounded like she was on the edge of panic. "That's no excuse!"

"Look, a friend was hurt. I know I should have brought her to the hospital, but there was a clinic closer by."

A long pause, where Maki wasn't sure her mother was still on the line. "I'm going to want the details, but I'm glad to hear you've at least made a friend or two you're willing to break some rules over."
Especially if it's like that. Is she hurt? We could still take her here.”

Maki laughed. "It turns out she's fine. And don't worry about the charges, but... uhm, I'm kinda tapped out on allowance. I'd been saving for nothing in particular, but Honoka took a nasty tumble and her laptop broke her fall."

"Are you sure you want to spend that much money, dear?" she heard come back after a minute.

Maki chuckled. "Well, it won't be anything fancy. I was just going to comb Akiba for something cheap so she could do her homework."

"Well...okay. How many weeks do you need?"

"Just the one," Maki clarified. "Like I said, I'd been saving."

Eri just shook her head as she watched Honoka pick – unhappily – at the small bowl of unsalted rice and a salad. "Kousaka, is stuff like this normal around her? Him? Whatever."

"From what he said, they almost never involved people who couldn't defend themselves before," Honoka tried to explain. "I didn't have any reason to think that wouldn't stay that way." She glanced up. "Please, don't send her away. I have a feeling things are about to get a lot worse over there. He's my friend, Eri. I know I can't make you, but…"

"...I can't make that promise, Kousaka."

"But for what it's worth, I don't personally blame him...her...look, you're going to have to go over this again. Which is it?"

"Both!"

Eri groaned. "Okay, fine, I'll go with 'her' for now. I can't really reasonably see any way this mess was actually her fault, and that's how I'm going to present it to the principal tomorrow morning."

She continued. "Don't take this the wrong way. I still think you amateurs are going to do more harm than good, stumbling around like this. .. but I can separate my feelings about your efforts from Ranma's behavior, and so far she's gone out of her way to cause as little trouble as possible compared to what I'd been afraid of."

"I guess that's all I can ask." Honoka ate a little more of her salad. "You realize our parents are going to kill us for staying out this late, right?"

"Can't be helped."

"Can't be helped." Eri shrugged. "Your friends all had their own projects, and the doctor wanted someone to keep an eye on you. You won't let me call your parents, and I guess I don't blame you. I don't like keeping this secret, but no one would believe us if we tried to tell the truth and that lump on your head would have been a dead giveaway."

"I feel fine."

Eri returned the protest with a level stare. "You're babbling about Chinese curses and a love polygon so complicated I think I understand the Tale of Genji better after hearing a half-coherent description of Ranma's life out of you. If I had that many arranged marriages, I'd probably consider surgery to get out of it too."

"Really?" Honoka blinked. "I guess that would be a solution…”
Eri couldn't resist a chuckle. "Well, probably not, but who knows. Anyway, I guess I don't care much about her 'real' gender. Just...try to keep any more crazies from destroying the yard or killing students, eh, Kousaka?"

"We'll do our best."

The elaborate shrine took on a very different character at night, with all the lamps lit up giving it a mysterious, yet warm atmosphere. What it didn't give the main courtyard was any privacy, but that suited Nozomi just fine. She had been forced to stay late cleaning up due to extra work at the Student Council before leaving Eri to finish taking care of her duties. But, the sweeping was about done before she really had to get home. The third-year student propped her broom up over her shoulder and walked towards the back sheds, and the only darkness within the shrine's grounds.

Now, Tokyo likes to brag, but they do have homeless people. They tend to mostly congregate around a few neighborhoods, out of the way, and since the weather is (for the most part) pretty hospitable they do just fine for themselves. But occasionally someone, usually a wanderer, would feel a need to curl up on the back paths. Usually, Nozomi just gently directed them to a shelter or, if they seemed reasonably well off like the occasional wandering monk, a nearby temple with a few rooms for spiritual travelers.

She hadn't expected to run into a full campsite.

A canvas tent, a sleeping bag set out over an unusually thick mat on the stone paths, and even a cooking stove set to low heat. There was even a small solar charger carefully hung on the top of the tent, a line leading into the tent and presumably a cell phone. Two water collectors set up over scrounged plastic bottles, presumably with purifiers. A clothes-line! Literally everything that a serious hiker would need to feel at home just about anywhere.

Still, the part-time shrine maiden couldn't let this stand. She walked up to the tent, only to have a familiar-looking pigtailed head poke out at her. "Ranma!?"

"Nozomi!?” Ranma shouted back, equally surprised. "Geez, what are you doing here?"

"Isn't that my line?" Nozomi grinned at the girl in the tent. "And how did you get all this past me while I was working?"

Ranma blinked. "Just jumped over the wall. Uhh..it's all right if I stay here, right? Won't be in the way or nothin'? I never had ta do this inside the city before…"

"Wh...what happened?"

Ranma groaned. "Look, I don't wanna talk about it, but I think it's best if I don't head back to the Tendos for a few days. The old man's gonna be pissed with me. Shouldn't be more than a week."

Nozomi winced. "Ranma, I can't let you stay out in the open for a week, especially not here." She turned off the camp stove. "Come on, if you don't mind the floor you can crash at my apartment."

"Huh? Won't your parents object to havin' a stranger over?" Ranma gulped.

Nozomi nodded. "There's just enough room for two. I'll pick up some extra takeaway. More than a week and I'll have to start charging for food, but you could earn that part time at the shrine too, if you wanted."

"...eh, sure, I guess." Ranma started to help pack up her campsite. "Sorry 'bout this."
"Kotori!" The named girl winced as her mother pounded the table. "I can't have my daughter running around at all hours without so much as a phone call!"

"It's about my friend!"

That put Principal Minami off-guard for a moment. "...the one you were worried about? Ranma, right? What did sh...he..SHE do?"

"He saved Honoka's life!"

Mrs. Minami sat down. "Start from the beginning, please."

Kotori swallowed, but summed it up as best as she could.

Her mother put a hand to her forehead to try to stall a headache coming on. "All right, so you're saying Ranma is in an arranged marriage to this girl who can do that to a book bag, has no self-control, and he, or she, can't reasonably get away?" A tearful nod. "That is something I can take to the board. The gender-swapping thing...I don't like lying, but I think we can get away with just not mentioning it, as long as the paperwork can reasonably point to her being a girl. If not...well, we'll explore other options when we get there.

"Of course," she continued. "Don't think you're completely out of trouble, daughter. After your practice, you come straight home every night for the next month, do you hear me? No stopping off for snacks. Oh, and we'll be sticking to this Doctor Tofu's diet for the whole month as well." She smiled evilly. "I think that should cover it."

Kotori whimpered. She had more discipline than Honoka, but no sweets for a month? Why couldn't her mother have a conventional sense of justice?

Umi sat in front of her mother and father in their own family dojo, in front of the shrine. A formal meeting. A fairly young couple when they met, both were now in their late thirties or early forties, Both were stern, but usually fair.

Umi swallowed. "Mother, Father. I... you are not going to believe this, I don't think, but I need to ask you something first." Her father nodded. "Do you know anything, I mean anything, about ki manipulation?"

Her father immediately went pale. "Legends and myths. You are not to bring that topic up again!"

Umi winced. "Father...it's not a myth. I'm not asking you to teach me, but believe me, I just saw it myself."

"...and now you want to learn?" He looked sternly at her.

Umi gulped. "Well, yes, but that's not particularly relevant. Can we discuss that part later, please?" A long pause, followed by a nod. "The reason it's relevant is that Ranma, my new friend that I'm sure I mentioned, he can use ki, and someone else who can too attacked the school. Ranma managed to solve it, but the injuries involved required going to a specialist in Nerima."

It was Mrs. Sonoda who spoke next. "I assume that Honoka was somehow involved in this?" Umi could only nod. "Well, then, I suppose it can't be helped. Was anyone else hurt?"

"Honoka bumped her head, but she's fine," Umi explained quickly. "The other girl had all her ki
ripped out of her, apparently. Or most of it."

Her father nodded knowingly. "Hence the specialist. A Western hospital couldn't handle such harms. Very well. Umi, I won't ask you to *not* pursue the other matter further, but you *will* consult with me, and not your friend, when you are ready. And be *very* sure you are ready, daughter. I have no desire to see you leave this world so young."

Umi blinked. "It's that dangerous?"

Her father stared at her with an intensity she had never seen before. "Moreso." He softened. "I think we can forgive you for this, under the circumstances...but Umi?"

"Yes, father?"

He actually smiled. "Do bring your friend home some time. I would like to meet with him."
Chapter 6

A/N: Song sung by Maki here is "Susume Tomorrow" from the "Susume Tomorrow" single.

The mood over the Tendo Dojo was subdued as the sun rose. Akane was forced to skip the majority of her morning workout, and thus had to be satisfied with a longer jog than usual. The Weakness Moxibustion hadn't sapped any of her energy, and she was left with none of her usual methods to work it off.

When she returned, Kasumi was waiting for her. "Oh, Akane. I don't think you should go out in your condition." The words were delivered in Kasumi's usual, carefree tone, but she was very slightly frowning, eliciting a wince from the younger sister.

"Well, what do you expect me to do?" Akane snapped back afterward, not easily deterred. "I can't fight back against anything! You know how this place is!"

Kasumi nodded. "I've made arrangements. This is meant to be a punishment, not a license for anyone who wants to to take revenge. Now, go wash up before breakfast."

Akane did so, and when she came back down after the bath she felt considerably calmer. At least until she caught sight of someone in a Furinkan uniform sitting at the table. "Hey, Kasumi. Who's your new friend?" Then she took it in. Long lavender hair, a body that filled out that uniform in a way no girl should look good in one outside of a porno… "Shampoo! What are you doing here?"

The girl in question just gave her a flat look. "Great Grandmother tell me to keep eye on Akane. Also say True-ant-see Officer come to see her, say have to go to school now. Not know what ants have to do with school, but if Great Grandmother say so…"

Akane went pale. "I...how am I supposed to trust you?"

Shampoo just turned back to the rice Kasumi had given her. "If want to kill Akane, Akane no can stop anyway, yes? But Great Grandmother say no kill. So, no kill."

This made no sense to Akane whatsoever. "What you mean, no kill?"

"You making fun of Shampoo?!" The purple hair girl snapped, turning to her. "Believe or no, Shampoo no hate Akane!"

Akane couldn't resist returning to her old standby of a snarky tone. "You don't, do you?"

Shampoo nodded. "We rivals, but no mean have to hate. You no can fight back now, would be wrong to take advantage and kill. Shampoo have to find other ways to fight. Where Ranma, anyway?"

Kasumi answered. "He came home last night for a few minutes, but said he had to go on a training trip before anyone else saw him."

Akane frowned. "Coward just ran away."

"...Well, is just man, in the end," Shampoo shrugged and sipped at her miso. "Very handsome, strong, and brave man, but still man. No can help nature sometimes."

Akane stared at her rival in utter disbelief for a moment...and then sat down and spooned herself
some rice. "Just don't get any funny ideas."

"No worry, that stick boy's job," Shampoo said with a trace of humor. "Shampoo job teach stick boy is bad ideas."

Akane thought about that for a while, while the pair of them ate in silence. "So, you're really going to do this every day?"

Shampoo nodded. "I hear about what happen. Is not good punishment. Not know what Akane do wrong. Obstacle is for killing, yes?"

Akane nearly choked. "I...Shampoo, that's not how we're supposed to deal with things here."

"Could have fooled Shampoo," the amazon girl said sarcastically. She waited for Akane to put down her rice bowl. "...Akane think she should be punished, then?"

Akane winced. "...maybe."

"Is not good answer, Akane," Shampoo's tone turned serious. "If not admit it, punishment do no good. What you do wrong?"

"Wh...why do you care?" Akane said defensively.

Shampoo sniffed. "Sooner Akane get Great Grandmother to end punishment, sooner Shampoo no have to be Akane bodyguard or go to school. So obviously Shampoo help Akane."

Akane bristled momentarily at the notion she needed a bodyguard, before it occurred to her that, in the current circumstances, she really did. And Shampoo was probably the best option – for all that she could be an annoyance, at least she understood what boys were usually like. "There are rules about what you're allowed to do to people who don't train in the Art, Shampoo. At least around here, you should never, ever use your skills on them unless you have no choice. I...I screwed up because I never dreamed in a million years Ranma could ever make friends with someone who isn't good at martial arts."

Shampoo seemed to be paying attention and not getting lost during the long explanation, which was better than Akane expected. "Airen always have soft spot for weak girls. Think that it?"

"I...I really don't know." Akane sighed. "All I know is that now he's vanished, probably to Kanda ward again, and who knows when or even if he'll come back."

Shampoo seemed to think about that. "Want Shampoo go get Ranma after school?"

Kasumi interjected herself into the conversation. "Shampoo, Ranma obviously cares a great deal about his new friends. I don't think it's wise to antagonize him so soon."

Shampoo winced at the rebuke. "If you saying so. But if Shampoo promise just go to talk?"

"That...could work." Kasumi agreed.

Akane looked between the pair in some disbelief. "Well, anyway, we should finish eating so we can explain this to Nabiki. She's gonna love this."

Ranma nearly bolted on waking up in the strange living room before remembering where he was and what had happened the previous night. Instinctively, he glanced around the room. It was a rather austere one bedroom apartment, a wooden table with three chairs next to a kitchenette. There was a
single plant in the corner and a couple of pictures hanging on the wall, but Ranma couldn't help but think they could have belonged to anyone. Everything was kept utterly neat and ordinary.

Ranma hadn't been allowed into the bedroom, but he assumed that it was close to the same. There wasn't really enough room to work out, but he would have to head to the shrine anyway.

With no Kasumi to make breakfast for him, and Nozomi asleep and probably staying that way through when he'd have to head out. He pulled the pots to boil water for the rice.

By the time Nozomi woke up, she could smell the basics of a breakfast being put out. She remembered last night (as if she could forget) and pulled on a robe. Ranma was sitting there, stuffing rice into his face. The settings were far from traditional, just some bowls with the rice and a salad, plus the few pieces of fish left over from last night set out, but it was functional. "Oh, Ranma. You didn't have to do that."

"Eh, no need for you to get up early. I was gonna head out to meet the others before they went to school."

Nozomi chuckled as she noticed Ranma seemed to have already eaten the lion's share of the food, taking a seat and claiming a much smaller portion for herself. "What about you?"

"Feh, school means headin' back to Nerima," Ranma dismissed the idea with a gesture. "You really live by yourself here?"

"Yes, my parents are often out of town on business," Nozomi said simply. "And don't try to change the subject. Doesn't your school object to just leaving at all hours?"

Ranma laughed. "You ain't been to Furinkan. As long as the fights don't happen on campus, they don't care no more." He gulped down half a cup of water. "Ya mind doin' dishes?"

Nozomi frowned, but nodded. "Sure. Just make sure to clean up after yourself. Oh, and use the cold water before you head out, I'm going to lock up for the day."

Ranma considered for a moment, then shrugged. "Sure thing. Just leave the patio open and I can let myself in and out."

Curses, plan foiled. Nozomi thought to herself, though with more amusement than the situation really warranted.

"SAOTOME!" The man addressing Genma was the very picture of a traditional head of a Japanese family. While he wore a gi, the dark gray was an intentional color, his face heavily lined by age, and the traditional goatee. He was currently on the verge of tears, although there were those who would argue this was his default state.

This was Tendo Soun, patriarch of the Tendo family.

Genma was caught sweating. "Now, now Tendo…"

"YOUR SON convinced the Master to mete out an official punishment to Akane, and now he's run off! This is serious Saotome!" Soun seemed inconsolable on this point. "My poor baby girl!"

Genma wasn't pleased himself. The boy was showing far too much of a spine in some ways, and not enough of one in others.
And the worst of it was, he had a damned point. Genma didn't think for a second this was a good turn of events, or that Akane's actions had been in any way intentional, but by the few rules the Schools followed, Akane needed to be disciplined. The Master had even reigned in his perversions for all of an evening to carry it out.

Not that Soun would listen.

Genma ran through the tools at his disposal. He hated to admit it, but it was getting to be a pretty limited set. The agreement with his wife - that Ranma be a Man among Men or commit seppuku, had been held fulfilled. The pledge alone didn't technically hold any more sway. Not that Ranma had figured that out on his own, but one of these new girls might.

The honor over the engagement was barely enough to keep the boy in line at the best of times, and he could no longer consistently show physical superiority over him. With Akane under official censure, censure unlikely to be lifted, technically the schools could never be united.

It was time for desperate measures.

"Tendo, this is your fault this time!"

Like the truth.

"SAOTOME! How dare you!" Soun's aura grew to truly terrifying proportions creating an illusion of a demonic assault. But Genma had been on the wrong end of it too many times.

So he just calmly sat there and let it flow over him, refusing to be pushed off his center. "Tendo, Akane got herself into this...but that doesn't mean we can't help her get out of it."

Soun quailed in his boots as the implications hit him. "You don't mean beg before the Master!"

Genma rolled his eyes. "Don't be stupid, Tendo. I'm going to have to go on a little trip to see if I can find something though."

"So you're going to run away just like your son!" Soun's emotions really could flip just like a switch.

Genma laughed. "Don't be silly, Tendo. The boy's not going to listen to me. But I still have a few strings I can pull. I'll set things up, then head out of town. I'll be back by tomorrow, anyway. Probably sooner, I think that place was just out in Yokohama."

"Okay, that's enough," Ranma called out early in the workout at the shrine, sticking to his male form. "Let's run through the routine and then call it a morning."

Kotori blinked, staring at the boy who had been torturing them for over a week. "You mean that?"

Honoka pouted. "I can keep going!"

Ranma shook his head. "I'm sure ya can, but ya need ta rest up for a few days. You'll be healed up and performin' your best," He glanced to Umi. "Right?"

"Uhh...yeah." Umi gulped, embarrassed that that idea had slipped her mind in her own workouts.

Maki collapsed against the pillar. "Well, I am grateful for one."

Ranma smirked. "You don't have a dance routine in public in three days."
Maki snarked back "You think playing the keyboard isn't going to be physical? I need to be in top form too."

Ranma paused, thinking about that for a moment. "All right. You jog to Otonoki with me and you're off the hook for the rest of what I had planned. Don't need your legs so much, right?"

"...I guess not so much," Maki grumbled, looking a bit put out. "But only if you change first. It'd be embarrassing being seen with a boy."

It was Ranma's turn to grumble. "Fine." Without another word, he poured a bottle of cold water over his head. Then she glanced to Umi. "By the way, thought of any more song lyrics?"

Umi started in shock. "Uhh...I've got something. It's in my bookbag."

Maki nodded to her, going to take it out.

"Hey!"

Maki started. "Sorry, I was just guessing Ranma wanted me to get to work on it right away."

"Ya got that right. You mind, Umi?" Ranma asked.

Umi pinched the bridge of her nose. "Fine. But you stay out."

Ranma blinked, then deadpanned "Don't wanna know what else is in your book bag anyway."

"This sucks," Akane grumbled. "Shampoo, do you have to stand so close?"

The pair were walking on the road towards Furinkan High, while trying to pretend the other didn't exist. It wasn't working for Shampoo, because she had a job to do that required Akane to, well, continue to exist. It wasn't ideal, to put it lightly. "No want to, but have to guard. Need be close enough if something happen."

Akane blinked in surprise. "You're really taking this seriously, aren't you?"

Shampoo sniffed. "Shampoo always take duties seriously."

Akane looked like she was about to say something, but suddenly the amazon blurred into motion. Akane jerked around, to see Ukyo's arm twisted around behind her back. The chef cried out in alarm and not a little pain. "Hey! What gives Shampoo!"

Shampoo snarled at her in a genuine rage neither had heard from her recently, aside from the failed wedding attempt. "You no hurt Akane, or Shampoo kill!"

"Hey, hey, okay Sugar!" Ukyo squawked out while Shampoo insisted on giving her arm a bit of a tug, causing pain to shoot down it and all along her back. "What gives, mess up with your spice cabinet? OW!" That last came from a rather more vicious jerk than the others.

Akane paled. "Shampoo, cut it out! She gets the point!"

"Spatula-girl get point all right," the lavender-haired girl let Ukyo go, but pulled out the Dao hidden with her Chinese Hidden Weapons arts. "Akane, you explain. Shampoo no good at this."

Akane swallowed. "Ukyo...last night Happousai hit me with the Ultimate Weakness Moxibustion." Ukyo stared at her as if she'd grown a second head, so she went on. "It was...I used the Art on
someone I wasn't supposed to."

Ukyo glanced behind her, noting the sword at her back. "All right, all right, I get it. It was just supposed to be a friendly pat on the back, but I guess that could have been bad. Now, Shamps, what's with the protective act?"

"No is act!" Shampoo shouted. "Great Grandmother say important Akane not be hurt. Is for punishment, but is also for being Warrior. Akane want be better warrior, convince Great Grandmother to lift punishment. Not understand, but no need to."

The sword slowly lowered, much to Ukyo's relief. "That Honoka kid, right?"

"You know her?" Akane asked, startled.

Ukyo's response was a sidelong glance at Shampoo. "Can't say I know her that well, but Ranchan brought her and her friends by the other day. I thought it was kind of suspicious at the time, but. . . " Ukyo shrugged. "She saw the spatulas and came to my shop to talk afterward. If she really doesn't know martial arts, I will say she's one hell of a strong personality. Didn't flinch once but I didn't get the fiance vibe from her." Her eyes narrowed "Still, that was one afternoon over a week ago," she continued. "Someone should probably keep an eye on him."

"Shampoo going to check out after drop Akane off at home."

The conversation was cut off by reaching the Furinkan gate, and seeing Kuno in his usual spot. Akane instinctively got into a ready position, but Shampoo had already pulled out her bonbori. "Told you Akane," she said with a smirk. "Is Shampoo job teach Stick Boy not have bad ideas until you better."

Ten seconds later, the three fiancées entered the school while a certain Kendoist was laid out flat in the middle of the courtyard.

Ueno park, home of several acres of open land, an oasis for families during the weekends. But during school hours, very few people were using it, making it a perfect spot for Ranma to spend the day running through kata. Probably take Ryouga awhile to find me, so this'll have to do.

It was about two o'clock when he noticed his audience. "Ranma. Son." Nodoka had arrived, not looking particularly happy to have come out all this way.

Ranma stopped and turned to her. "Hey, Mom."

"I am...concerned, Son," she said, cutting right to the heart of the matter. Thankfully not literally, Ranma knew full well that the tube across her back contained the family's katana. Instead, he sighed. "This about last night? Mom, I'm not changin' my mind."

"Ranma, I do believe Akane behaved inappropriately." Nodoka clarified. "But your behavior was also unseemly. It is, after all, a man's job to be responsible for his wife."

Ranma returned the rebuke with an actual glare. "Mom, maybe you missed some stuff if you just got Akane's side'a the story. The girls wanted to get the police involved. I had ta promise something to Honoka or Akane'd be going in front of a judge."

Nodoka smiled. "I'm glad to see you so devoted to your new mistress," she said. "But Akane must come first in your thoughts."
Ranma just stared at the woman for several seconds, not quite following the twist in logic. So he decided to ignore it for the moment and come back to it. "Mom, you even listening? Police. Judge. Akane. Are ya seriously suggesting I should have . . . I don't even know how I could have stopped Honoka from making that phone call if I just told her not to."

Nodoka went silent, clearly thinking. For a few moments, Ranma was hopeful that he'd gotten through that he regarded the situation as serious, before she shook her head. "I don't believe the situation was that serious. Certainly, no actual harm was done."

Ranma could only groan softly. "Mom, Akane smashed her laptop. Honoka don't think that's 'no harm' and she did have ta go to the doc!"

Nodoka blinked, surprised. "Your friends haven't objected to that kind of thing before."

"Honoka ain't a martial artist, and she ain't from Nerima," Ranma pointed out. "I get the feelin' it's kinda different with people who ain't in the Art,"

Nodoka shook her head. "You speak as if honor isn't important to her."

The words came to him like a slap. . . but it wasn't actually unreasonable, put like that. "I think it's that she don't have the same view you do," he said carefully.

The snort of derision wasn't what Ranma wanted to hear. "So no honor at all. I really do not understand why you would associate with this girl. BUT!" she interrupted Ranma's retort before he could get going. "I can see she is important to you in some fashion. If Akane didn't listen to you on the matter, you should have asked her father to handle it."

Ranma interrupted with a snort. "Yeah, if I did that Honoka'd have us both in court."

"Then I will speak to the girl and explain her position." Nodoka declared.

Ranma rolled his eyes. "You sure you wanna do that, Mom? She's kinda holding all the cards here."

"Nonsense!" Nodoka smiled. "I'm sure she's a lovely girl, and as soon as I explain things to her she'll understand that she has to come second. After all, the Saotome family honor is first."

"Don't know if Honoka cares about that kinda stuff," Ranma shrugged. "And even if she does, it's out of my hands now."

"What do you mean?" the older woman snapped at him sharply.

Ranma sighed. "Mom, it's a matter for the Anything Goes school now. We got, what, three rules? She broke the two big ones last night."

"You shouldn't have reported her for such trivialities."

Ranma was about to respond when he realized. "We're talkin' in circles, Mom. Why don't ya just tell me what ya think you'd have done?"

"Informed this Honoka girl that she should listen to her betters."

Ranma's eyebrow twitched. "And when that didn't work?"

Nodoka raised an eyebrow. "Told her never to see you again."

"Not happenin'." Ranma turned on his heel. "Sorry, Mom, ain't backin' down on this one. I'll come
back home at the end of the week. I promised to see this through to the concert I'm helpin' Honoka with at least, that's in a couple of days. After that...well, we'll see. Some stuff may come up I'm not ready to talk about yet."

"Ranma! This is most unmanly!" Nodoka shouted at him. "Come back here and tell me this instant!"

Ranma winced at that word. "You're really gonna bring that pledge up now? Fine. Before this happened, the old letch decided to start my Mastery exam. Honoka's kinda a big part of it, but I ain't sure we're gonna go ahead yet. That's all I'm sayin' right now, just...let me get through this part and we can talk it out."

Nodoka blinked at the sudden talk-back, but then it penetrated. "This is somehow related to the Art?"

"...yeah." Ranma crossed his arms. "Not sure how yet, but the freak seemed serious about it, and he's held up his end so far. If he stops, I'll probably stop needing to come out here. So, until then…"

Nodoka took a moment to think about this, staring at Ranma through narrowed eyes. "Very well, Ranma. One week from today, you'll meet me and your father in the Tendo dojo after school. I expect answers."

She glanced out over the plain. "You know, many of your ancestors died on this very field."

Ranma raised an eyebrow. "Didn't know that actually."

"There is a shrine to them. Pay your respects after you finish your practice. Good day, son." Nodoka bowed and departed.

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It never seemed to end for Eri. Oh, she was thankful for the position and loved the job, but being the head of the Student Council meant dealing with the various conflicting needs of the existing clubs. Nearly everyone but the real Idol Research Club was from a family of at least some wealth, and the result was the conflicting ambitions strained the available budget.

She knew, knew, that the school was just not economically viable. In most schools the club budget was funded by those admittance fees, but at Otonokizaka Eri realized the vast majority of the money was coming from the school's trust – a trust that simply couldn't last under the strain being placed on it.

But the combination of girls who were used to the money for ambitious projects being available, dwindling attendance, and the resulting conflicting egos forced her to come to a conclusion.

"Argh! This is impossible!" she exclaimed, suddenly, to Nozomi. Her friend and partner in 'crime' looked up from her own budget sheet in surprise. "We've got half the sports teams, such as they are, insisting the other half don't need their budgets since they can't even field enough people for a competition team."

Nozomi smiled and shook her head. "It's a sound argument, but it wouldn't make them happy." She pulled out her lunch, a sandwich from a convenience store. "Maybe we should take a break."

Eri noticed the unusual choice. "No time to prepare breakfast properly?"

Nozomi responded with a little laugh. "No, just my new house guest kind of wiped me out."

Eri knew Nozomi's living situation. "House guest? Don't you think your parents would object?"
"Probably, but I couldn't leave her camped out in the back of the shrine," Nozomi said, taking a bite. "I'll manage, Erichi."

"...her..." Eri rapidly added the pieces together, and her eyes narrowed in anger. "Ranma."

The sudden chill startled Nozomi so much she nearly dropped her sandwich. "What's wrong with Ranma?"

Eri's breathing quickened. "You mean you don't know? That gi...boy...girl..."

"Yes, Eri, I know about the curse," Nozomi explained between bites, having calmed down. "He was a perfect gentleman last night."

"HE CAN ALSO MAKE TORNADOS!" Eri screamed. "He's dangerous! I can't believe you invited him to live with you! What would possess you to take in a...wandering vagrant?"

"He's hot," Nozomi teased back, before turning serious. "I also got the hint that there's some kind of family troubles at home." Seeing this did not mollify the blonde, she elaborated. "I put a strict time limit on him to sort it out. A good thing, too. You should see him eat."

Eri's head hit the desk. "Has everyone in this school taken leave of their senses?"

"Probably."

Shampoo approached the school. It had taken some persuading of the stupid Japanese device to lead her to this place, even knowing the name, but the picture was unmistakable. No weapons, as agreed. She had even - reluctantly - listened to Kasumi's advice about the front gate.

She would get to the bottom of this and get her Airen – her Ranma - back.

She walked in through the front gates, towards the door directly before her, ignoring the looks of the weak girls in the surrounding courtyard. They weren't Amazons. Not warriors. A few had the skills, she wagered, but they were like the fool Kuno. Skills, but not strength. Shampoo knew which was more important.

She got as far as the front door before a woman in a nice dress-suit stopped her. "Excuse me, miss. I'm afraid that there have been some incidents over the past few days. Unless you're invited, the campus is closed outside of special events."

Shampoo evaluated the woman. She seemed to believe she had some authority here. The Amazon was about to dismiss that idea when she remembered Akane's words that morning. Words it was to be, then. She wished, pretty much for the first time, that she hadn't wasted a year getting by on her pidgin Japanese. "Need to see Ranma. You bring to gate, yes?"

The woman before her raised an eyebrow. "There is no student at this school named 'Ranma.' No teachers or faculty that I'm aware of, either."

"Rats. Shampoo thought for a moment. "Need to see Honoka, too."

"After the events brought to my attention last night..." the woman said sternly. "No one will be 'seeing' Miss Kousaka."

"Shampoo come under truce!" she shouted. "Not be treated this way!"

The woman shook her head. "You have your answer. Please leave."
It took every ounce of self-control the Chinese girl had not to punch that self-righteous expression off the woman's face. "Shampoo be back."

The woman raised an eyebrow. "You've been captured on the security cameras. Just for that, I'll be passing your picture on to the police. And don't think you can just disable the cameras, the recordings aren't stored inside. Miss Shampoo, please leave now before I have to take further action. You're disrupting my students."

Shampoo paled. That was no idle threat – she couldn't afford to come to the attention of the authorities. "Wait, please! No call police! Shampoo no want cause trouble."

"...very well," the woman said after what seemed like a moment's consideration. "If you wish to speak to Miss Kousaka, wait outside the gate. I'll ask if she wants to talk to you. If she doesn't show up within the hour, you have your answer and I'll expect you to be gone."

"Shampoo...understand."

Honoka looked over the lavender-haired girl, giving her her best smile. "Xiang-pu?" she asked.

The Amazon looked startled. "You try get name right?"

"How did I do?" the ginger girl asked, still trying to project her best friendly expression."

"...better than some," Shampoo admitted. "But can just call Shampoo. Everyone else do it."

"If you insist." Honoka shrugged, leaning on the wall next to her. "So, what's this about?"

Shampoo blinked. She...hadn't actually expected this to be a talk In her experience, Japanese people weren't really interested in her opinions. Of course, that might have something to do with her habit of ensuring everyone around her knew what those were. Loudly. She settled on "Why Ranma seeing you?"

Honoka groaned. "It's not like that. Why is everyone in Nerima obsessed with Ranma's love life, anyway?"

"Is biggest news in town every day." Shampoo actually quipped. "But Ranma is airen...aiya...'Beloved' think word is, yes?"

Honoka needed a second to parse that. "If you must know, I don't really care."

"Lies. Everyone after Shampoo Airen, why you different?" Shampoo tried to counter.

And Honoka giggled. "Well, yes, he's kinda cute but honestly, I can't imagine wanting to live with her."

Shampoo needed a few seconds to figure that one out. "...I not sure you say what you mean to say. You think Ranma is girl?"

"Yes."

"You know Ranma is really boy, yes?"

"Yes."

Shampoo blinked. "You okay, Honoka?"
"Never felt better!" Honoka confirmed.

Shampoo considered that. "You order ramen from Nekohanten? Mousse maybe give you something from 'special' spice rack?"

"Sounds great!" Honoka giggled. "But nope, nothing like that happened."

Shampoo narrowed her eyes. "Ranma boy or girl?"

"Yes."

"..."

Honoka laughed. "Sorry, sorry. But to answer the question I think you're actually answering, Ranma's both. And no, that doesn't turn me off per se, but . . . " Honoka shrugged. "Anyway, you seem like a perfectly nice girl, Shampoo."

Shampoo's eyes narrowed at her, suspecting some kind of deception. "So I sneak into bath with Ranma."

"...just not in my bathtub, please," Honoka looked a little off. "That's pretty gross."

Shampoo's head tilted, like a curious kitten. "I take back to China?"

Honoka frowned at that. "Is he going with you willingly?"

"What difference that make?"

Honoka coughed. "A pretty big one, actually."

Shampoo sniffed. "Ranma is husband! Why stupid Japanese no understand?!"

Honoka raised her hands up. "Calm down, please!"

Shampoo's lips curled up into a snarl, but she remembered - again - that hitting this infuriating girl had gotten Akane into her mess. Reluctantly, she unballed the fist she had unconsciously made. "Why no understand that?" she repeated.

Honoka took a deep breath, prompting Shampoo to do the same. "Shampoo, if I went to Ranma and asked her if you were his wife, what would he say?"

Shampoo blinked. "Shampoo..." No, that was the wrong answer. "He say yes."

"Are you sure? Are you really, absolutely sure?" Honoka asked again. Noting a tear starting to form, she reached out and put a hand on the Chinese girl's shoulder, giving a gentle squeeze. "A marriage takes two people. If he doesn't say 'yes' then no one here will accept it."

"But...but..." Shampoo clammed up. "Stupid outsider no understand!"

The ginger took a step backwards. "Shampoo, please. Ranma's my friend. I want to understand. I'd like to get along with all of his fiancées."

The amazon's eyes narrowed. "Is maybe pervert-girl? Like girl-type Ranma?"

Honoka tilted her head. "Why? Interested?"
Shampoo felt her head spin. That one usually got to them. "I no think so," she decided. "Shampoo no want be friend with you."

Honoka just smiled. "Why not?" When the Amazon looked startled, she pressed forward, reaching out and putting a hand on the other girl's shoulder. "Would it make you feel better if I just went ahead and formally renounced any claim on her?"

"...that...start."

"Done." Honoka's smile continued unabated. "Now...I'm Kousaka Honoka. Would you like to be friends?"

Shampoo tried to think about what to do in this kind of situation. It occurred to her that no Japanese person had made her such an offer since she arrived, definitely not in any kind of sincerity. She genuinely didn't know how to react to the girl staring at her with those kind, bright blue eyes.

Honoka cried out in alarm as Shampoo suddenly turned and fled from her, wincing at the sudden sob the other girl gave before she was gone. She found herself wishing there was something she could do or say, or even apologize...but there was nothing.

So she turned and went back to the roof.

A few minutes later, she was eying a certain pig-tailed girl as he continued to check her over, peering into her eyes with a flashlight and repeatedly taking her pulse, poking and prodding in various ways she wasn't sure she should be tolerating from anyone other than a doctor, and generally being a nuisance. Finally, she asked "Satisfied?"

"How many fingers am I holding up?" Ranma asked her, seeming dead serious.

Honoka rolled her eyes. "Three."

She didn't let up, pointing at someone. "And who is that?"

"Umi."

Another point, this time at the other red-head.

"Maki."

She turned her finger on the dishwater blonde.

"Marilyn Monroe."

"Very funny."

Honoka sighed. "Ranma, I'm fine."

"Ya just had a run-in with an Amazon. You haven't got a scratch on ya, yer completely coherent, and yer sayin' she ran off in tears," Ranma countered. "She's up ta something."

Umi just shook her head in response to that list. "So the fact that we're starting to get better results is a sign that they're up to something, instead of maybe realizing it's time to give up and leave this alone? What did we ever do to your so-called friends anyway?"

"Existed."
Kotori winced. "I think maybe we should just get on with practice."

"Before that," Ranma interrupted. "We got some time...I been thinking. You girls maybe want to record the concert?"

Maki smiled. "Good idea. We can put it up on the web site. The whole idea is to get attention for the school, so we should put ourselves out there as much as possible."

"Oh! Right!" Kotori smiled and pulled a sketch out of her book bag. "Our costumes! I've been working on them, and they're almost ready!"

The costume was primarily made up of a minidress, and a layered skirt. The shortness was emphasized with plain white stockings, and calf-high boots. Kotori had added white, detached sleeves and a ribbon around the neck. A smaller diagram in the corner showed the colors would be pink, light green and a pastel blue.

Ranma shrugged. "Well, looks good to me."

"Me too," Maki smirked. "Maybe a little short on the skirt, but I won't be wearing it."

Umi growled. "Ko-to-ri..." The named girl backed away from her long-time friend. "I thought we agreed that there would be no skimpy costumes!"

Ranma blinked. "This ain't too bad. You seen what some of these girls are wearing?"

"That's not the point!"

Honoka chuckled. "What does Ranma think?"

"Huh?!" The girl jumped back. "Hey, leave me out of this!"

Honoka grinned broadly. "Why? You're the boy here, so your opinion counts for more."

Ranma swallowed. Umi looked like it the answer wasn't to her liking, violence might break out. "...well, I'd have ta see it on ya, but I think it looks good."

Umi shrieked at her. "You will NEVER see me wear that! I don't want to flash my legs!"

Ranma took this as her cue to jump off the roof. Unfortunately, she got all of three steps before Honoka caught her by the wrist. "Oh, honestly. Ranma, Umi's not going to hurt you even if she could. Umi, you're being silly."

Umi gulped. "Right...sorry. We'll talk about the costumes later...since we're taking it light on the conditioning today, should we start working on our next song?"

Maki smiled. "I think you'll like this one..." She took a deep breath, then began to sing in a slow rhythm and clear tone. "Datte kanousei kanjitanda...sou da susume...koukai shitaku nai me no mae ni...bokura no michi ga aru..."

Everyone looked around at each other as Maki blushed. "Great job!" Kotori grinned as she gave her declaration.

Ranma nodded. "Perfect. We'll do that one next, but for right now, still got a concert in two days."

Umi and Maki simultaneously gave Ranma a weird look, as they had expected the martial artist to stop coming around by then.
Akane had just finished going through the first kata she learned for the fifth time that night. It was the closest she could get to stress relief, but it just wasn't the same as punching through a training dummy or a few cinder blocks.

She forcefully refused to append her 'wayward' fiance to that list. Even if he were present, smacking him wouldn't have helped now.

She was about to start on repetition number six when an unwelcome voice intruded. "Getting back to basics, are you?" It belonged to a withered old crone, balanced seemingly precariously on her walking stick. She was so old that only the barest traces of what may have once been a beautiful woman could still be seen, the primary of these being a long shock of strong, white hair down the whole length of her body and then some.

This was Cologne. Matriarch among the Chinese Amazons, and not someone Akane wanted to talk to right now.

"Come to make fun of me?"

Cologne barked out a laugh. "Is that what you think this is about? Really, girl, what would be the point? You do it well enough on your own."

A fist – one the old woman could easily have dodged but chose not to - flew into her cheek. "Felt like a fly," she said. "Amazing that I felt anything, actually. Did you know you could have been stronger than Ryouga?"

"What?" Akane blinked, shocked at the backhanded compliment.

Cologne shook her head. "Pity that potential's already passing you by. But it's of no real consequence." Akane's bristling didn't even phase her. "And I can see you're making no real progress, either. Another pity." She turned around, bouncing away on her staff like a pogo stick.

"Wait, progress?" Akane asked, incredulous. "What do you think this mess is about?"

Cologne barked out a laugh. "What do you think it's about, Tendo?" She bounced back over. "Now, don't get me wrong. As you young'uns would say, I hate Happousai's ass with the heat of a thousand suns. But when it comes to the Art, he's not completely worthless. If he says you need to learn a lesson, it's probably good advice."

"Like you care," Akane turned back to her kata. "You wouldn't be doing this if it didn't help Shampoo somehow."

Cologne raised an eyebrow. "Well, you're right there. I wonder how much more you'll figure out on your own…"

Akane snapped. "What's that supposed to mean? Stop trying to be mysterious and get to the point!"

"And what if being mysterious is the point today, Akane?" she said, using the girl's given name for the first time. "But if you want some plain reasons, I'll indulge you. First, my son-in-law is quite, quite gone."

Akane blinked. "Gone? But he's an hour away on the subway. Sure, it's a bit of a trip but it's not like he moved to India or Europe."

"May as well have," Cologne shrugged. "I thought this might happen eventually, but even I didn't
foresee you'd do something *this* stupid." A kick was the response. "Is there a kitten playing in here?"

"Grrr…"

Cologne shook her head. "At this point this is *damage control*. You're going to have to get that temper in hand if anyone is going to have a chance at Ranma any time soon. But if that's not important to you…"

Akane wilted. "Wait! When Ranma was weakened, you taught him the Hiyruu Shoten-ha. Could you...please?"

Cologne gave it a moment's thought. "Girl, you don't need me for that. You already know everything there is to know about the Heaven Blast. In fact, you were present at a number of Ranma's improvisations, you probably *know* more than I do about it." She barked a laugh. "I'll drop by with the harness tomorrow to see how you're doing. Might want to talk to your father about the basics."

"No! Absolutely not!"

Akane found herself stepping back at the unusual vehemence her father was showing. "You will not give yourself over to that Amazon woman's 'training,'" he continued. Akane gulped as he was actually glaring at her. "We have no way to know if she can be trusted, and even if she *can* be you know what her idea of training involves. No, Akane, we'll be going with Saotome's idea."

Akane blinked. "Wait, Mr. Saotome has an idea? And you really think he can do better than Cologne?"

Soun coughed. "He assures me this method is perfectly safe. Ranma did it when he was seven years old, it just requires some equipment."

"Indeed it does, Tendo." Genma suddenly walked into the dojo, with a large, irregular bundle on his back. "I'm sorry it took so long, had to have it changed a bit with the moxibustion."

Father and daughter stared incredulously. "Saotome...what...is it?"

The canvas wrapping the machine was pulled away with a flourish. "Ta-da!" The device in question was based on something that could once have been found in arcades across Japan, although it was now a rarity. Ten holes, eight in a roughly diamond pattern with two in the middle, had tiny little plastic enclosures inside. The backboard held a score display with seven digits, plus a second display with three reading 'time.' There was also a lower front panel with a button and a dial. The game's marquee proudly announced the title was . . .

"...Wack-a-Ranma?" Akane asked, incredulously.

Genma beamed proudly. "It's simple. Every day after school you come home and play the game for as long as you can stand it." He gave it a little kick and a miniature Ranma popped up, then another, showing both male and female forms represented. "If you hit one whose eyes are glowing red, the game ends. When you can reach one million points, we'll talk to Tofu about taking the moxibustion off."

Akane smiled. "This isn't so hard."

"Well, it might be harder than you think…" Genma said warningly. "I had an arcade maintenance man rig this up for Ranma to teach him control when he was seven, but obviously I had him make a few changes."
"If Ranma did this when he was seven, I can do it," Akane stated confidently. "Fire it up."

The first few chibi-Ranmas popped up and Akane dropped them, to the tune of a point each. Then, a red-eyed chibi announced his presence with a cry of "You are SO uncute!"

Akane tried to bash its' head in. There was a loud buzz, and the score counter died. "ARGH! That wasn't fair! I want a do over!"

Genma smirked. "It'll take all the abuse you can throw at it, Akane. Ten yen a game." Seeing Soun's glare, he added "I'll even make it interesting. If you can beat it before you fill up the coin box, you get your money back."

Akane shook her head. "I will. I'll beat this stupid test of yours, Mr. Saotome."

Shampoo made sure to wipe her eyes down one last time before she entered the Tendo home. *Akane's a damn trouble magnet,* she groused, mostly to herself. *Still, much as it pains me she is important to my husband. And of course, keeping her safe is my mission.* She checked in the dojo, only to find the girl collapsed against the Wack-a-Ranma machine, panting heavily. "Aiya! Was just gone for few hours!"

Akane groaned, forcing herself to her feet. "This contraption's almost as bad as the real thing!"

Shampoo looked at Akane incredulously. "What you talking?"

By way of reply, Akane just reached down and turned the dial on the front to a setting that read 'Shampoo.' "Ten yen."

"Mercenary girl rubbing off on you," Shampoo said wryly, but produced the coin. It was placed into the slot in front, and Shampoo took her place after a quick explanation of the rules.

She did all right tapping the first few with feather-light touches, and restrained a combination laugh and growl when a red-headed Chibi-Ranma taunted her with 'Get away from me, ya freaky chick!'

Once the first few insults flew by, the targets started coming faster and faster, until one of them ducked out of the way with the cabinet announcing her miss with a 'Nyahh!' that almost seemed calculated to get under her skin.

Shampoo knew it was a game, but somehow she started getting angry at the taunting voice of her husband, every time it came up with one of the old standbys. Finally the entire field all popped up at her at once, each with glowing red eyes, all shouting a different insult. "Get away from me!" "Will ya leave me alone!" "Get offa me!" It seemed to go on and on, and the Amazon finally couldn't restrain herself in time, barely tapping a pig-tailed doll. They all sank down, with Shampoo following, sweating despite the fact that it shouldn't have even been a workout.

"Stupid panda?"

"Stupid panda."

Shampoo shook her head. "Even Akane no deserve this."

The Tendo girl sighed. "You did better than I have all night."

"Think maybe that enough for now."

Akane stood up. "You're probably right. You'd better get home."
Shampoo thought about it for a moment. "Shampoo not going home. Too too many bad thing happen to Akane at night."

Akane couldn't hide her surprise. "You almost sound like you care."

Shampoo winced at that. "Shampoo...need think about things. Honoka…" She shook her head. "No want talk about it. Besides, need do homework. No can do with stupid duck around."

Akane swallowed. If Ranma habitually had a hard time, Shampoo would probably find it impossible to get caught up, being raised in a village in China so rural they hadn't adopted indoor plumbing. It wouldn't be fair to just take advantage of her like this without giving anything back. "Come on. I'll help."

Ranma found herself sticking close to her two 'charges'. The shining lights and glowing advertising, normally aimed at overwhelming the senses, instead only drew her eyes to every side-alley. The depictions of animated girls merrily smiling from most of the billboards just seemed all the more disturbing to her under the bright lighting that blocked out the stars above. "This really the best place in town to buy Honoka's new computer?" she asked, trying very hard to keep her eyes everywhere there might be trouble at once.

"Best in the city," was Honoka's response.

Maki clarified with "Best place in the world, if you know what's what. Luckily, I have a tip. Come on." Much to the pig-tailed girl's relief, she was led into a large store off the main run instead of into one of the side-streets. They quickly strode past the phones, and into a smaller, sectioned off area of the store with laptop computers under the glass display. She called out to the boy behind the counter. "I hear the new Sony model's being put out tomorrow." He grinned at her, but she seemed to ignore it. "How many of the old ones are left?"

"Two of 'em," he said. "I could . . . " Ranma tuned out the following discussion, instead electing to look around at the various gadgets.

Honoka laid a hand on her shoulder with a giggle. "A little overwhelmed?"

Ranma turned to the ginger with a shrug. "I don't see the point of most of this stuff. I mean, I got the laptop down I think, but..." He held up a device that looked like half a keyboard.

"I think that's for . . . " Honoka blinked, tilting her head. "I don't know what that's for..."

The device was quickly returned to its' place. "Well, glad I ain't the only one." Suddenly, Ranma found herself holding a large box. She slowly lowered it to peer at Maki, who wasn't able to meet Ranma's eyes.

"You needed one too, right?" The other redhead said, slowly blushing. "And I got it on a discount, so I can't take it back."

Honoka blinked, eyes going between the pair while she held her own new computer. "...maybe we should go get a snack."

"After the concert!" Two redheads shouted at her in unison.

The streets of Kanda were as safe as any in Tokyo, which is to say more than safe enough for a girl to be walking home alone just after sunset. Thus, as Umi made her way home she didn't bother to
avoid any shadowy alleyways.

This proved a minor mistake when someone reached out and grabbed her around the chest, pulling her into the alley before she could even scream. "Wh-what?" She heard a small grunt of effort when she, naturally, started to struggle. "Toujou?"

Nozomi chuckled. "Right in one. So, what happened last night?"

"Didn't the President tell you?" Umi asked, a bit dazed.

Nozomi's somewhat unnerving grin was reflected in her voice. "I wanted to hear about it from someone else. Erichi was a little hysterical. Something about freak weather patterns."

"...that happened." Umi admitted.

Nozomi twitched. "I see. Then I only have one other question for you. Did Ranma hurt anyone?"

Umi needed a moment to think. "Yes...but..."

"But?"

Umi gulped. "The only person he hurt tried to pick a fight with Honoka."

There was a tense moment, and then Nozomi's grip relaxed. "I see. Thanks for being honest."

Umi gulped, and nodded, her cheeks reddening. "Uhm...can you let go of my chest now?"

"Oh, sure."

Back in Honoka's room, Ranma and Honoka sat staring at the screens of their new computers, waiting for the progress bars to fill up. Honoka was the first to break the companionable silence.

"Hey, why were you so nervous?"

"Akiba ain't a safe place," Ranma's explanation was curt.

Honoka just laughed. "Ranma, it's fine."

"You ain't run into someone who mistook ya for a thug and tasered ya, maybe. Those things smart but it ain't like I can pound 'em into the ground or nothin'. They got those things ta deal with the real thugs." Ranma explained.

The ginger shook her head. "Well, maybe if you weren't so tense and watching everyone for signs of problems...after dark, you just want to stick to the Electric Town strip and it's fine, really."

"Ya sure?" Ranma asked, skeptically. "I'd hate ta hear ya got hurt. Again."

Honoka winced. "I've been going there for years. I think it's safer than your fiances."

Ranma ignored the jab and flipped some hair out of her eyes, staring at the screen with an expression that could almost be a pout if that hadn't been too feminine for the not-girl. "So then I just make up a password, right?"

"Yep," Honoka said, having long since finished her own setup procedure, grabbing a long sip of tea from the glass on her table. "Er...I think Maki said it comes with all the software for school, so why don't you just not download anything until we can find someone who can explain this better?"
Ranma closed the lid and leaned back. "Sounds good. I don't get this stuff at all. Never even had a phone till the Tendos insisted."

"Umi's right, you must have lived in a cave all your life," Honoka said, not bothering to hide her amusement.

Ranma snorted. "Don't knock it 'till you try it. The right cave can hold in the heat from your campfire and keep you outta the rain. If you're real lucky it's dry soil. Get yourself a nice pad and it's better than any fancy hotel."

"I...see." Honoka gulped. She really needed to address the obvious, but there was no telling how the redhead currently in her room would take it. "You know, it was really nice of Maki to get you a whole new laptop out of her allowance."

"Yeah." Ranma winced. "Guess I should thank her for it or somethin'."

Honoka winced herself – she'd been trying, subtly, to get Ranma to think about being more polite but her own actions had run counter to it. Still, not important at the moment. "Uhm...why do you think she did that?"

She blinked, completely puzzled. "Uhm...I dunno. I mean, she bought you one too."

"Yeah, but I think she felt kind of bad about not being able to help with... anyway!" Honoka skipped over the memory. "There wasn't any solid reason like that for her to help you out..." she tried again, hopefully, only for Ranma to stare at her confusedly. Oh, honestly. You'd think with that many girls chasing her he'd have noticed.

Honoka felt herself blushing as she realized this was straying into uncomfortable territory, and Ranma seemed to be glancing around in a way that suggested a retreat, so she let the matter drop for now. "Never mind. Let's just get started on that paper."

Kotori tried to step past her mother's study quietly – practice had run a bit late, with Umi demanding perfection from the routine. She had come straight home, but...

"Kotori!" Her mother's voice cut through her taut nerves like a knife. "Come here."

When she stepped into the small home office, what she found wasn't what she expected. Her mother turned the screen on her computer outward to show it was displaying a video of a tornado erupting from the center of the Otonoki courtyard. "Care to explain why you didn't share this aspect of last night's misadventure with me, daughter?"

"EEP!" There was no mercy in her mother's eyes. "It was Ranma! I don't know how but he can do that!"

There was a long, uncomfortable silence.

"Did this have something to do with the... attacker?" Kotori nodded to the question, stiff as a board and sweating. "And was this assailant anything less than a demon from Hell itself?" A shake of the head. "Then, accepting that you're not lying to me, why did she think this was appropriate?"

Kotori winced. She really hadn't wanted to explain that the boy/girl she was trying to help for Honoka's sake was... this. "I don't really get it, but Ranma said something about it being the safest way to knock her out without hurting her he could figure out on short notice."

"This didn't hurt her? And she's not a demon?" The principal's eyes were wide as saucers.
"Ranma caught her," Kotori clarified. "After...whatever it is knocked her out."

Finally, Mrs. Minami held her head in her hands. "Kotori, I'm trying to understand this, but...why?"

It took the girl a long time to think about it. "One, Honoka thinks it's a good idea. And two...well, think about what Ranma's life has to be like that he had to learn how to do something like that."

The implications bubbled through her mother's head. "I don't know if this is normally possible, but to push a teenager to such a length...you win. But if I do this, she absolutely can't remain with her parents. I'll write up the initial paperwork tonight."

Genma finally wiped off his brow, the intense solo workout outside not quite making up for the lack of a good sparring session with his wayward son. He was only slightly surprised to see his wife waiting for him. "Good evening, dear," he said, trying to keep it formal.

She kept to the same level. "I spoke with Ranma. I think something shall have to be done about this girl he seems to have taken an interest in."

"Relax, Nodoka," he said, claiming a confidence he didn't fully feel. "The boy's in love with Akane, he'll come back."

Nodoka shook her head, laying out the futons. "That isn't the issue. If Ranma is enough of a man to require a mistress, he should have one. But this...Honoka...seems to have ideas above her station."

Genma quirked his lip. "Dear, is this about Akane? As it so happens, as a martial artist I happen to agree with Ranma's judgment. If anything, in his place I'd probably have let the cops have her, but I'm not in love with the girl."

"...so you're saying he acted appropriately?" There was a dangerous hint of steel in her voice.

The sometimes-panda swallowed audibly. "As a martial artist, absolutely."

"And what about as a husband?"

Genma felt relief. "Nodoka, he'll learn how to balance the two eventually. For right now, just be happy that he got it half right."

"Very well," Nodoka muttered unhappily. "For now. We'll sort this out formally next week."

"...yes dear."
Chapter 7

A/N: Reminder – check my profile for scheduled publication dates.

The day of the concert brought with it unexpected challenges. Unexpected, but not insurmountable.

"Ranma. Not that I'm ungrateful…"

The pig-tailed girl looked to Maki, puzzled. "Yeah?"

"HOW!?!?" She gestured to the stage, which was flanked by all the speakers from the school's sound system. "I was told we couldn't use them!"

"...I asked Nozomi for the key last night," the girl said. "Why, who'd you ask?"

Maki's head hit the keyboard. "Ayase."

"Damn. What's her problem, anyway?" Ranma made one last adjustment to the position of the heavy speakers. "Okay, wanna hook it up? I'm no good with all that wiring stuff."

The response was a shake of her head and a somewhat exasperated smile. "Some 'man of the house' you'll make."

Ranma turned indignant. "What's that supposed ta mean!?!"

"Why, important to you?" Maki teased. "Is being a man that important?"

Ranma snorted. "What, like me better as a girl or somethin'?"

Maki blinked, completely startled by the line. Her cheeks turned red and she began to stammer. "Wh..I mean, it's not like I mind that you're a boy, but yeah."

Ranma turned pale. "Wait...I…"

Maki rolled her eyes. "Look, just stand back for the sound test, okay?"

Ranma obediently did so and the music started to play. She walked around the room to make sure she could hear it clearly, giving a thumbs up once she reached each of the spots Maki had already marked out for her. "Okay, sounds good," she said, looking around. "Why isn't anyone here yet? I'd have guessed someone would have shown up by now."

"They're probably at the club meetings." Maki explained. "This is supposed to be a day for the clubs to get interested students."

Ranma scratched her head. "Then...why ain't we starting earlier?"

"This was the only time we could get the auditorium." Maki explained. "Well, they could get the auditorium."

Ranma's eyes narrowed. "...and who decides...no, don't tell me."

"Ayase," they said together.

"This sucks," Ranma concluded.
Maki shrugged. "Still, might get some people in who don't think the club they thought they'd go for isn't for them. I wasn't planning on joining any clubs anyway."

"Me neither." Ranma admitted. "Don't see the point. The martial arts clubs are okay for what they are, but they can't get on my level. Not with the school rules."

Maki gave the girl a sly glance. "I'll bet. Anyway, why don't you go check on the others? It'll be time soon."

Ranma noted that there was only one change room set up behind the theater. *Feh, all-girls school, I guess.* She was about to knock, when she heard excited voices coming from the other side of the door.

"Get her arms!" That was Kotori.

A shriek that was probably Umi.

Then a groan of pain that was probably Honoka, one Ranma winced in sympathy to, but it was followed up with "I've got them! Get her pants!"

The martial artist's cheeks reddened, and she removed a hand from the door that she hadn't immediately realized she'd reached out to try to open it in the first place.

"I'm! Not! Going! Out! There!" Umi shrieked.

Ranma gulped. "What's goin' on in there?"

There was another brief sound of struggle, during which Ranma had to exercise all restraint not to open the door to try to help, and then Honoka cracked it open. "Umi's just got a case of stage fright. We're going to help her get over it."

"...eh, if you're sure." Ranma told the ginger girl. "...listen, curtain's in five."

Honoka gave a quick nod. "How's the audience?"

"...it ain't good."

Honoka's expression briefly fell. "Can we give it an extra couple of minutes?"

Ranma nodded. "If th-" She stopped herself. "I'll go make the announcement."

Honoka's expression fell further. "I see. We've only got the stage for twenty minutes, but we've only got the one song so…"

"Gotcha." Ranma nodded. "Don't worry, I can handle the cleanup in three if Maki gets her keyboard. I'll tell the girls on lighting we'll start ten minutes late."

Maki tapped out the keys, listening to her last-second rehearsal on a pair of ear-buds. Not the best equipment but they were improvising as it was. Still, it was the best she was going to get, and she was about to step backstage when she noticed some movement up in the tech booth. Curious, she left the school auditorium to go in through the back, rather than use the stage entrances.

She was less surprised than she felt she should have been to run into Eri. "Ayase," she said, coolly. "Couldn't leave it alone, just scheduling them for an empty concert hall? You had to actually mess
with them?" She put her hands on her hips.

"That would be against the rules, Nishikino," Eri sniffed. "I just wanted a copy from the cameras..."

Maki turned her back, looking over her shoulder at the larger girl, completely unintimidated. "And what would you need that for, hmm?"

"Nothing!" Eri snapped back, too quickly.

"Nothing." Maki repeated, obviously not buying it. "You know, Ranma's got a point. What is your problem?"

Eri snorted. "Oh, come off it Nishikino. You, of all of this lot, should get that. This is just... pointless. This kind of stumbling about on stage won't get the school the kind of attention we need! Even lending your talents just barely makes their singing passable."

Maki shrugged. "Well, they'll probably never make the National Theater, but they're above average for high school performers. And they put this together in about a month with no budget at all. Frankly, I'm impressed that they managed it with no experience."

"They didn't 'manage' it," Eri insisted. "Just because you'll accept a flawed performance..."

Maki raised an eyebrow. "What's wrong with it? I wrote it to sound good for what I thought they could manage, and they outdid that."

"Still amateurs..."

Maki blinked. "Wait, what? I don't recognize you from the local music scene, and I know everybody on the road to the arts universities."

"Russian ballet," Eri responded.

Maki winced. The demands of that particular art form were well known to her. "Eri..." Her tone immediately softened. "You know they don't have to be that good, right?"

"I can't accept that anything less would save the school," Eri countered.

Maki paused...well, it had worked for Ranma. "How about a bet, then?"

The blonde stared at her. "Another bet?"

Maki smirked. "You don't have to do anything you weren't planning on doing anyway. Go ahead. Edit the video as best you can and upload it to Love Live. If you're right, the comments section will tell us everything we need to know, and I'll encourage Honoka to stop." Eri grinned – without Maki the other three were sunk no matter how many crazy martial artists they dug up. "BUT!" she interjected. "...if the overall trend of the comments is positive, you join Mu's."

"What?" Eri's jaw dropped, but Maki wasn't deterred.

"What's the problem? They're eager to learn, but Umi's no choreographer. Ranma can train our bodies to be able to do the moves, but a 'pro' like you could give us the steps. You wouldn't have to actually get on stage, just become the club's fifth member." Maki's grin only wavered a little. "Unless you're afraid you're wrong."

"Not a chance, Nishikino." Eri nodded. "Very well. I'll prove this is a waste of time."
Maki nodded. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to get into position."

"So…" Honoka looked down at her feet.

Umi gave Kotori a glance, then put a hand on her friend's shoulder. "Honoka, don't say it. It wasn't for nothing. There's still time, people might show up."

Kotori put an arm around her. "Besides, we had fun, didn't we?"

"...yeah, but…" Honoka took a deep breath. "Right. This is just a practice run. We're making a recording, so we can prove we can do this." She nodded to the pair. "I don't care if there's no one out there. We go out there, and if there's no one but Ranma, we still give it our all."

"...well, that wouldn't make it easier." Umi grinned weakly at her own 'joke.'

Kotori shook her head with a giggle of amusement. Honoka echoed the giggle and added "You do realize if we keep going we're going to get an audience sometime."

"L-l-let's just focus on today!" Umi shouted, opening the door and going out to the stage.

The time to the performance ticked down. First two girls with short hair, then another with her hair done up in pigtails came in. The later had a pair of binoculars and sat way in the back for some reason, but Ranma didn't complain. Though Ranma didn't recognize them, they were Hanayo, Rin, and Nico.

When Eri came in at the new five minute mark and took a seat in the very back row, arms crossed stiffly and glaring at the curtain, Ranma assumed something had happened but decided not to question it.

At four minutes, Nozomi walked in and gave the room a smile and a nod. Ranma got up to the front. "It'll just be another few minutes, folks. We decided to hold off to give people some more time to show up." She took some small satisfaction in the sour look Eri shot her. Got your number now, Ayase. It was really hard to keep the smirk off her face, but she got down and quickly joined Nozomi at her seat near the front. "Not a great turnout, but no time to drum up any more."

Nozomi gave the temporary girl a distant smile as a response. "Oh, I think this is more than fine. There's only one class to recruit from, after all."

Ranma blinked. "Good point. Three people's probably a lot."

"Five."

The reply included a soft shake of the head. "Ayase don't count. She's just here ta see us mess up. And you were gonna come anyway."

Nozomi giggled. "True. Next time you'll want to be sure to have more control over the venue."

Ranma smirked. "I'll make a note of it."

Both girls went completely pale on hearing a sound coming from the rafters high above the stage. Nozomi, surprisingly, was the first to react. "Are you messing around up there?"

"Lights are all automated. Only reason for anyone ta be up there would be repairs, and that's a bad idea with a show about to start." The martial artist checked her phone's clock. "Two minutes ta
The pair glanced back, and noticed Eri had already stood up and was striding towards the front of the auditorium. "Shit!" Ranma cursed. "Stop her, please. I'll go check it out."

A nod from the vice president, and the martial artist moved so quickly she almost seemed to vanish.

Nozomi, meanwhile, put a hand on Eri's shoulder as she was passing. The blonde hissed at her. "Nozomi, not now. Not after the other day."

"Do you trust her?"

Eri reacted as if slapped. "Her maybe, but her 'fiance' is a lunatic!"

The sudden sound of bone hitting metal alerted the pair to Nico's sudden fall from her awkward seat. She recovered quickly, running up to the pair. "Wait, what are you two talking about with Saotome?"

"It wasn't Saotome that was the problem," Eri muttered, trying to avoid alarming the two first-year girls. "It was that Tendo girl. She came in here ranting and nearly killed Kousaka..."

Nico went absolutely pale. "Oh God no...I didn't think..."

The lights began to dim.

"We have to stop the performance." Eri whispered. "We can't afford to have something happen with all the students here!"

"Something's already happening," Nozomi pointed out, taking her seat. "And if I'm right, it's going to be the last something before certain people take the hint."

Nico followed suit. "It's starting, anyway."

Reluctantly, very reluctantly, Eri followed suit as the curtain began to rise on the three most vexing girls she had dealt with all year.

"I saay...Hey! Hey! Hey Start Dash!"

Ranma crept along the scaffolding as the lights from below moved about, casting shifting shadows that would be all too easy to hide in. She hissed out "Who's here? I swear ta god, Shampoo, if it's you I'll."

"Hush, cretin!" a rather different voice hissed back. "Even as pedestrian a performance as this demands silence." A black ponytail hanging off one side of her head, almost in defiant contrast to her intentionally aristocratic bearing. A lime-green leotard, showing off a trim and slender figure. And a voice that Ranma felt could grate steel into shavings.

This was Kuno Kodachi.

Ranma, cautiously, hopped along the rafters until she was next to the girl. "So, what brings you here? I'm in enough trouble without more comin' after me."

"I was simply interested in what my Ranma could be doing in this district. Imagine my surprise to find you instead, and in with this quaint troupe no less." She glanced sideways at the other girl. "I suspect...but no. My Ranma would not be caught dead in such a place as this, and rightly so."
Never could figure out the curse, Ranma groaned. "Well, he ain't here, he ain't gonna be around here," she pointed out. "It's a girl's school. If yer lookin' fer him, just move on, would ya?"

Kodachi *smirked* back at her. "My, my, is that a challenge in your tone? Very well...but you are also correct that this is not the place, or the time. I bid you adieu!"

Ranma covered her mouth and nose from long practice, but the only thing Kodachi tossed was a smoke bomb, easily dismissed as another special effect. She glanced down, but it was evident the song was nearly over.

"Dammit. *Really* wanted ta watch…"

It was intended to be a celebration, but with all the near-misses, no one felt too much like celebrating. Instead, Honoka dropped the bombshell, placing the folder Happousai had originally given to Ranma on the table. Umi, Kotori, and Maki read it in turn, sipping on their sodas in silence. Once Maki set it down, she glanced up at Ranma. "You said your Master wanted us to enter this?"

"Yep." Ranma rolled her eyes. "I don't get it either."

Umi frowned thoughtfully. "Ranma, do you mind going downstairs?"

"Yeah, actually, I *do* mind," the pig-tailed girl replied with a bit of acid in her tone.

Honoka put a hand on the pair's shoulders. "Ranma...go downstairs," she settled on. "Don't worry, I've got your back up here," She pulled out a thousand-yen note. "Actually, why don't you try a few of the games in the game center next door. I think you'll like the second and third floors."

Ranma gave her a hurt look, but Honoka put hands on her shoulders to patiently explain. "Ranma, I think there's two different things going on here. Can you trust me?"

"...yeah. I trust you." Ranma said. "Okay, I've got my phone on."

A minute later, the red-headed girl had vanished and Honoka turned back to the group. "Okay, first, the easy bit. All in favor of working towards Love Live?" Every hand was raised. "Now...does anyone object to including Ranma?"

Umi nodded. "Look, Honoka, *Ranma* is fine, but there's a lot that comes with him."

"The real question of how much of that *is* Ranma?" Kotori interjected, much to the surprise of everyone. "Mama brought up a good point. He didn't learn how to do...what he does to win fighting tournaments. If he stops going to that school, and gets somewhere else to live…"

Honoka looked thoughtful. "He's already staying with Toujou, but that's only a temporary arrangement…"

Maki bit her lip nervously, but Umi beat her to the punch. "Honoka, we're in high school. This is really getting to be more than we can handle. Finding someone a place to live? How are you planning on supporting him?"

Maki tried to speak again, but Honoka slammed her hands on the table. "I'm not abandoning her, Umi!"

"I wasn't suggesting that!" Umi shouted back. "But in case you don't remember, you nearly *died!*"

"Kind of hard to forget!" Honoka's voice raised as well.
The pair nearly stormed off, when Maki put a hand on each of their shoulders. "Maybe...maybe I can help." Both of them looked at her, their heads whipping around fast enough that Honoka's did so with a loud cracking noise. "I...I have a big house..." she explained lamely. "There's enough room."

Honoka nodded. "That would work, if your parents will go for it."

"...she might have to pay rent or something," Maki said. "Maybe do chores, but...well, I think she can handle that."

Kotori sighed. "Everyone, I think that's the best we're going to get for tonight. Maki has to talk it over with her parents. If Ranma doesn't have a long term place to live, Mama won't let him into the school."

"Right." Umi said, looking at Honoka. "If Ranma joins the club officially, I won't have any problems. Otherwise..."

Honoka nodded, realizing it was the best she was going to get. "One week, then?"

"...sure." Umi agreed. "Don't make me regret this."

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Honoka got to the game center only to find Ranma in an argument with the attendant. "What the heck's going on here?!

The attendant gestured to a simple punching-strength game. Which was currently emitting sparks. Visible sparks. Honoka looked at Ranma for an explanation. "I didn't think I hit it that hard," she said.

Honoka sighed, turned to the attendant, and bowed. "I'm very sorry about my friend. I'm afraid she was raised outside of the country we know." When Ranma didn't bow as well, the martial artist got a kick to the shin. Ranma took the hint and bowed.

"...I don't care." The attendant finally said. "Just go."

Once outside, Ranma looked at Honoka. "Well?"

The ginger couldn't quite meet Ranma's eyes. "It didn't go as well as I'd hoped. Umi's scared of you. I think she wants some assurance that there isn't going to be a repeat of the Akane incident. I mostly convinced her to wait, but she won't give her blessings until we know what happens at the meeting with your parents."

Ranma groaned. "Mom's not gonna like this. Not a bit. I was hopin' I wouldn't have to tell her about the idol thing."

She'd been afraid of this. "I don't think that's going to be optional, from what you've told me."

Honoka shrugged. "How bad can it possibly be? What's the worst she can do? She can't even kick you out of the family without your father's backing her up, and he isn't going to risk that."

"There's...somethin' I didn't tell ya." Ranma fidgeted nervously. "Before we left on the training journey, she made my pops swear to bring me home a 'Man among Men,'" The redhead gestured to her body. "It got kinda dicey for awhile, but she's mostly accepted the curse, I think. But she gets kinda twitchy around girly stuff."

"How bad could it be?"
"...the terms are if she says he failed we both gotta commit seppuku," Ranma explained, somewhat bitterly.

Honoka reacted almost as if physically struck, needing to grab a nearby wall to steady herself. "That's...that's..."

Ranma sighed. "It is what it is."

The other girl steadied herself and stood up. "So? That can't be legal! Fight it!"


Honoka shook her head. "Don't say that, please? Without your curse we wouldn't have been able to do this..."

Ranma blinked, surprised. Then chuckled. "Yeah, I guess." She glanced over her shoulder. "It's a half day tomorrow. How about after practice we head somewhere?"

Honoka thought about it for a moment. It was obvious Ranma was trying to deflect the conversation away from the difficult topic, but she decided she'd had enough for the day. "I'll spend Sunday with the others, then."

Maki squirmed as her mother stared at her. "I know it's kind of a lot to ask..."

"Maki!" Her mother, the dignified doctor and occasional socialite, squealed. "No! Not at all! I'm absolutely delighted you wanted to do a sleepover!"

Maki gulped. This was just getting worse. "Erm...it might be longer than a night. Probably."

She saw her mother's expression change, going a little darker, but still quite excited. "Well, all right, but just for a weekend."

Yeah, knew it wouldn't be that easy, "No, mom...it would be...a bit longer term."

Her mother's enthusiasm bled away, and she took a seat. "Maki, is your friend...in trouble?"

"Her name's Ranma, and...well, yes. But not legally. It's just her family might be...we're afraid it might be abuse." Maki explained, slowly and no longer able to meet her mother's eyes.

"I see..." There was a long silence while the older woman clearly thought. "What evidence do you have, and why has no one gone to the police?"

"Well, it's complicated..." Maki began, but was immediately cut off.

"It usually is. Evidence, Maki." That was the scientist talking, Maki knew.

She glanced at the clock. "Do you have to get to work? This might take awhile." Her head shook. "No, really."

Mrs. Nishikino thought about it, then gave her a nod. "I can see this is important to you, so I'll make time." A cell phone was quickly brought out and a call made, giving her daughter a soft smile. "One of the advantages of being the boss, and the owner's wife. Now, please."

Maki took a deep breath. "First, you have to understand that we know Ranma didn't have a normal
childhood. She was raised on the road as some kind of wandering martial artist." A nod to go on. "She barely has any social skills, but she's been trained to be the best at that one thing.

"On top of that, she's been engaged by her father. A lot. I don't think Ranma even knows how many girls she's been engaged to anymore…” Maki said, almost immediately realizing her slip and wincing after she made it.

Her mother caught it as well, raising an eyebrow. "Girls?"

Maki gulped. "Ranma's father raised her as a boy."

"...would this be because 'she' is a boy?"

Maki swallowed. "Ah...that's also complicated. Suffice to say she's enough of a girl that the Principal wants to invite her to Otonokizaka, for the moment?"

"Ahh...yes, well, these are always interesting issues." The doctor said with an emphasis on 'interesting' suggesting Chinese curses that don't involve water, before turning back into the mother. "I suppose, whatever the truth, Ranma wouldn't be sharing a room with you so it's largely irrelevant," she settled on with a shrug. "Now, all this seems like a good reason to go to the police."

"Well, Ranma's staying with one of her fiances, and her father's on the city council. We think he's blocking any investigation." Maki explained. "It's all guesswork. Plus the principal of her school…" Maki had to restrain a giggle. "Well, Ranma says he has a palm tree growing out of his head. I'm not sure any of us believe her, but there's rumors about Furinkan so bad he's probably a bit crazy anyway."

"And lastly....what does Ranma think of this?"

Maki winced. "We haven't asked. Honoka thinks it's better to present her with everything all set up."

"...and I agree. I'll have to discuss it with your father, and I think we'll have her do some chores around the house. Nothing too strenuous, just enough to make it clear she's to be on her best behavior." Mrs. Nishikino gave her daughter a bright smile. "And please, by all means, bring this Honoka home as well some time."

A few days later, Ranma found his rather peaceful practice routine being interrupted by a water balloon, which he interrupted with his fist. She turned to the thrower, prepared to make explanations, when she saw Nabiki standing there with a smirk. And a small envelope with kanji it took her a moment to recognize. 'Student Transfer Request.' "Yeah, Nabs? I ain't in the mood ta play games."

"Really, Saotome?" She smirked, her eyes glinting with more than just the usual lust for cash. "Because you sure could have fooled me. What the hell are you doing to my sister?"

"What do you care?" Ranma put her hands on her hips in a surprisingly feminine gesture, one Nabiki took note of. "You've never hesitated to throw your sister to the wolves before.

Nabiki considered the merits of making a jab about Ranma's body language, but decided against it. If she'd toss Akane to the old pervert, there was no telling what the aquatransexual would do to someone she didn't like. Nabiki was under no illusions Ranma held any real affection for her. Probably not for some 'good natured' teasing, but with what she was planning additional needling would not be helpful.

Just before Ranma lost patience, Nabiki held up the envelope. "Care to explain?"
Ranma raised an eyebrow. "What? Plannin' to go to St. Hebereke's? Maybe take some classes in crazy like Kodachi?"

"You mean you didn't know about this?" Nabiki chuckled. "Funny, it's about you. Otonoki's principal seems set to accept the school's first aquatranssexual student."

"...huh?"

"You, Saotome!" Nabiki snapped. "Geez, you really didn't know about this?"

Ranma put her head in her hands. "No. Wasn't planning on it."

"Think maybe you'd better talk to Honoka." Nabiki smirked. "Well, toodles."

Lunchtime in the Student Council room. Eri on her phone, scowling at it. Since the day of the concert, it had been getting to be a familiar sight to Nozomi, and one she didn't particularly enjoy. "It's not going to change, you know."

"How?" Eri asked. "How can people like that... that... ?"

Nozomi shook her head. "I think you know, Eri. You just don't want to admit it to yourself."

"They're sloppy!" Eri shouted back. "I can see dozens of mistakes in the first thirty seconds between the three of them, and it's so simple!"

"Really?" Nozomi's reply was as serene as always, but with a hint of iron to it. She reached into her bag to pull out the camera. "One more bet, then? You've got the music, right? Do it right here, and we'll see how you do."

"Fine!" The blonde's response was practically a snarl, but she set the phone to start the song on a delay while Nozomi pointed the camera at her. When the music started, every movement she made was fluid, serene, a perfect transition while she kept her expression calm. For nearly five minutes she performed the steps, mimicking Kousaka Honoka nearly perfectly, even, in her estimation, improving on the whole affair. When it was done she added a bow. "There. How's that?"

"Take a look for yourself." Nozomi set the camera's screen down next to Eri's phone, and played them side-by-side. Eri watched...swallowing.

There was something wrong.

Her trained eyes insisted every one of her moves was perfect, every twist and step completely in time. She even winced at one point when Honoka fell out of sync, just for a moment. No layman would have spotted it, but to her it stood out as clear as a diamond in a spotlight.

But no matter what the little ballet instructor in the back of her head insisted, she could only truly watch the recording of the other girls.

When it was done, she snatched up her phone. "Th...that doesn't prove anything!"

"So stubborn," Nozomi smiled sadly. "You're going to go do it, then?"

"After the Student Council meeting after school," Eri confirmed. "Yazawa's protest is already filed, of course. It won't change anything."

"Oh, I think it might..." Nozomi's mysterious side emerged, much to Eri's annoyance. So she took
out her lunch and proceeded to ignore it.

Nabiki sat in the cafe at the train station, furiously tapping away at her tablet. By no stretch had she gotten to where she was by being careful. Regular after-school treats and movies, family vacations, even the latest in electronics, it all cost money and she was determined not to be left behind. It was bad enough Daddy insisted she attend Furinkan. Without an image carefully crafted to give the appearance of rising above the common rabble, she wouldn't be getting past high school.

For Kasumi, that was fine. She didn't seem to have any ambitions beyond taking care of the home. And Akane's dreams of an 'acting' career were completely naive. It would be a stretch for the Otonoki girls, and that was actually a decent general school. Really, foisting Ranma off on her had been the best thing she could have done for her sister's future life, even if she'd never be thanked for it.

She accepted that.

What couldn't be tolerated was Ranma's new behavior. Okay, sure, the idiot had cut into the budget. That could be accepted as a short-term investment. It would pay off in taking care of Akane later, so what was not being able to go to the nicer onsen for a couple of years, maybe one less overnight trip to the beach? She could still sell the photos of him for everything she needed and most of what she wanted, along with the betting pools.

But now the jock seemed to be running off with the . . . goods. Without that, Daddy would have to pay for Akane to actually go to school. Wasted money.

And no one ran out on a debt owed to Tendo Nabiki. Even indirectly.

The losses would be catastrophic. She might not have money to get into a good university now. No, Ranma would have to be brought back into line. Her first effort would probably be enough, but Nabiki knew the value of a contingency plan. Besides, Ranma hadn't suffered enough for putting her sister through this.

It was just as she was ready to consider how when she noticed a flier right next to her ankle. Picking it up, she read it over. "Love Live Music Festival." The words were a murmur. She knew about Love Live, of course. The social networking site could have been useful if DoCo could have gotten Furinkan's backing, but at the time there hadn't been anything about this. Curious, she checked it over. She stopped reading, though, as soon as she got to the prize. "One billion yen?!" she checked it again - the winning group would split that, plus a guaranteed recording contract for one album.

And better still, that Honoka girl would go for it too. Kasumi's music wasn't technically published, so all she needed was some sucke...er, singers. And she knew just where to find those.

As she left the cafe, she never noticed the last few lines of fine print. "Internal copy – not for publication."

Honoka felt a sense of doom around her new friend as she got up to the roof. "..h-hey Ranma. We were just going down to the computer lab to check out the results on the video...did you want..." Ranma's expression stayed hard. "What's wrong?"

"Mind explainin' why I got a transfer to this school waitin'?" she asked coldly. "A girl's school?"

Honoka gulped. "Uhm...I wanted it to be a surprise..."
"Oh, boy, it was a surprise all right!" Ranma snapped. "Had ta find out from Nabs, of all people!"

"Hey! That's not fair!" Honoka shouted back. "You don't have to take it, and we weren't going to tell you until everything was set up if you wanted to, that's all!"

Ranma sighed. "Honoka, look, I know you were tryin' ta help, but my mom's got that thing about bein' a man. I really don't think she'd go for it."

"...that's why I did it." Honoka admitted, much to Ranma's surprise. "Not that specifically, but don't you deserve a say too? There was a lot of luck involved in setting this up."

"What, you want me ta just turn my back on my parents, on . . . on everything?" Ranma asked, on a slow boil.

Honoka gulped. "Well...yes." She nearly took a step back from the sudden chill in the air. "Ranma, wait. I want you to, yes. But that's all. If you say 'no, I'm not doing it'...that's it. It all goes away, and you go back to the Tendos, back to your old school, and it never comes up again, I promise."

"No pressure, right?" The question was sarcastic.

Honoka gulped. "Well...no, I can't promise that. I only managed this once, so there's no going back."

"...how long have I got?"

Honoka blinked. Maybe this would come off after all. "Mrs. Minami wants to have it settled by the end of next week. So you can decide after talking to your mom."

Ranma blinked. "Wait, so you were gonna tell me…"

"Before you went." Honoka confirmed. "I didn't want you thinking you didn't have a choice. I'm your friend, Ranma. No matter what, I'll stand by you."

"...th...thanks, Honoka." Ranma said, her voice suddenly hesitant. "Yeah...uh...sorry."

This was answered with a smile. "Any time. Let's get down to the computer room."

Kotori glanced up and down the list. "Hey, where are we?"

"Why not just do a search?" Maki asked, twirling at her hair while she leaned against the desk disinterestedly.

Umi answered her, peering over Kotori's shoulder. "Well, it's kind of hard when your group's name is a Greek character." She frowned. "No way, we can't have been banned."

Maki rolled her eyes. "Oh, honestly. Just do a search for the song."

"Erm...I never uploaded it," Kotori admitted. "It's taking me a few days to figure out this editing software, and Honoka's new laptop isn't up to it, so..."

Maki gave her a smile. "Trust me, it's there."

A few letters typed, and then Kotori was staring in astonishment. "We...we're number two hundred and three!" There were literally thousands of school groups represented on the site. "HOW?!"

The scream was punctuated by the door suddenly opening and Ranma barreling into the room,
Maki giggled. "Calm down...and take a look." Ranma, curious and not a little cautious, came up behind Kotori to peer over her other shoulder. "...huh."

The blonde suddenly found her head being pushed down as Honoka looked over it. "Oh, wow! How did we get so high?!"

Kotori whimpered, pushing back. "Honoka! That hurt!"

"Sorry..."

Umi coughed. "It looks like one of the bloggers ran a mini-feature on us. They labeled us an 'up and coming' idol group!"

Ranma grinned. "Aww, I knew ya could do it. Keep it up and we'll enter Love Live in the first round!"

"And save the school." Honoka prompted.

The pig-tailed girl coughed. "Yeah, that too."

All five girls were suddenly silenced when a different blonde came in through the door. Eri's face seemed darkened, and she glared at Maki for a moment before looking at the ground, seemingly defeated. And in her hands, a formal 'Letter of Application,' as the words on the outside stated.

She took a deep breath, and presented it to Honoka. "Please accept my application."

Honoka's jaw dropped, startled, and she looked around. "Wha? Why this so suddenly?"

"A bet's a bet." Eri admitted. Her eyes went to Maki again. Honoka almost missed the gesture, but smiled sadly and shook her head.

"Eri...I can't take that."

Maki's jaw dropped. "What?!"

Honoka gave a meaningful glance to Ranma. "I started this just to save the school, but now...I love this. I love dancing, and singing." Eri stared at her, jaw dropping to the floor. "Even if no one ever comes, I want to keep going. And I think that came out in our concert." The blonde girl now being addressed looked as if she had been punched in the gut. "It was fun, but it was more than that. If you're just here because of an obligation...I think that will come out too." She finally looked directly at Eri, and was shocked to see the other girl's mouth opening and closing, obviously not knowing what to say.

So she just gave her another encouraging smile. "Ayase Eri, I'm afraid I have to reject your application at the present time."

"...no." Eri's voice went soft. "No, not from you too. I won't take hearing that from the likes of you!"

"Wh..what?"

It seemed that, when Eri snapped, she did so with an almost-audible twang noise. "All the time! I was never good enough! Always something just barely off! And now you come in and everybody loves that flailing around you have the nerve to call dancing!" She stepped up into Honoka's personal space, backing her up against the desk.
Suddenly she felt herself being yanked forcibly back by the smaller of the two red-heads. "Hands off her Ayase!" Ranma snarled, fist almost pulled back.

"ENOUGH!" Honoka's voice cut through the growing argument. Ranma, reluctantly, let the now-terrified Eri go, taking a step back. "Ranma! I appreciate it, but I was never in any danger!" When Ranma backed away, sufficiently cowed, she turned to Eri. "I don't know what this is about, but you don't have to yell at me! What do you really want, Eri?!"

"I...I want..." She fell to her knees. "I want to know...why?" A few tears fell onto her knees. "What is it about you that's getting this kind of reaction?"

Honoka knelt down next to her, giving the third-year a hug. "Is that all?" Eri leaned into her, still crying. "I don't know...but if that's really the truth...then please, join Mu's."

"Wh...what?" Blue eyes widened in surprise at the sudden reversal. "Bu...but, I was just going to give you dance lessons!"

"You can do that too," Honoka said, softly. "But I think Ranma will agree as a fellow artist." The redhead looked startled as their eyes met. "What do you do when you want to know someone?"

"I fight them," Ranma said, completely seriously. "I think Honoka's the only girl I'd say I know without that..."

"Right." Honoka grinned, before turning back to Eri. "Dance with me?"

Eri nodded, slowly. "Soon. Count on it." She brushed the remaining tears out of her eyes. "I'm so...so sorry."

"Don't be." Honoka helped her up. "Everyone makes mistakes." She glanced around at the room. "Hey, wait, where's Kotori?" In fact, during Eri's outpouring the other blonde had somehow mysteriously disappeared. Honoka shook her head. "I...think maybe this has been a bit much today anyway, and the new songs aren't quite finished yet. Eri, we usually work out at the shrine in the morning. Care to join?"

"Yeah, sure," Eri said with a nod, glancing up at the door as Nozomi entered. "Y..you were right, Nozomi."

"I usually am," the usually serene girl grinned, holding up her own application letter. "I was going to wait awhile, but it looks like there's no need."

Umi grinned. "Six members...President, I think we're ready for that club application now."

Eri gulped. "Uhm...can that wait? There's another complication, and I can't do anything about this one immediately."

Umi was about to plow forward, but Ranma put a hand on her shoulder and shook her head. "It'll be fine."

Umi gave it a moment's thought before nodding. "Let's give the whole thing a few days. There's one more major complication to take care of..."
Chapter 8

A/N: Song in this chapter: "Mou Hitori Ja Nai Yo" from "Solo Live from Mu's! Kousaka Honoka: Honmori Honoka-Iro."

Maki sat in class. "One more day until that stupid meeting," she muttered, mostly to herself. There was a lull in the class with the teacher having already cleared her answer and helping some other students, so she pulled out her music to try to work with Umi's lyrics, putting together something from her archive. It looked like, if they were lucky, she could finish up three more songs for them to have going for the next concert. Maybe more, if the solos worked out.

Working in the music room alone seemed to have paid off after all.

The break was just about over when Rin, her athletic classmate, came up to her desk. "Hey. I was at the concert. You played really Nya-ice!" the girl said, drawing out the last syllable like a meowing cat. "Say, is your club looking for members?"

Maki blinked. "Uh...guess we could…” It would be a pain, but in her brief time with Honoka she'd learned enough to know the girl wouldn't forgive her for turning someone down. "We meet on the roof after school."

"Ahh...well, it wasn't for me," Rin said suddenly. "You see, my friend…"

Maki side-eyed the very quiet Hanayo. "Ah. Uhm...is she in decent shape? Believe me, the practices will be murder if she isn't."

"Ah...well, not as such," Rin admitted. "But she's always wanted to be an idol. I'm sure she can handle it."

Maki thought about it for a moment. "Well, I guess Ranma won't kill her, if she wants to try."

Rin's eyes were as wide as saucers. "K-ki-kill? It's that serious?"

Maki chuckled. "Not really, it's just that Ranma's kind of our physical trainer. And Eri's acting as our dance instructor, and she's almost as bad. They both take things really seriously and won't accept anything less than better than the best you can do today, tomorrow."

The pair glanced nervously over at Hanayo, who was staring back at them in seeming horror. "Oh, great." Rin sighed. "You scared her."

Maki sighed. "Well, better to find out now." She stood and walked across the room. "Hanayo?" she asked, deliberately softening her voice. "Your friend there says you want to be a school idol. How much did you hear?" The girl shook her head, but it was obvious she had heard quite a bit. "Okay, listen. Yeah, it's going to be really tough for awhile, but I'm sure you can handle it." The lunch bell rang. "Okay, look...just do what I do." Maki took a deep breath, and sang a scale. Some of the class glanced over at her, but she ignored it. "Now, you try."

Hanayo's voice was quieter than a church mouse.

Maki sighed. "No. Louder."

Startled, Hanayo sang a loud, clear scale for the entire class. Everybody stopped and stared at her. Maki found herself picking her jaw up off the ground. "Yeah, that'll do. Could you please come up
to the roof after school? We could definitely use you."

Maki frowned at the door. "I don't get it."

Everyone else was standing around, a few tapping feet. Nozomi casually peered through the bars down at the courtyard, as if she could find one girl leaving the school that way. "You're sure she said she'd be here?" Kotori asked, puzzled.

"Well...no..." Maki started, but the door opened. On the other side, though, wasn't Hanayo, but her friend.

"She's run off-nya!" the fiery-haired girl shouted.

_Everyone_ blinked at Ranma's reaction, which was to jump up and look around. "All right. Where's the ca-ca-cat?"

Umi decided that, at least for now, it was best to ignore that. "Maybe let's talk to her before just assuming she wants to sign up."

"What about you?" Honoka's face was beaming. "The more, the merrier. Right?"

Rin held up her hands. "Oh, no, not me! I'm not...well, I'm not pretty enough."

All eyes suddenly turned to Ranma, again. ". . . I get to be the judge again?" Six nods. "Well, I'd say she's a pretty cute tomboy."

"Uhh...thanks?" Rin said, obviously confused, although with a hint of anger behind it. "But...uh..."

Umi smirked. "Trust me, Ranma's the best judge we have. If she says it, it's probably true."

Eri shook her head. "Well, enough delays. Let's get started."

The Kanda train station was much like every other in Tokyo, meaning a multilevel, overcrowded mess, especially after school. Not the ideal place to meet someone.

Nonetheless, Honoka and Ranma immediately stood out to each other. The former was wearing a red, fur-trimmed kimono that clashed a bit with her hair, which had hastily been styled up into a bun. The latter, meanwhile, seemed to regard a 'formal meeting' as being an occasion to do little more than change into a clean, pressed shirt. Although this one was, at least, a different color.

Honoka spoke first. "Ready?"

"Ya sure you wanna come with?" Ranma asked. "It ain't gonna be a pleasant meeting."

Honoka nodded. "I know. But this concerns Mu's, not just me. But, well, we can't all go."

"Maybe Umi..." Ranma tried...

Only to have Honoka cut him off "Isn't dressed, and we're running out of time. No way in _hell_ will she take the Ranma Express, so you're stuck with me, Saotome." She stuck out her tongue to let him know she wasn't serious.

Ranma shook his head. "Well, if you say so. Where'd ya get the kimono? Don't look like yours..."
"How would you know?" Honoka asked, stepping towards the train that was pulling to a stop.

Ranma deadpanned "I searched your closet when you weren't looking. It's good practice."

"...it's a good thing I know you, or I'd have to slap you now." Honoka said simply. "There are things you don't do." After waiting a moment to ensure Ranma was properly chastised, she explained "It's actually Maki's. She loaned it to me on condition that I return it in one piece. I don't own nearly a nice enough kimono for something like this."

Ranma winced. "I really hope Maki's willing to write that thing off. I'll do my best, but if it's you or the clothes..."

Honoka was about to protest . . . but realized it might just come to that. "Well, she was there... that night. Hopefully the thought occurred to her."

"...I am so not getting that kimono back," Maki groaned, the idea suddenly occurring to her. "Two hundred thousand yen... Papa's gonna kill me."

Kotori patted her back. "There there. It died for a good cause."

"I guess..." She looked to Rin. "Where does Hanayo go after school anyway?"

Rin led on. "She usually leaves for home pretty quick, but she likes to check on – there!" And within moments she was off and running, Kotori and Maki on her heels. By the time they caught up, they were panting and sweating.

"Geez...don't...do...that..." Maki said, groaning.

Kotori was a little better off. She had the oxygen to notice where they had stopped – in front of the enclosure for the two alpacas who called the campus home. She squealed in delight and immediately threw her arms around the white one while the nearby brown-colored beast looked on with a bit of disdain. "So CUTE!"

Maki grinned at Kotori's reaction, before looking to Hanayo, who was adding feed to the two beast's trough. "Hey...why didn't you come up yesterday?"

"Oh!" Hanayo blushed. "Uhm...I just...uh..."

Kotori blinked, looking the girl up and down. "Oh...wow..." Her smile threatened to split her cheeks. "I think I know just what to do for your costumes!"

"Eh?!" Hanayo's blush deepened and she seemed to shrink back. "But I'm...I mean.."

Maki snorted. "You want to, right? It's not like you're the only one who's got a little stage fright. I hear Umi needed to be dragged out of the change room."

The blonde girl actually squeaked in response to this news. "Sh...she did?"

Kotori gave Maki a bit of a look. "It wasn't quite that bad."

"Oh...uh...that's okay."

Rin sighed. "Kayochi..." she said, addressing her friend. "You've always wanted to do this."

Maki gave a nod. "No one's forcing you to go. We ended up taking a day off because one of our
members had important personal business…”

That was when Kotori suddenly gave a squeak of her own. "Oh no! I'm late! Excusemegottago!"
And then long hair was trailing in a sudden breeze. All three stared at her.

"What was that about?"

The Tendo dojo. To Ranma, it had been home for the past year. To Honoka. . .

"Oh, wow! You lived here?" She was practically bouncing in her sandals. "Geez, it's almost no
wonder you stuck around, after living on the road so long."

"Eh, it ain't so great," Ranma shrugged.

Honoka gave him a very nonplussed look. "But it's so big!"

"Most dojo are." Ranma said. He was about to ask her in, when the door to the house opened.
Akane was standing there, glaring at him.

"Finally came ho…” Her insult died on her lips as she saw the girl next to him. "Oh. I…” her
expression softened as she trailed off. She suddenly bowed deeply in apology. "I'm...I'm so sorry.
You weren't hurt, were you?"

Honoka quickly went from cautious to smiling. "I'm fine. You don't have to worry about me. My
friends all say my head is as hard as a rock."

Ranma glared at her and looked like he was about to say something, when Honoka elbowed him in
the ribs and he quickly shut his mouth.

Akane eyed Honoka at that gesture, but shook her head. "Anyway, you're a few minutes early. Care
to come in for some tea?"

"That would be lovely, thank you." Honoka bowed again. The pair were led to the low table of the
Tendo dining room. Honoka took her seat, sipping the tea offered. The green tea was normally bitter,
but suddenly it felt like all moisture was sucked from her throat. Ranma had a similar expression, and
they looked at each other.

Then Ranma surprised her. "Not bad, Akane. You're getting better."

Better? Honoka thought, trying hard to ignore the burning sensation in her throat. What is this uphill
from, hemlock!? Still, Akane's hopeful look at her was too much to take. Since she didn't think she
was dying, she managed to spit out. "It...it's fine." She took another sip, already noticing that the
burning didn't seem to be getting worse. Of course, it wasn't going away either. Ranma drank it
down in a single gulp, and Honoka decided to follow suit, taking it as a cue.

Akane grinned at them. Honoka smiled back weakly. "Ah...they're probably expecting us."

Akane nodded. "Daddy and Mister Saotome are in the dojo, Ranma. Honoka, do you want to wait
here?"

Honoka shook her head. "This concerns Mu's too. So that's why I'm here today."

Akane gave her a strange look, her attitude cooling a bit. "Well, if you insist, but I don't think Mrs.
Saotome wants to talk to you."
It was at that moment that a certain blue-haired girl stuck her head through the door. "Ni-hao! Ranma is coming today, yes?" She said, looking around. Upon spotting her 'Husband' she walked in, a bright smile on her face, before also spotting Honoka. "Oh." Seemingly intimidated by the ginger's mere presence, she just hovered uncertainly in the doorway.

Honoka grinned at her. "Hey, Shampoo. We have to go talk to Ranma's parents now, but if you wanted we could go talk after."

"Ah…" Shampoo stopped, obviously torn. "Is okay," she settled on.

Honoka shrugged. "Well, suit yourself."

Back at Otonokizaka, another altercation was already underway. Umi slammed her hands down on the desk of the Student Council's office. "What do you mean there's nothing you can do?"

Eri rubbed her forehead. "Look, Sonoda," she said, in her best voice. "I know you don't believe it, but you guys did convince me. I'm not sure it'll save the school, but . . ." She sighed. "The problem is that I can't just decide the rules don't apply. Especially since you had me put my name on the application, I don't have a choice."

Nozomi sighed. "I didn't think she'd go this far…"

Umi side-eyed her. "Wait, who wouldn't go this far?"

"Yazawa Nico…" Nozomi explained. "She's the one who lodged the protest."

"On what grounds?" Umi asked, a hint of despair creeping into her voice.

Eri sighed. "She's the head of the Idol Research Club."

"...wait, we had School Idols?" Umi asked.

Nozomi shook her head. "'Had' would be the word, yes. It was before you got here. Nico founded the Idol Research Club in her first year, but she had . . ."

"...Unrealistic expectations," Eri concluded. "I have to admit, that's one reason I tried to stop you. She didn't have much more luck at her first performance than you did, and it went downhill pretty fast. It wasn't summer before she was the only performer left, and by fall she was the only member. She stopped putting on concerts…"

Nozomi picked up the story, looking out the window with a troubled expression at a classroom across the yard – one with the blinders drawn down. "These days she just sits alone in there after school."

"I… I see." Umi said, looking down at the ground. "And she made a formal protest about the formation of a new club?"

Eri slid it over to Umi as she replied "It's on the grounds that it would cut into her budget. It's all stupid. She doesn't even request one. . . but I've looked over the school's bylaws. The principal could override her, if Nozomi and I sign off on it. . ."

Umi brightened slightly. "Well, Kotori's her daughter, so . . ."

"I'm not signing," Nozomi said flatly.
Umi stared at her. "What?"

Eri laughed, a rather bitter sound. "That's what I said too. So you see, there's nothing I can do."

"Why?" Umi pleaded. "We worked so hard!"

Nozomi smiled in her usual, mysterious way, drawing the Temperance card from the top of her deck. "It's simple. I want to at least try to get her to withdraw her protest."

Umi nodded. "...then we wait to see if Honoka comes back."

The two older girls gave her a horrified look. Eri found her voice first. "You make it sound like Ranma's family are yakuza or something." She stood up and started to pace. "I knew Tendo was psycho already but I assumed her family was keeping her in check."

Nozomi frowned. "I should have done this before they left." She quickly shuffled her cards. "Umi, cut please." She did, and Nozomi did another shuffle before turning over the card. The smiling face of the human skull made all of them go pale. Nozomi quickly began to shuffle again, her hands shaking. "Again." But it was no use, the card was the same. "...Death." The fortuneteller collapsed into her chair. "...the good news is that it doesn't need to be literal, but something big is coming."

Umi swallowed. "Can we do a more detailed reading?"

Nozomi shook her head. "Not without Ranma and Honoka here. Why do you think this could go so badly?"

Umi sighed, taking her own seat heavily. "Look, you know I'm a martial artist too, right? Not nearly on the level Ranma is, but I'll be going for my own mastery after I graduate before I go to college."

Eri raised her eyebrow in prompting. "Well, the traditional arts have some really crazy families. Everyone considers the traditions important, of course, but you've got some families who can trace their traditions back hundreds of years, like my family. And some of them let it go to their heads. It sounds like Ranma's mother may be cut from the same cloth."

Eri sighs. "What about you? Do you consider your ancestors important?"

Umi's smile was rather nasty. "Oh, I don't think my ancestors were important, but that just means I've got something to live up to, doesn't it?"

Nozomi smiled. "Quite a good attitude to it, I think."

Kasumi met the pair at the door. "Ranma, you should know... Auntie Saotome's been informed about the school transfer. She's already blocked it."

Honoka paled for a moment, but then straightened up. "She can't actually do that. Otonoki's already said they'll accept her whether she's dismissed from Furinkan or not. And since the Saotomes aren't paying for it, either, Ranma's got the final say, not them."

Kasumi blinked, clearly surprised, but then she smiled. "That is good news. But do you know why Otonokizaka would go to so much trouble?"

Ranma smirked. "Guessin' it's because Pineapple Head's famous."

Honoka couldn't help but chuckle at that. "Something like that."

Kasumi responded with a gentle laugh of her own, before glancing around and lowering her voice.
"Ranma...may I ask you seriously?" When the pair looked at her quizzically, she continued. "Do you love my sister?"

"Gee, I dunno.." Ranma swallowed. "I guess, I mean…"

"...I see." Kasumi sighed. "And Honoka?"

Ranma blinked. As did Honoka. "Well...I guess. I mean, it's kinda like havin' a little sister around or somethin'."

"I'd have said I was the big sister." Honoka replied.

Kasumi sighed, relieved. "Right. I guess I'll just have to wish you luck, then." She pulled the door open, and stepped to one side. The pair walked through, Ranma exuding confidence while Honoka bit her lip nervously. The first thing they noticed was that only one pillow was laid out. Ranma frowned, but without another word went towards the closet to retrieve another.

At the other end of the room sat the three parents. Soun and Genma were in their gi, Nodoka in a much nicer kimono than usual, but still had the tube containing the family's katana slung over her back. She said nothing at Ranma's action, and when the teenagers were seated she spoke. "Thank you for coming, Ranma," she said with a smile that did not quite meet her eyes. Her attention then turned to the ginger "Although I don't remember inviting you, miss..."

Honoka coughed. "Kousaka Honoka," she said. "The meeting concerns Ranma's mastery exam, and Mu's is inextricably involved in the exam. I'm here as head of the group."

Nodoka's eyes narrowed. "I fail to see how your group's music could possibly factor into the family Art."

Genma coughed to interrupt. "Nodoka, that's not your place to judge, although I have to admit to curiosity. Especially since I haven't deemed you ready for your exam."

Ranma shrugged. "The old letch seems ta disagree. He even said he'd do it over your objection."

The bald man paled. His voice suddenly became very shaky. "I see. Still, I am both your father and your instructor. I have a right to hear this."

Ranma smirked. "Well, I guess there ain't no problem with tellin' ya. Ya did your job a little too good, so he can't test me on martial arts."

Genma nodded with complete understanding. "So he's decided to have you learn to teach by teaching something else." He glanced at Honoka, seeming to genuinely appraise her for the first time. "Stand up, young lady..." She did so, curiously. "Turn around, slowly, if you would." She did, then sat back down while Genma thought. "You're right, she's no martial artist. Barely physical, in fact."

Honoka bristled at the assessment, but Genma paid it no mind. "So, what are the terms?"

"Love Live." Honoka declared. "If we can get into the Love Live festival, Ranma gets his mastery."

Nodoka glared at her sharply. "And just how long will this take?"

Ranma sighed. "The festival's not 'till next spring."

"Unacceptable." Nodoka declared. "I will not have my son spending an entire year on such an unmanly pursuit as this. . . idol singing."
"Mom, it ain't like I'm gonna get on stage or nothin'!" Ranma tried to clarify. "Plenty of guys doin' that stuff behind the scenes."

Nodoka stared at Ranma, completely uncomprehending for several moments. "You mean to tell me you actually want to do this?"

"Mom, I said I'd help," He said slowly. "I don't got enough friends ta just turn around and say 'no'."

Nodoka looked at her son for a very long time, considering her next words carefully. "Ranma, our family is an old one, with a long history and tradition. You gave me your word of honor that you would be a man among men. I believe you are breaking this vow. Do you disagree?"

Ranma swallowed, his eyes wide, but Honoka leaped to his defense again. "Mrs. Saotome, it's just like Ranma said. Most professionals in the idol business are men, at least behind the scenes. I don't have any problem with it, and neither would anyone else. It's just a hobby anyway, it's not like he'd be fashion designer or anything."

Nodoka snapped at her. "Be silent. Ranma, answer the question."

It took Ranma an inordinately long time to answer. When he did, it was with a shake of his head. "I don't see the problem. Right now most of what I'm doing involves calling out time and watching for problems. I listen to the music and sometimes Kotori wants input on costumes, but I ain't been fitted for 'em and I'm not going on stage. So no, I don't think I've done anything 'unmanly' here."

Nodoka shook her head. "Even if that's true, I fear this . . . hobby is ill suited to you."

Honoka tilted her head. "I don't get it. Mrs. Saotome, there's even male idol bands. Yes, it's mostly girls, but. . . "

"This test is over." Nodoka snapped. "That might be fine for other boys, but the oath must be respected."

Genma and Soun both went bone white. "Nodoka, you can't possibly be suggesting we interfere in the Master's test!"

"Of course I am not suggesting such a thing," Nodoka said. "Genma, you will simply add Ranma to the school's roster. That would settle the matter, and then there would be no further need for your 'help,' Miss Kousaka." Her voice gained an undertone of bitterness as she continued to speak. Soun was looking ready to bolt, and Genma slowly shrinking under his wife's glare.

Ranma blinked a few times. "Well, that would make things a lot easier...less pressure and all."

"Good!" Nodoka beamed at her son. "Very well, Miss Kousaka. You may leave now."

Honoka blinked. "What?"

"Well, with the matter of Ranma's mastery settled, you need not concern yourself any further. Good day," the woman said dismissively.

Ranma's eyes narrowed. "What are ya talkin' about, Mom?"

"Ranma, I do not think, as mistresses go, that Kousaka is acceptable."

Honoka groaned in a combination of exasperation and amusement, mostly the first. "Why does everybody think I'm sleeping with her?" she asked of no one in particular.
Soun stared at Honoka in amazement and no small amount of alarm.

Genma looked desperately around for a bucket of water to turn into a panda. Of course, none was around, for that would be too convenient.

Ranma took a half second to catch up on why the old men were suddenly in a rush to not be at this "important meeting" before he caught on and tried to shush her.

"And just what are you implying about my son, young lady?!" Nodoka's voice rose until it was just below a scream.

"Mom, seriously, pipe down!" Ranma got off his pillow and took a step between the two women. "She don't mean nothin' by it, that's just kinda Honoka."

Honoka shook her head. "Ranma, I can speak for myself. And on this... I don't imply anything. It's obvious Ranma's both a boy and a girl, and with no cure -"

Nodoka cut her off, cool but collected again. "Get out."

Honoka stared at the woman in disbelief. "A..are you kidding me?"

"My son was raised to be a man among men!" She declared. "I will not suffer this insult to his honor in this household!"

"It isn't even your house!" Honoka shouted back. "Unless your name's on the door and I just missed it!"

"Hardly of any consequence. Ranma is engaged to marry a Tendo."

Honoka turned her head away. "And if Mr. Tendo tells me to leave, I'll go. Until then, you're just as much a guest as I am!"

All eyes turned to Soun. He looked at Ranma, who was giving him a death glare. "... as reluctant as I am to say it, this girl was involved in the incident that led to this. She should, at least, be allowed to speak her own side of those events before she leaves."

Honoka snorted. "There's not a lot to tell. Akane came up and pretty much 'challenged' me for no reason. And she wouldn't take 'no' for an answer, so..."

Soun's eyes widened. "I... see."

"THIS IS AN INSULT!" Nodoka spun on the Tendo patriarch, shrieking. "You would believe her over your own daughter?!"

"That's about what happened there, mom!" Ranma shouted her down.

Nodoka turned back to him, immediately seeming to be calm again. "Son, I can't believe you are even tolerating this girl continuing to insult your manliness, unless you agree with her."

Ranma held the bridge of his nose. "Mom, yeah, if almost anyone else said it I'd pop'em one, or at least tell'em off. But it's kinda different, she don't mean nothin' by it."

"Are you planning to accept the transfer to that horrible school, then?" Nodoka asked mildly.

"Hey! That's my school you're talking about!" Honoka interjected. "And it's nicer than Furinkan!"
"Furinkan is a far more acceptable place for a man to attend." Nodoka countered. "Leave. This instant." Her hand caressed the tube.

Honoka turned. "Fine! Ranma, you know where to find me."

"He will not be seeing you again." Nodoka apparently wasn't done, although her voice didn't get any louder, there was a certain edge to it. "Ranma, I forbid it."

"Or what?!" Honoka cried. "You'll use that sword?"

Nodoka nodded. "If need be."

"Come on, Ranma," Honoka decided. "This woman clearly doesn't get it."

Ranma looked between the two redheads, completely lost for a moment. Honoka looked at the scene for a moment longer, and then turned and walked out the door. Ranma looked on her for a moment longer, when Nodoka smiled. "Well, now that that unpleasantness is settled…"

"...yeah, sorry Mom."

She stopped just outside the gate, bracing herself against one of the wooden poles to catch her breath, when Akane appeared. "Oh, good."

The ginger looked back at her, startled by her sudden appearance. "What do you want?"

"I just…" Akane winced at the sudden glare. "Look, Auntie Saotome wasn't being fair. I heard the last part. I think the neighbors heard the last part."

"It doesn't matter," Honoka said sadly. "It...it's over."

Akane winced at the forlorn tone the other girl had taken. Some of Ranma's other suitors hadn't taken the rejection this hard. "I...guess I'll see you."

"Probably not." Honoka turned away and walked along the Nerima streets, alone.

This far from the center of the city, the streetlamps didn't obscure all of the stars, and she looked up at one of the brightest in the sky. "Dammit. He's... gone."

She considered trying to call him, but that bully calling herself a mother had probably already made him erase her number. She nearly sagged against the wall, before remembering that she was wearing Maki's kimono and didn't dare damage it.

Just gotta stay strong until I get back to Kanda. Everybody'll be waiting for me…

She started putting one foot in front of the other again, when a boy stopped her. Ridiculously muscled, wearing a sleeveless shirt, and carrying a massive hiking pack with an umbrella strapped to it. Honoka grinned a little bit, before noting the tiger-striped bandana. "Hey, can you tell me how to get to the Tendo Dojo?"

Honoka felt herself nod. "Yeah, just head down this street, can't miss it."

"Thanks," the boy said. "Say, are you another fiance of Ranma's?"

She shook her head. "Nah...I'm...nobody you need to concern yourself with."

He responded with a shrug. "Ah well. Good luck."
Ranma exited the bathroom after washing off with the cold water. Normally, she'd have been sure to take at least a quick dip, but tonight her female body seemed more appropriate. Damn. Before all this I don't think I'da ever gone girl just 'because.' Briefly, she wondered if her mother was right, but somehow it was Honoka's voice that answered. You're both, right? So why shouldn't you 'go girl' when you want to?

"Ranma?" Akane's voice came from behind her. "So, you're staying?"

Ranma shrugged. "Looks that way... look Akane, how's the training going?"

"It's going great!" she exclaimed, turning around. "I'll get this stupid moxibustion off any day now."

Ranma nodded. "That's good. You going to the temple for training, or did Pops dig something up?"

Akane blinked rapidly, as if she hadn't been expecting that. "Why would I go to a temple?"

"Well, meditation's a good way to learn how to get a handle on yourself. Best to start with the basics." Ranma pointed out, oblivious to Akane's slowly darkening expression. "But if you've got it, you've got it, right?"

"Of course I do!" Akane snapped. "And I don't need your help."

Ranma nodded. "Akane, I really didn't want to do that. You understand, right?"

Akane took a deep breath. "N..." then, unexpectedly, she took another. "Yes. I've had a lot of time to think about it. I...I just believed that stupid girl, and I don't know why I did when she said you were sleeping with Honoka." There was a long pause, but then Akane asked. "You're not, right?"

Ranma laughed. "Nah. That would just be weird, Akane. I'd sleep with Kodachi first, and believe me, it would take all the drugs to get me to do that."

"...don't say that too loud." Akane managed to grin. "She might take you up on it."

Ranma paled. "Good point." She glanced around. "Say, what's Shampoo doing around here, anyway?"

Akane shrugged. "Believe it or not, bodyguard duty. I don't know what Cologne's thinking, but Shampoo's been as good as her word on it too. Haven't had a problem with Kuno."

The redhead grinned, obviously relieved. "I was kinda worried about him, but Tofu said he'd handle it. Glad to see it's working out." He rolled his shoulder. "Look, can you handle me heading back there? I left my stuff at Toujou's place. It's a bit late tonight, but I'll need to go back and get it in the morning."

Akane shrugged. "I don't see why not. Anyway, I'm going to go train. You should get changed for dinner."

Ranma nodded. "Right."

Nabiki sighed, already looking to clean up from her prep for the contest. Twelve songs was always a long shot, and now that Ranma's back way ahead of schedule there's no way I can keep the other three on task. And Auntie Saotome torched the backup plan, to boot. Ah well, easy come, easy go.

There would be other opportunities to make money. Maybe not that much at once for awhile, but at
least now she was back on track for the big prize. A business degree, the corner office, and lots and lots of money. Sure, the loss of the shot at the hundred million hurt, but it was always a long shot.

Ranma considered finding some hot water for dinner, but found she wasn't particularly hungry. So instead, she went out to the top of the roof to do some stargazing. She sat like that for a long time, not thinking about anything at all, when she suddenly found a basket being pressed into her hand. "Thanks...wait, what?" She turned, startled, and realized Kasumi was standing next to her. "How'd you get up here?"

"Oh, Ranma, don't be silly. I used a ladder." She sat down next to the redhead. "Is this really okay?"

"How much did ya hear?" Ranma asked.

"Everything."

The redhead sighed. "Well, then, what am I supposed ta do?"

Tendo Kasumi did something for the young boy/girl she had rarely done for anyone outside her family. She reached around, and pulled Ranma into a comforting embrace. It was almost a minute that they sat like that, Ranma fighting to hold in tears. Finally, she calmed down enough to speak again. "Kasumi...it's...it's not like I wanna hurt'em. But..."

"...I know." Kasumi nodded, gently releasing her. "Besides, it doesn't count if you don't pass the tests, right?"

"...huh?" Ranma paused, thinking about it. "Yeah, I guess you gotta point."

Kasumi smiled at him, somewhat sadly. "You realize there's probably nothing I can do to smooth things over with your mother if you go again, right? At least for now, this is really it."

"Y-yeah." Ranma swallowed...but here, in the dark, with just Kasumi, she could admit it. "I...I'm scared."

Kasumi's smile never wavered. "I'd be worried if you weren't." Then she turned even more serious. "I realize you have to do this, and what will happen, happens. But please, don't hurt my sister too badly."

"I'll try, Kasumi," Ranma said, her voice soft. "I never try to hurt her, you know."

"I know." The eldest Tendo's voice brightened. "Oh, and I gave you and Honoka cookies. I think she likes them."

Ranma laughed. "You're the best, Kasumi." She almost bounded off the roof, before asking "Need a lift down?"

Kasumi was momentarily startled by the courtesy. "I'll manage," she said. "You can't afford to lose any more time."

The train flew through the night, sliding into and out of the various tunnels on its' way. Each time it entered a tunnel in a building or underground, the whole thing plunged into darkness with only the lights above shining on her before the shining neon of the central city illuminated the car again.

Honoka had intentionally boarded the loop going the wrong direction, simultaneously wanting to get
home and for this horrible evening to have never happened. But above all, she knew her remaining friends were waiting at Kanda station, and she wasn't in a hurry to talk to them. So she prolonged the ride, but she knew the loop would reach Kanda sooner or later.

And so she just sat, the usual animation that seemed to bring the girl to life just drained out of her. She had been so sure, just for a minute, that they could have worked this out...or that Ranma would see.

She finally pulled out her phone and started to listen to the new musical numbers Maki had loaded so she could learn them. The first to come up was 'Susume Tomorrow', the first new one and the only one all of them had truly shared. She nearly burst into tears, but, with effort, managed to steel her emotions. I won't sing that one again. She started swiping the motions to delete it from her phone. Maybe Maki has something better for how I'm feeling. I'm sure Ranma will at least follow the web site.

She was about to confirm the digital attempt to sever the painful feelings from her life when she heard something strange. A tapping at the window. She looked up, but the train was moving. The ginger twirled her hair when the oddity of it finally hit her and she turned around.

Ranma's face was peering in the top of the window, apparently grabbing onto the top of the train for dear life. She pointed to the nearby door. Honoka, scarcely believing it, got up and pushed it forward, just enough to expose a crack. Ranma did the rest, forcing it open and flipping her body inside, narrowly missing being scraped off by the tunnel the train entered.

"Sorry 'bou-WHOOF!" That was as far as Ranma got before she was practically being smothered by the other girl by a surprisingly powerful hug. "He-hey!" Ranma flailed around, but couldn't really bring herself to throw the girl off.

"Don't SCARE me like that!" Honoka shouted, still holding Ranma tightly. "I thought I'd never see you again!"

Ranma sniffed. "Yeah...I'm sorry." She took a glance towards the back of the train, but seeing only one other girl in the car, staring resolutely at her phone, she slowly put her own arms around Honoka. "Kasumi...she..."

"Remind me to thank her." Honoka swallowed back her emotions. "I'm so sorry it turned out this way."

Ranma nodded. "So...uh...what happens now?"

"I...I'm not sure." Honoka admitted, her voice trembling.

Ranma restrained a curse. "Honoka, I..."

Honoka pulled back to see a shadow had seemed to fall over Ranma's face, and she realized everything this meant. The idea of just...up and leaving everything in her life terrified her. For a moment, she considered whether she would be able to do it even if she had to. That she couldn't decide seemed answer enough.

Ranma started as she suddenly realized Honoka was singing a new song. Slow and sweet, it seemed perfect, almost as if it had been written for her. "Whenever you want to see me, we can be together / You may not be able to find the right words, but as long as we're together, isn't that fine?"

As soon as the last word left her lips, Ranma smiled weakly. "That one new?"
The train slowed to a stop as it started to pull into Kanda station. Honoka gave her a weak smile, pulling back. "We'll talk about it later."

Neither noticed the brown-haired girl at the far end of the car had turned off her cell phone and was staring at the pair with emerald green eyes in shock.
Chapter 9

The doors to the train opened, and waiting there were Kotori, Umi, and a somewhat nervous Maki. Surprising all of them, it was Umi who smiled weakly, and spoke. "Welcome home Honoka…" she trailed off, then, hesitantly, added "Ranma."

Ranma seemed as lost as any of them had seen her. "I think I was just kicked out for good."

Kotori covered her mouth as the shock took her. "Oh, how terrible!"

Maki leaned forward, positioning herself to look up into the smaller girl's eyes. "Are you all right? If my parents kicked me out…"

Umi just looked away, not able to meet Ranma's eyes. "I'm sorry. I thought this might happen, but…"

"Wasn't nothin' you could do about it." Ranma said. "I'd...I guess I gotta go ask Nozomi 'bout…"

"Nozomi's got you sleeping on the floor of her living room," Ranma blinked at the sudden intensity of those violet eyes. "I've talked to my parents. There's plenty of space at my house." It sounded like Ranma was going to object, so she pressed onward. "It's not like it'll be free. Mom wants you to do some stuff around the house...and...er...she only kinda knows about the curse."

"How does she 'kinda' know about the curse?" Honoka wondered out loud.

Maki swallowed. "Er...she knows there's something weird about your gender, but not that it changes at the drop of a hat."

"Or a bucket." Umi couldn't resist adding with a joking grin.

"Or a teapot," Kotori couldn't resist continuing.

Ranma rolled her eyes. "Okay, laugh it up girls…" She turned around, looking back towards Nerima. "Look...I hate to say it, but you mind if I sit down for a bit?" she asked, afraid of the incoming teasing.

Something Honoka caught, but gave no outward sign of amusement. Instead, she put one of Ranma's arms around her waist. "After a night like that? Anyone'd be feeling a little worn out. Go ahead and lean on me if you have to."

"I ain't that worn out," Ranma said with some amusement, but Honoka felt a little bit of weight and decided not to push the issue.

"What time is it, anyway?" Honoka asked, not able to reach her phone.

Kotori frowned, pulling hers out to check on it. "It's seven. Hungry?"

Umi rolled her eyes at the simultaneous rumbling of their stomachs. "Right on cue. Well, it can't be helped. We all told our parents we'd be late this time. And why. Mostly."

Maki shook her head. "Where's good to eat around here?"
Maki looked at the scene playing out in her own living room. "This was not what I meant."

The nice, tanned leather couch and easy chairs were arranged around a living room table made from hardwood. A bookshelf behind the large, L-shaped piece of furniture was filled with standard medical texts, with a few simple plants providing most of the room's color. Opposite that wall, which also featured a large window over the house's small lawn, was a watercolor painting. The far wall was dominated by a huge TV set. But the thing that would normally have drawn the eye the most was an entire wall filled with trophies collected from musical competitions over the past several years.

Normally, because the table was currently home to enough plastic trays of sushi from the convenience store at the train station to hide its surface completely. Cheap, plentiful, and filling. Just...not what Maki would have chosen for herself after Ranma and Honoka's trip. "Are you sure this is okay?"

Honoka grinned and gave a silent nod. "Let's eat!" She called out, but was internally bracing herself for what she knew was about to happen.

Three jaws nearly hit the floor as, in the space of thirty seconds, nearly half the food seemed to simply vanish. Quickly, the girls started fighting to get a few favored pieces onto their plates along with Honoka, who had already grabbed a couple of choice rolls for herself. A minute or so later, everyone had a single plate to eat slowly off of, including Ranma, and the table was empty.

"Do your parents not feed you?" Maki managed to bring herself to ask

"Sure they do," Ranma shrugged. "As long as I can keep Pops from stealing it."

There was no way Ranma could have known what that little phrase would set off. Honoka getting up from her place across the table was predictable enough, but before she could get over or around it, Maki was holding onto her tightly. Kotori was only a bit behind, and then Honoka joined the group embrace. Umi looked at the open display of affection with a second of bemusement before joining in. But she was the first to speak. "If that's what it takes to be 'the best martial artist' I think I'll let you have that title."

Honoka gave her best friend a dirty look, but Ranma surprised them all by laughing. "Guys, it ain't that bad. I mean, I made it, didn't I?"

Honoka shook her head. "No, Ranma…" she trailed off, catching Umi's look. "I guess it wasn't."

Maki tried to pull out of the pile, staring at the other girls in a mix of horror and disgust. "I think it's absolutely awful!"

Another voice, this one belonging to an older woman who was obviously quite related to Maki, chipped in with "I quite agree!" She stepped into the room, her nice business suit seeming to fit in well with her stern expression. "So, this is the famous Miss Saotome." She glanced the girl over, everybody pulling away from the group hug almost instinctively. Although Honoka stayed close.

"And I've heard a little about your problems already. We can discuss rent another time, but for tonight you can stay here." Ranma tried to pipe in, but she cut her off. "No, I insist. If there's no nameplate on the door, you can crash there tonight."

Maki swallowed. "Uhm...Mom...I may not have told you everything you need to know. We should head up to the bathroom. The bath's empty, right?"

Ranma rolled his eyes while holding Mrs. Nishikino in his arms, wearing only a tight-fitting muscle
shirt and his boxers. The woman had fainted on seeing the transformation, and since she had been next to the tub at the time she had fallen towards him. Honoka was trying to wrestle the window open, while Maki fanned the air around her. "This is gettin' ridiculous. Ain't no one seen an ancient Chinese curse in action before?"

"Which one?" Honoka quipped. "You seem to have two."

"Getting mighty sarcastic, Honoka." Maki pointed out.

The ginger just nodded to their two other friends. They had seen Ranma in male aspect before, but never in quite this state. "I think this is coming as a bit of a shock to them too."

"What is?" Ranma asked.

Umi coughed, blushing. "We're just so used to thinking of you as a girl, is all…"

If Ranma had a response, it was lost in a groan from Mrs. Nishikino, who was awakening.

"Ranma?"

"...yeah."

The doctor swallowed. "I would love to stu...ah. Tofu, right." She shook her head. "Maki, remind me to take the note off Tofu's file. I think we need to start taking him seriously." Everyone got a chuckle out of that. Then she continued. "So...which are you?"

"I'm a guy dammit!" came the predictable, almost instinctive response.

Maki's mother quickly ran through the situation as she knew it. "But Otonoki's taking you anyway? Very well. I won't put any rules on your form at home, just bear in mind that you need to knock before using the bathroom."

Kasumi reflected that mornings in the Tendo home hadn't been this harmonious in some time. The change in routine without Ranma present meant she normally had a chance to prepare the morning meal without listening to their... lively... practices, or the arguments that had preceded Ranma's apparent move to the Kanda district. There would be Hell to pay for her interference at some point, she was sure.

So why did I do it? she asked herself as she sliced the tofu for the soup.

A question that was parroted to her almost immediately thereafter by an angry Saotome Nodoka. "Kasumi, that matter wasn't really your concern, and even to the extent that it was you acted most... inappropriately," the older woman continued.

"Auntie Saotome," Kasumi murmured carefully. "How do you know it was me?"

Nodoka snorted. "Akane wouldn't send her own fiance away, and Nabiki had no reason to, so she wouldn't." She stepped up next to Kasumi, knife in hand, to begin chopping vegetables for a salad. "Process of elimination, dear."

Kasumi favored Nodoka with one of her rare frowns. "It wasn't right, what you were doing. That girl was only trying to help. Ranma's livelihood in the future may depend on the results of the test you tried to stop."

"Her kind of 'help' is the last thing my son needs," Nodoka replied with a snort. "As for the test..."
"What about my test?" Came a third voice, one neither of them expected to hear. Happousai, somehow, had managed to find a perch on the counter between the two women.

"Master," Nodoka said shortly but politely. "I respect your skills, but ordering Ranma to violate his honor as a man was really unacceptable. And my husband..."

"Didn't have the balls to make the right call when his retirement was on the line," Happousai said dismissively. "I've finished my evaluation, and Ranma's ready to begin the next step."

"Be that as it may, I cannot - "

The old pervert glared at her. "I really don't care what you can or can't accept, Saotome. You're not a member of my school, whatever sword secrets your family may have locked away."

"Nevertheless, my husband will find an alternative." Nodoka replied, returning to her chopping. "That's his right as Ranma's primary instructor, and that will be the end of it."

Happi shrugged. "Meaning you'll try to find an alternative. Well, knock yourself out." He turned around. "I think I'll skip breakfast. No offense, Kasumi, but I think I need to vary up my raiding times a bit."

Kasumi hid her slight annoyance – it wasn't like she could stop him, and they both knew it. It was a system that worked out well enough, actually. She made the meals and kept his room in enough order that a spark wouldn't burn down the household, he left her personal items (and her person) mostly alone. The unspoken truce had taken a few months to work out, but it meant she had to give tacit consent to some of the old man's other activities. "As you like, Master Happousai. Would you like me to set aside a tray for you when you get back?"

"That would be lovely." Happousai took that as a cue to bounce out the window. Kasumi ignored Nodoka as she finished the tofu and dumped it into the pot to simmer.

Ranma stood in front of the mirror, in her female aspect and wearing an expression of extreme annoyance. The vest wasn't too bad, although the plaid skirt made her wonder what the heck Umi was so embarrassed about when it came to the costume. And this ribbon she was expected to tie around her neck was just such an obvious target. And the shoes would make dodging an unexpected attack difficult.

"This ain't a good idea."

Maki rolled her eyes. "You've been saying that for twenty minutes. Anyway, you don't have any other good options right now."

"Could just not go." Ranma stuck out her tongue, causing Maki to shake her head at the immaturity.

She slowly stood up and pushed Ranma's new school bag into her hands. "And then my parents kick you out."

"Ain't that simple, Maki," Ranma said.

She was about to continue when the other redhead put a finger on her lips in a surprisingly intimate gesture. Maki's voice went a bit quiet as she said "If you've got a problem, take it up with the Principal, not me. You've got to meet with her anyway, right?"
"Ah, Saotome!" The principal was, indeed, in her office, and smiling brightly as Ranma made her way in, blushing at all the attention she was getting. "Oh, I see you got the uniform I sent to Nishikino's house for you. Of course, you won't be starting until tomorrow, so that was a little premature, but I appreciate the effort."

Ranma swallowed. "Uh...yeah, about that." She glanced at the closed door behind her, before screwing up her courage.

"...I understand your instructors were lax about the uniform regulations at your old school, Miss Saotome..." came the predictable response.

"Ah, yeah." Ranma cut her off. "I guess they was kinda...what's the word?" She shrugged. "...but the problem is...well, you've seen some of the curse in action."

The older woman raised an eyebrow. "You came in your female body, so you already figured out one of the conditions I was going to set out in this meeting."

"Kinda figured." Ranma confirmed. "It don't bother me that much, but...well, look, I put on about ten centimeters and almost twenty kilos, all of it muscle." The response was just a questioning look, so she continued. "And the curse has gotta way of findin' me. Usually it's just ta get me inta this body, but if I gotta spend too long as a girl hot water's gonna find me eventually. Now, what do ya guess happens ta this thing when, and it is when, that happens, huh?"

The principal paused in her tracks. "I...admit I hadn't considered that possibility. It...may be possible to bend the rule as a result of a...yes, we'll call it a medical condition. Usually it would be an allergy to the standard uniform components, so severe that it can't be overcome with underclothing, but..."

"As long as it don't say what the condition is..." Ranma agreed.

The principal nodded. "However, I will have to insist you at least wear clothing in the school and class colors." That got a noise of affirmation. "Now, as to the other matter of serious importance. I want to impress something on you, Saotome. Otonokizaka is not like many of the schools you seem to have attended in the past. I had to pull a number of favors in with the board to get you this opportunity, and the very real possibility of the school closing and making the question of ongoing reputation moot was a large factor."

Ranma felt a sinking in her stomach. "Ah, could ya get ta the point?"

She nodded, looking serious. "I've had discussions with a few of your former instructors. The phrase that sums up those talks is that you are a 'fairly bright, but lazy'. student." The pit grew. "This ends now. Your records from Furinkan will be thrown out of the school's consideration. I simply cannot believe the number of grades revised downwards, and I understand your life has been hectic." There was a lengthy pause. "The fact that almost a third of your discipline reports were written in crayon was definitely the deciding factor." Her eyes narrowed. "That is the only consideration I can afford to give you. From here on in, you must take responsibility for your academic performance. You need to maintain an average of at least seventy percent, and a class attendance of eighty percent, or I will have no choice but to expel you. Is that understood?"

Ranma swallowed, heavily. "Any excuses for not bein' in class accepted?"

"Legitimate illness or injury, including medical records," The principal said. "Also, if you should have any business with the government that is cleared with the school administration ahead of time, I'm not allowed to penalize you for that. If you have any religious requirements that will come up,
clear them with me at least a month in advance and we'll see if they can't be worked into the schedule."

"Ah...nothin' like that I can think of," Ranma said nervously. "O'course, tha gods and spirits don't usually ask me about stuff like that."

The blonde gave her an exasperated look. "Well, then, they'll simply have to wait until after school."

Ranma shrugged. "I'll do my best."

Honoka found herself at the center of public attention. She was having some trouble deciphering the babble, but it seemed that there was some consternation about the new student that would be joining them tomorrow.

After about two minutes of simultaneous babble, she shouted over them. "YES! He's a girl, she's a boy. I don't really get how it happened, but Ranma will always be a girl at school unless there's an accident."

"Some accident!" someone shouted, setting off chuckles, which even she could agree was warranted.

Still, she coughed. "Anyway, it's not a big deal. Just...kinda be aware she's a little off and don't push him too hard, okay?"

Then came a question she hadn't even considered. "What about gym class?"

Unaware of the crisis forming back at the school, Ranma grumbled as she walked through the park. Otonoki's uniform might have been one of the most striking in the city, but it was lousy for working out in. And the shoes seemed designed to pinch her toes. Since the park was somewhat empty at midday on a school day, she took them off and stuck them in the large pond to try to cool them down a bit.

She was just considering getting up and going on her way when a voice she hadn't expected to hear interrupted her thoughts. "Saotome."

Ranma looked over at the woman. Tall, busty, and wearing a yellow dress that would be scandalous on anyo - no, it was scandalous on her too. Unfortunately, she was also his homeroom teacher. Or, at least, she had been. "Miss Hinako," she acknowledged. "Shouldn't you be working?" Or, in Ranma's opinion, making the lives of Furinkan's students even more miserable per Principal Kuno's orders like she had been for most of the past year.

"Aren't you supposed to be in class?" she countered, taking a seat. "So, I suppose this is it."

Ranma shrugged, taking her own seat again. "Not lookin' like I'm going back to Furinkan, so I guess I'm out of your hair."

Hinako glanced at her. "Don't you remember? I'm a specialist – I'm supposed to take care of discipline problems, and Furinkan hired me with one specific student in mind. With you out, my job's technically done."

Ranma snorted. "Pineapple Head's gonna find out he's got plenty of problems without me. Your job's safe."

"If only," Hinako chuckled. "I was hired on specifically to take care of you, and as far as I'm
concerned, I've succeeded. I can't say it was always fun..."

It was Ranma's turn to snort in good humor. "I'll say. And for the record, I don't think I been disciplined," she said, leaning back.

Hinako smiled. "Of course not. A new plot every week, sometimes by my boss? The random attacks? And that's not even counting your home life. How could anyone actually manage to grow up in the middle of that? So I did the one thing I could." She looked over at the redhead she was sitting next to, leaning out over the water. "When I heard about the transfer order, I talked to the chairwoman myself rather than let the reports say everything."

"You?" Ranma asked, not quite believing.

Hinako smirked. "I'm a teacher, Ranma. My job is to make sure my students have the best education they can get. Removing you from Furinkan and putting you in Otonoki helps you and them, whatever my idiot of a boss says."

Ranma blinked. "Wait, the principal's trying to keep me at Furinkan?"

"Calling in every favor he can get his hands on," Hinako confirmed, pulling herself back up. "But at this point it's basically airtight, as long as you don't get kicked out of Otonoki. So do me a favor, don't get kicked out." She stood up. "I need to go let it be known I'm back on the market. You have my email?" Ranma swallowed, but pulled out her new phone. Once their addresses were exchanged, Hinako gave Ranma a genuinely warm smile. "Farewell, Saotome. Please, don't let me run across you in a professional capacity again."

The school rooftops at lunch time are usually a place for socializing with students not in your class, a bit of quiet study time, or (If you're Mu's) occasionally a bit of impromptu practice.

They're not usually used for running around in circles in a complete panic.

"What do we do what do we do WHATDOWEDO?!" Honoka was never really one for following the trends.

Umi shook her head. "Shouldn't you have thought of that before bringing him into school full time? He's your project."

Honoka kept running.

Kotori had a rather pained smile plastered to her face. "Uhm...I don't mind him using our showers..."

Umi gave Kotori a weird look. "He'll probably try to stay a girl, you know."

Kotori had a mischievous grin on her face.

Honoka stopped for a moment. "No! We're not going with any plan where she might get changed naked in front of other people!"

"Well, I don't see where there's a choice," Umi pointed out, trying to sound reasonable and knowing she wasn't really succeeding. "We only have so many showers."

Honoka grinned brightly. "We can sabotage the hot water tank!"

Kotori pouted. "I think you've been hanging out with Ranma too much lately."
"...yeah, okay, that's probably an overreaction," Honoka agreed with a moment's consideration. "But I can't go back to class without some kind of plan!"

Umi rolled her eyes. "No one likes a cold shower, Honoka. Ranma can beat us all to the locker room, so he can just get there first and get done before the rest of us start, and we can even claim it's so he's being nice and letting us all use hot water."

Umi found herself on the receiving end of either a bone-crushing hug or a spontaneous stress-test of her ribcage. "That's perfect Umi! She can go out the window!"

"Th...thanks...now...let me breathe?"

Rin looked down at the sheet of lyrics presented to her, then up at Maki with a raised eyebrow. "I'm not so sure. Seems kinda...uh..."

The named redhead leaned back in her desk chair, glancing out the window. "Well, I didn't write it for you, exactly, I was just wondering what you thought."

Rin blushed heavily. "Ah...you had someone specific in mind?"

"Well..." Maki blinked in heavy confusion for a moment. "I had one idea, but Ranma doesn't seem interested in performing on stage right now...probably give it to Toujou and Ayase. They're pretty close, and if Toujou's not a Class S I'll eat the sheet music."

Rin chuckled a bit. "Uhm...what did you want me working on then?"

Maki seemed startled by that thought, put reached into her portfolio. "Well, there's another duet we could work on together for the first public concert. Honestly, this is about tapping out my backlog."

Rin read it over, her blush not diminishing in the slightest. "Uhh...maybe you should run these lyrics by Umi? They're a bit. . ."

"Sappy, right?" Maki sighed. "Honestly, why even bother?"

"They're a bit much...I've never had a guy I liked before like that." Rin clarified. "I don't know if I could sing this without being embarrassed."

Maki chuckled. "I'll talk to Umi about maybe toning it down...I wrote the lyrics last night, actually. I was just trying to get something down to take some pressure off her since I had all these songs ready to go."

Rin tilted her head curiously "So...you've never had a guy like that either?"

"Not a guy in my life, nope," Maki said suddenly, before her glance was attracted to Hanayo, sitting across the room from them and occasionally stealing a longing glance at them. "Yeesh, we know she wants to. Maybe we should just drag her up to the roof?"

Rin grinned in a rather predatory way at that, setting the second set of sheet music on top of the folder labeled Glass no Hanazono that contained the first song. "I'll make plans."

After school was normally a busy time for Ukyo, but there was only one thing in life that could override the needs of her restaurant. Thus she found herself waiting for Akane and Shampoo to make it home, being used to slipping out early to get to the restaurant for the after-school rush. Instead she...
slipped a coin into Akane's training machine, very gently tapping her way to victory.

She shook her head. "Damn, why is everyone having so much trouble with this thing? It's not like it's actually him."

The sound of clapping took her out of her reverie, and she spun to see Kasumi standing in the door to the dojo. "Ukyo, that's great. I'm sure Akane will be..." The young woman shook her head. "No, I shouldn't try to pretend everything's going to be fine anymore. I'm happy you found it easy, but that's Akane's test. I would appreciate it if you kept that to yourself." Surprised, Ukyo just gave a quick, curious tilt of her head that Kasumi chose to take as confirmation. "Anyway, why are you here?"

"Nabiki invited me. Something about Ranma."

Ukyo was absolutely startled to be on the wrong end of one of Kasumi's rare frowns. "I think we should leave this alone for awhile, Ukyo. Ranma's just trying to do his test and maybe spend some time with his new friends."

Ukyo walked past her. "Sorry, but I don't think that Ranma's 'new friends' are all that good for him. I want a fiance, not a 'best friend.'" She walked towards the living room, knowing Nabiki would be arriving in a few minutes.

Hanayo felt two pairs of eyes on her as the clock hand swept towards the minute the bell would ring. She knew there were Plans, and they involved her. Her mother may have been an idol, and she knew it was hard work from that, but from the sound of things the new Idol club was taking things way too seriously!

In Hanayo's opinion, a fun thing like singing shouldn't hurt. It sounded like Nishikino had been somehow tortured before she was allowed on stage! And now they wanted to make her do whatever insane initiation the redhead had been put through!

That was not happening to Koizumi Hanayo, not if she could help it.

She planned out her escape in her head, first considering lying (and realizing Rin knew her schedules and wouldn't buy it) to outright escape (No good because Rin could outrun her any day and Maki had been doing a lot better in gym.) She was just thinking about places to hide when the two girls were standing next to her.

A minute before the bell.

And, for some reason, the teacher was just nodding at them.

She didn't dare interrupt the class, which was still ongoing somehow.

The bell rang.

"..p..please save me!" she squeaked out, before being grabbed by each elbow and dragged up to the roof.

Maki nodded to Rin, who gently let her down.

As soon as her feet gained traction, she tried to run.

The door slammed shut behind her, held fast by the dark-haired second year from the concert. "Oh
no you don't! Not until we've talked!"

Hanayo backed away, right into the Student Council president. "Oh, honestly. Koizumi, we're not going to force you, but your friend seemed to think you'd gotten the wrong idea."

"I don't wanna be tortured!"

"You definitely got the wrong idea." Eri shook her head in exasperation. "You lot are hopeless."

Hanayo found her shoulder being grabbed. "We are not going to torture you. Just evaluate what kind of shape you're in."

Hanayo's eyes widened in amazement as a girl in a second-year uniform she'd only seen once before landed on the roof, apparently jumping up from the ground. "Oh, hey!" she said. "Saotome Ranma. You're the new girl, right?" Hanayo nodded, a strange, nervous lump appearing in her throat. "Just do me a quick favor? Bend over and touch your toes."

Hanayo tried to. She really did. But she couldn't make it more than a little past her knees.

Ranma frowned in concentration. "Ayase, can ya come over here for a sec?" The long-haired blonde retreated and the two huddled. Hanayo couldn't hear what was being discussed, beyond a few snippets. 'Not a lot to work with,' 'Definitely need the doc,' and 'no, Ranma, we are not using a taser.'

Umi nearly found herself flung out of the way but managed to brace herself in the doorway. "Just Talk."

Finally, Ranma and Eri broke and came back over to her. "Koizumi?" Ranma said. "It ain't that we don't want ya...but I gotta warn ya that the others were pretty beat up for the first few weeks, and you're starting from further behind than that."

Hanayo blinked. "Wait, so..."

Eri smiled encouragingly. "Ranma and I are handling the physical fitness and choreography from now on. We were just talking about the exercise routines. You'll have to go to a clinic Ranma knows of, get a special diet and -"

She was cut off by Ranma. "Work your ass off." Eri glared, but she continued. "I won't promise ya a very fun time, because it won't be...but by the end of it you'll be dancing with the best of'em."

Hanayo swallowed back the lump in her throat. "How hard is it? I mean, I dance a bit to the videos..."

Eri and Ranma glanced at each other, before sighing. "Ayase, take Honoka's spot, I'll do Umi's. Umi, could ya put on the song?"

Umi bristled. "Why are you suddenly so eager?"

"Because I'm makin' a point," Ranma clarified. "I've only watched, and I'm guessin' Koizumi's only watched it, and Ayase?" A nod. "So...we're gonna do it."

Hanayo found herself shuffled into the right spot, and then the music started. She tried, she really did, but at the first step she felt completely wrong-footed and it just continued as the song did. The beat moved, and the two girls next to her kept pace, while her legs just crashed into each other and she tripped. At first, she tried to sing along, but then she realized that Eri wasn't even bothering with that and was still slipping. Only Ranma seemed to have a good grip on the whole thing, and she was also
making a number of errors.

Four minutes later, the humiliation ended and Hanayo slid to the ground. "Th..that was…"

Ranma nodded. "Tough, yeah. And you're gonna have ta do a lot of work but . . . "

Nobody dared breathe for a bit, but then Hanayo nodded. "I'll do it."

"Sixty!" Ranma called out. She was gratified to see most of the girls keeping up. "C'mon, Koizumi!"

Most. Hanayo was lagging behind, at his count, at around thirty five jumping jacks. She thought about mentioning this to her, but noticed she was overly red faced. "Sixty three…" he said absently, keeping the pace for the others, then said. "All right, three more Koizumi. That's it, thirty eight, nine, forty." She grinned at the blonde. "Go and take a break, get some water." She momentarily turned her attention to the others, but then heard a loud thud.

"You think we overdid it?" Ranma asked, trying to sound innocent.

It was somewhat undermined by the blonde girl laying face-down on the roof.

Honoka peered at her. "I didn't think we pushed her that hard."

Umi felt her irritation rise again. "Actually, Honoka, you've gotten a lot better." The words were a reluctant admission. "I can see where this was too much for her."

Rin's manic grin set them all on edge. "I think she's just being dramatic." She turned and pounced, screeching in a distinctly feline timber "Kayochi!"

Ranma jumped at the sudden noise. "Don't do that!"

Everyone stopped their cool down stretches to look at her. "...do what?" Rin asked.

"Talkin' like a c-c-c-c-cat!"

Nozomi was the first to recover from the near universal astonishment. "You're afraid of cats?"

Ranma was not reassured by the small smile that broke through.

She turned away from the group. "I don't wanna talk about it." She took a deep breath to calm herself. "All right. Hoshizora, Koizumi, you're both in. Pack your bags and get changed into street clothes." Both girls made noises of protest. "Actually, Nozomi, Ayase? You want to come too?" Ranma said. "Doc should probably take a look at all of ya."

"Okay, stick close," Ranma said to the girls, peering up and down the street.

"Feh, whatever," Rin responded dismissively, intentionally and pointedly skipping ahead as the group exited the train station.

Only to have Eri grab her by the collar and yank her back, causing the girl to screech when it threatened to cut off her breathing. "Haven't you been paying attention, Hoshizora? Nerima is not safe for us!"

Rin rubbed at her neck. "Yeesh, I've been here before too, you know. Hanayo, tell'em it's fine."

The shorter of the two blondes put on her glasses. "I..I mean, I know we were all right, but if what Ranma's saying is true...and she can jump up three stories, so I..."
Nozomi sighed and facepalmed. "We know there's at least one person in this district willing to poison bystanders to get what they want. NO!" she suddenly snapped as it looked like Rin was about to retort. "Even if it's not likely we'll run into whoever it is, we are much safer sticking close to Ranma than running all over the place."

"Why are we even here, then?" Rin growled out. "Why not just go to a regular doctor?"

Ranma sighed. "Three reasons. One, I trust Tofu with my life, and I don't say that lightly. Yeah, the Nishikinos are pretty good, but Tofu knows my . . . condition inside out and came up with treatments on the fly for things. That takes art. Second, he knows stuff no western doctor can touch. Ancient medical secrets, that kind of thing. Even if you don't think you've got a special talent like mine, you should see someone like him at least once."

Rin blinked. "Okay...so what's the third reason?"

Ranma smirked. "He'll work for free on stuff for Mu's as long as we can wait around his other patients."

Eri chuckled. "Well, that's certainly a plus. Any reason why?"

"Well, for the girls I think he was just glad I was making friends..." Ranma scratched the back of his head nervously. "Now, well, it's for a Mastery test. In the real world, he says I'll need to have a good relationship with a doctor, but he's willing to give me help on the test."

Rin pouted. "Well, I guess I can go along with this. Just for now.

The pamphlet was laid down on the table. The reactions were mixed. Akane stared as if it was going to bite, Ukyo's eyes lighting up in elated understanding, and Shampoo clearly just confused. Nabiki's smirk never left her face. "This, my girls, is how we're going to get Ranma back. I've made all the arrangements, I just need to know if you're in or out."

"In," Ukyo said without missing a beat. "Those hussies are getting way too close to Ranchan, and he's getting too into this. So if we show we're better, he'll back us instead of them to the festival."

Akane looked more skeptical. "Nabiki, we agreed to quit after Christmas for a reason. I don't know..."

Shampoo surprised her though, as she pieced together the words on the page and smiled. "But was fun," she said. "And if Ranma want be singer and warrior, Shampoo just prove she best both ways."

The older girl shook her head. "We're in this together. We'll have to hold up as a team to even stand a chance..."

Shampoo's face fell, and Akane stared at her for a moment. "Give me a day to think about it?"

"Miss Toujou, have you had any moments of unusual insight or luck lately?"

Nozomi blinked at the question. "I don't know what you mean, Doctor?"

"There's something unusual about your aura," Tofu prodded at a point on her stomach. "It's not ki, but..."

Nozomi frowned. "Well, I do work as a shrine maiden after school," she said. "I spend a lot of time
in meditation for that, plus I've always had a bit of talent with the tarot."

Dr. Tofu laughed. "Well, I don't think it's anything to worry about. If you'd like, there are some people I could refer you to."

She gave him a rather level look. "Doctor, I know full well that most of the people in the fortuneteller game are frauds. Just because I've got a little talent doesn't mean it's a good idea for me to try to use it, and maybe encourage people to hand their money over to the scams. I'll stick to my shrine and my little after-school paycheck."

Tofu stared at her for a long moment. "That's...very wise." He quickly punched some numbers into his tablet. "At any rate, Ranma's improving. Just take this meal plan and you'll be fine."

Meanwhile, out in the office, everyone was just sitting around bored. Hayano was reading a magazine, while Rin browsed something on her cell phone. Eri and Ranma were leaning together over a school book, the boy frowning in concentration. "I don't see why I gotta know this stuff," he said, suddenly leaning back to rub his forehead.

Eri chuckled. "Well, if you want to get kicked out of school. . . "

"Yeah, yeah," Ranma groused. . . and then froze up on seeing none other than his mother come striding into the waiting room, still resplendent in full kimono with the tube containing the family sword across her back.

"Ah, Ranma," Nodoka said calmly. "May I speak with you a moment, young man?" Her tone was calm, but would brook no argument. "The Master has given me permission to devise an alternate test for you. I've already prepared a list."

Eri put a hand on her hips. "Excuse me, but past experience has shown me to be wary of anyone claiming to just know Ranma. And you are?"

"I am his mother," Nodoka sniffed at her. "And if you'll excuse me, I'm having a discussion with my son, not you,"

Ranma cocked his head at this. "Uh, mom, Eri's kind of a friend. No need to be rude." He reached out and took the list being held out to him. "...Basketball? Football? Rugby? Sumo? Kempo?" He shook his head sadly. "Mom, yer missin' the point."

"I don't agree, Ranma." Nodoka's voice went cold. "These are all manly hobbies you could take up. I don't see the problem."

"It ain't about whether I can do it," Ranma explained patiently. "It's about whether my students can do it,"

Nodoka stared. "Then find a team that might need your talents."

Eri decided this was the appropriate moment to interject herself into the conversation again. "Mrs. Saotome..."

"Quiet!" Nodoka snapped at her again. "Your opinion is neither needed nor warranted. Know your pla..." She trailed off, as did everyone else. The front room of the office suddenly seemed about thirty degrees cooler. Rin and Hanayo dropped what they had been reading to cling to each other for dear life. Eri swallowed and turned towards the door to the examination room that had just opened, while Ranma stiffened and trembled, making ready to bolt at the slightest hint of danger.
And Nodoka found herself frozen in place by two purple eyes staring at her with nothing short of cold hatred. "You. Will not. Finish. That. Sentence." Nozomi's voice was icier than anyone had ever heard it. "You heard Ranma's answer. Leave. Us. Alone."

Nodoka somehow found her voice. "You don't have any right to tell me where I can or cannot go."

Tofu suddenly stepped out from behind the third year, his ability to hide behind her all the more amazing for being taller than her. "I, however, do. Mrs. Saotome, please leave my office and go home."

Nodoka sniffed. "As you wish, Doctor. We can discuss this another time." As soon as Nodoka departed, the room returned to normal and everyone began to relax.

Hanayo gulped, managing to find her voice first. "Nozomi's scary when she's angry."

Ranma gulped. "Uh...is that everyone?"

Tofu nodded. "Yes. I'll have the full results ready tomorrow. Uhm...Miss Toujou, please don't do anything rash."

Nozomi turned back to the older man, giving him the sweetest smile any of them had ever seen which still somehow gave everyone another chill. "Why, Doctor, I have no idea what you mean."

"...I gotta make another study session with Honoka," Ranma gulped out. "Let's get going."

Umi sighed. "Kotori, what's this about?"

It was rare to see the blonde like this. Sure, she enjoyed coming up with fashion designs, and even made some of her own private clothes, but this was different. The group had, for a change, retired to her apartment rather than Honoka's after practice. Kotori seemed...possessed was the only word Umi could use to describe it. She was feverishly scribbling away at her drawings, trying to work out... something.

Ranma stood there, once again in male aspect and wearing only his skivvies, looking more and more nervous. "Yeah, what is thi-"

"Shush!" Kotori said with an unusual harshness. "I'm trying to concentrate." A few minutes later, she nodded. "Ranma, could you try on the vest with the purple trim there?"

He pulled it on, frowning. "Kotori, it's for a girl."

"I know, I just wanted to check something," she said, returning to her drawing. "That one's for Nozomi, but it's almost right...there!" She held up the design for a moment, then hugged it. "It's perfect!"

Honoka blinked, not quite sure what to make of this. "What's perfect?"

"Ranma's new uniform!" The blonde beamed. "Really, that stuff you wear all the time is so frumpy. It'll be a little tight as a man, but that'll just show you off all the better!"

The martial artist quirked an eyebrow. "I'll be able to fight in it, right?"

"Shouldn't be a problem!" Kotori said brightly. "Let's get to Harajuku right away! I know a shop that can make two or three overnight!"
Honoka, Umi, and Ranma all simultaneously blinked, shrugged, and followed her out the door.

Hanayo sat in front of the meal purchased for her in accordance with her new 'meal plan.' Maki was sitting next to her at the restaurant's counter, with Rin on the other side to make sure she didn't cheat.

Maki took her curry, and stared as the chef pulled out two bowls to pour Hanayo's order of curry into a separate bowl from her rice, setting them both down. "...really?"

Rin shook her head. "I don't worry about it anymore." Hanayo took a small bite of rice, but Rin glared at her. Reluctantly, she started eating the curry first. "Kayochi...you all right?"

"I hurt all over..." the blonde girl half-whined. "How do you stand it?"

Maki winced, but put a hand on her shoulder. "It gets easier. It really does. And Ranma's getting better about it, too. If you hurt now, we'd be rushing you to a hospital bed right now if you'd shown up while we were getting ready."

"Ugh...how do you know?" Hanayo whispered, taking another bite.

Rin grinned at her. "Kayochi, you don't have to come to morning exercises for the first week." She stretched out a bit, before digging into her own curry.

Maki squeezed down. "Trust me. I wasn't that into the exercises before I joined up, but I'm feeling better than ever now."

"How long did that take?"

Maki winced. "About a month."

Hanayo seemed to think about this for almost ten seconds, then her face slowly slumped down into the curry bowl.

That morning, as soon as Ranma stepped out into the yard, he was confronted with the diminutive figure of Happousai, sitting on a rock and smoking his pipe. "Well, congratulations on passing your first test."

"Huh?" Ranma said intelligently.

Happousai barked out a short laugh. "Couldn't have arranged it better if I'd been planning on it, must admit. Your mother's little hare-brained scheme was just the thing to make the point. Ranma, why did you refuse to even consider an alternate test? She told you I'd 'authorized' it, didn't she?"

"Well, yeah, but it'd be letting the girls down," Ranma pointed out. "Would a real Master walk out on his students?"

Happousai grinned, tapping some ash out of the pipe. "Exactly. Also, just so you're aware, I never actually told her to do that. I just didn't stop her..."

Ranma nodded. "Right...so that's how it's going to be."

"Well, it would hardly be an exam without some troubles on the way."

Happi then bounced off, while Maki came out of the house behind Ranma. "Hey...so that was your school's Grandmaster, huh? He doesn't seem like the demon you made him out to be."
Ranma leaned against the wall. "No kidding. He ain't acting like himself."

"Well, whatever," Maki said dismissively. "Oh, yeah, about last night. Eri sent me a text." Suddenly a cell phone was tossed at Ranma. "You should ditch your family’s phone. You can probably be tracked that way."

The martial artist frowned. "So that’s how she knew where I was." He gave a quick nod, sliding the new phone into his pocket. "I know just what to do with the old one. Trust me."

Ranma felt like she was being led to her execution. She pulled at the bow-tie around her neck. "You know that this thing's a target in a fight, right?"

Umi looked over her shoulder at him. "Remind me to introduce you to a guy named Jackie Chan. He made a few movies I think you'd love."

Honoka took the redhead’s hand and gave it a little squeeze. "Ranma, you look amazing, and you said it passes the water test. What are you worried about?"

"What am I not worried about?!" the named girl snapped back. "The curse, for one."

"We took care of all that yesterday!" Honoka countered. "Just introduce yourself exactly like I told you and there won't be a problem." And then they were at the classroom. "We have to go in. Are you all right, or do you need one of us out here?"

Ranma seemed to recover. "I got it, Honoka."

The three other girls went into the classroom while Ranma waited until the homeroom teacher signaled her, then slowly stepped into the classroom. The other girls seemed to be staring at her in . . . admiration.

Kotori had managed to rework the Otonoki uniform into something with a distinctly continental flair. Ranma's customary black pants had been replaced with a flowing blue silk that was clearly tailored to her shorter form, albeit loosely enough that her movement wouldn't be restricted when she changed. The normal pale yellow vest had been replaced with a short-sleeved polo shirt that, when tucked in, allowed her loose red bow-tie to somehow avoid clashing with the rest of the outfit. The overall effect was quite striking, but didn't quite put her out of place.

Ranma took a deep breath, then bowed. "My name is Saotome Ranma of the Saotome School of Anything Goes Martial Arts." She swallowed down her pride at the words, even the mere ritual admission of weakness grating at her on an instinctive level. "Please take good care of me."
Honoka found herself pulled into the Student Council's meeting room over the lunch break, which she would really have rather spent with her friends. Especially Ranma, to see how his first day was going. Instead she was stuck here, with Nozomi presenting her with a slip of paper which she picked up, and read.

Honoka sighed, putting down the protest form. "I'll go talk to her," the ginger said dejectedly. "If she refuses, you'll sign the counter-protest?"

Nozomi gave her a brief smile. "I'm a member of this merry little band of misfits, aren't I? It just wouldn't be..."

"I know," Honoka waved it away. "I've never seen this girl. Anyway, we need to get the school officially on board this week. The festival announcement's coming up next week, plus we're running out of allowance money to pay for things."

The other girl looked troubled. "I would have thought Nishikino would have more than enough."

Honoka shook her head. "Even if she hadn't paid for my and Ranma's new laptops, we couldn't make her do that. I didn't even know how much her family made until a few days ago."

"I see." Nozomi frowned. "This Nerima thing's cost a lot of time," she mused. "Are you sure we'll be ready by the time the competition starts?"

Honoka nodded. "Maki and Umi have songs ready to go, thanks to Maki's backlog. Everyone's got a solo, a trio, and two group numbers to memorize for our first public concert after summer vacation..."

This got Nozomi to consider for a moment. "Well, that puts us an awful long time between your intro and our next performance... how quickly can we get another song ready?"

It was Honoka's turn to blink. "I guess that depends on Eri, but if we buckle down I'd say two weeks if we have to, why?"

Instead of answering, Nozomi pulled out a few camcorders. "Ta da! We can get started on some intro videos today. That'll get interest going, but we can also do some PVs of our works in progress to drum up interest."

"PVs?"

Nozomi chuckled. "Didn't look closely at the web site? Yes, that's what Love Live is calling music videos. They can be concert recordings, but we can also put together real music videos. The AV lab was upgraded a few years ago, too. We might not be able to get professional results like A-RISE, but we can probably get pretty close."

Honoka stared at the camera, her eyes slowly widening along with her smile as the possibilities started coming to her all in a rush.

In all truth, the only problem Ranma was facing during the break was fending off her overly curious classmates.
"So, you went to China? How long were you there?" one particularly persistent girl asked, peering down at her from among the crowd that had spontaneously formed around her desk.

Ranma scrambled to try to remember her name. "Ah, Mika, yeah?" The girl nodded. "I dunno, maybe a year?"

Someone else frowned. "What were you doing? It can't have been school."

"Eh, ain't been in school much," Ranma shrugged off the idea. "Ah, excuse me, promised I'd meet someone on the roof." She picked up her lunch box, twice the size of anyone else's, and hopped over the crowd to lightly jog towards the stairway.

Mika looked to another of her classmates. "Uhh...does she know anyone at school?"

"Well, she came in with that Nishikino girl in first year," one of the others said. "I saw them myself."

Maki smiled and waved as Ranma came up the stairway to take a seat next to them. "So, how are things?" she asked.

Ranma sighed. "Eh, they mean well, it's just kinda too much." She took a seat on the ground, finally managing to flip open the lunch box. She stared in shock - not only was the meal plentiful, but someone - probably Mrs. Nishikino, had taken a great deal of time and effort (if not a huge amount of talent) arranging the rice, fish, seaweed, fruit and vegetables into an attempt at animal art.

The thing that made Ranma suspicious was the animals chosen. The ca-cat was probably standard, but the onigiri shaped like a piglet with little orange slices about its' neck, the vaguely swan-shaped main rice serving next to a more obvious panda, and the fish slices arranged into an obvious approximation of a mallet were... a bit much.

Not wanting to look ungrateful, though, she started to dig in.

It wouldn't exactly be winning any Michelin stars, but she'd put up with a year of Akane's cooking. She polished it off with ten minutes of the lunch break to spare, while Maki was still picking at her smaller lunch.

Only...Maki wasn't picking at it. Instead she was staring at him expectantly. They sat like that for almost ten seconds before Maki finally spoke up. "Well?"

"It was pretty good," Ranma said. "Your mom doesn't have ta make it all pretty, though."

Maki swallowed. "Uh...actually, I made that."

"Oh." Ranma blinked a few times, then shrugged. "Well, just sayin', you know. More about the quality and quantity than the appearance with food."

Maki couldn't resist a giggle. "Uncultured barbarian girl..." Ranma was about to protest, before she continued. "I kinda like that about you, though."

The martial artist was spared from making a response by the sudden appearance of Umi behind them. "Raaanma..." The redheads both turned to look at her, the cold tone in her voice somehow more terrifying, at least in that moment, than either of them had ever had to face. "Honoka told me to keep an eye on you! How am I supposed to do that when you're vaulting over your classmates!"

"...I think I gotta go."
Maki watched Ranma run to escape from her enraged classmate, unable to keep a giggle to herself.

Honoka glanced over, not for the first time, at Ranma sitting at her new desk. The desk both of the pig-tailed girl's ankles were zip-tied to at the integrated chair. "Uh...Umi. There's two problems with that," she pointed out, hesitantly. "Well, three, but two you care about."

Umi rolled her eyes. "What?" Ranma's sudden smirk behind her got another of those razor-sharp glares that wiped it from the redhead's face.

Honoka stared at her. "Well, one, he has to get up for gym class."

Umi nodded. "I have scissors. I'll let her up five minutes before that."

Honoka rolled her eyes. "Two, she's more than strong enough to just lift the desk and get out that way." As Umi flushed in embarrassment, she went on. "Why did you do that, anyway?"

"You're the one who wanted her to mingle more!" One of Umi's hands slammed into her own desk. "Talking to normal people and all that?"

"Ehehehehe..." Honoka chuckled nervously. "Well, where did she go?"

"...to have lunch with Maki," Umi admitted. "Who...well..."

Honoka nodded. "That works, I guess." She looked to Ranma, who had been waiting calmly and patiently. "Why didn't you just break the ties?"

"Class," she pointed out reasonably. "Plus I promised ta keep the property destruction to a minimum."

"Good boy," Honoka grinned to let her know she was joking. "Seriously, how's it going?"

Ranma seemed to consider this, twirling her pigtail. "I dunno. I just keep waiting for the other shoe to drop, ya know? We're still in the same city, it ain't gonna be as simple as waiting for Mom to calm down."

Umi winced. "I don't think you should be getting your hopes up. I know if I pulled something like this my parents would be writing me out of the will."

"Yah, well, not like Pops has any other choice," Ranma pointed out. "He ain't gonna find another heir after what he's put Ryouga through. He's the only other guy we know who could manage."

Kotori suddenly peered at the trio over Ranma's shoulder. "You know, one day you're going to have to tell us all these stories of yours. It sounds fascinating."

Ranma laughed. "I'd take a year ta get you caught up on last year," she said.

Kotori persisted. "Maybe turn it into a book!"

Ranma shrugged. "Maybe. If anyone would buy it."

"Only if you file it under fiction," Umi added her own chuckling retort. "I'm still not sure I believe it and I've seen you work."

This is the worst part, Umi reflected as soon as the bell rang to signal the transfer period for gym. We
promised Ranma wouldn't see anyone changing or in the showers, but the school never made any arrangements for how we'd pull that off. If Honoka's plan doesn't work we're going to have a lot of unhappy campers with our first...ugh. She decided to dismiss the ongoing issue of just what gender she should think of her friend and newest classmate as.

There were gasps of dismay and astonishment as Ranma opened the window and leaped out. Umi quickly closed it behind the redhead, turning to the class. "Don't worry, that's normal."

A glance at Kotori revealed the other side of the problem. Not to mention a few who might be all too happy with the hot water solution. We're going to have to try to get the fiance problem across at some point. There was no more time for that now, though. While Ranma dashed ahead, Umi led the way down to the locker room with Umi close behind. By the time they got there, however, the water from the showers was just shutting off. "Right. So far, so good, right everyone?" she muttered, not really caring if anyone heard her.

Honoka nudged back with her elbow. "Hey, be nice. It's working, right?"

"Let's wait 'till after class before we pass judgment," Umi said bluntly. Kotori nodded quietly to it and walked to her locker. Surprisingly, the rest of the class was very quiet, as though no one was quite certain what to say about the only topic they wanted to talk about. So, in the end, they said nothing of import, discussing nothing more consequential than after-school plans. When they got out to the athletic field, Ranma was already waiting, doing some quick stretches when the gym teacher, a young woman with bushy red hair, came out of the office. "Okay, everyone knows the drill. Ten laps." The woman glanced specifically. "That includes you, new gi-" she was cut off by Ranma's cocky grin.

Honoka shook her head. "Mrs. Nakano shouldn't have said that," she murmured, softly enough so the named teacher wouldn't hear her. Ranma wouldn't bother with the secret martial arts stuff, Honoka was sure. Whatever other superhero tricks her friend may have, they wouldn't be on display here. But Honoka knew, from painful experience before Ranma's training, that ten times around the track was four kilometers.

Or, in Ranma-speak, 'a quick sprint.'

While the rest of the class started to spread out around the track, with some of the faster students taking the outer rings to let others have the slightly shorter inner track, Ranma danced, weaving around the other girls in their gym clothes like they were an obstacle course. Girls stopped to stare in shock as the dust cloud that marked her passing flew by them. Honoka found herself completely surprised to be passing other girls on the inner ring, eventually settling into place next to Umi, with Kotori on the other.

"Why is he in this class again?" Honoka asked.

Kotori giggled. "Mom wants her to have a normal school life, I think?"

"...that...oh I give up." Umi sighed in exasperation as Ranma came to a stop in front of Mrs. Nakano.

Four girls dancing on the stage during last period. Akane didn't know how Nabiki had managed to persuade the school to let them ditch classes, and a part of her didn't care. She didn't care about Ukyo's half-hearted singing while trying to master the simple moves Nabiki had somehow arranged. She certainly didn't care about Shampoo glaring at the empty auditorium like she was getting ready to challenge everyone in the imaginary audience to a death-match. She didn't really care about anything but the promised return to the status quo. Just get Ranma to switch bands, give them his
dubious expertise and maybe even join up in place of whatever he was doing for his new friends, and it would all go back to normal. He might even convince Happousai to drop this silly punishment.

_No, Akane, that is not fair. You screwed that up, and you'll fix it._ She tried to put it out of her mind as her next line came up. She stepped out in front of the group to take up the next line _"A red rock bou-Woahwoah!"_ She stumbled as Ukyo stumbled into her from behind. As with every time someone touched her lately, she crashed to the ground.

An instant later, Shampoo was between them, throwing a series of vicious punches at the chef. _"You do that on purpose, make Shampoo look bad!"

"Owww..." Akane sat up, holding her nose. _"Woah, Shampoo, hold up a second....you didn't do it on purpose, right, Ukyo?"

Ukyo caught her breath as Shampoo stopped fighting. _"Of course not. What do you think you're doing? Akane, that's not your solo!"

"I..I just..." Akane felt her temper rising. _"Well, Nabiki is barely singing."

The older girl just drawled out _"Oh, good one. Sis..."_ she looked like she was about to say something, then decided against it. _"You know what? We're not getting any more done today. Shampoo, take her home, would you?"_ She held up a hand as Ukyo headed toward her spatula and bandoleer. _"Not you."

Once the other two had cleared out, Nabiki took a deep breath. _"Not working?"

"Not working." Ukyo agreed. _"You did this for months before I arrived, got a bit of a reputation, but. . . these songs are fine for what they are. Kasumi did a bang-up job, but that's the most danceable one we have and the School Idol contest is going to be a lot more than just singing. But . . . "

Nabiki nodded. _"Akane's too inclined to improvise if we're dancing, and Shampoo treats it like a kata. When we practice just singing she can put up a convincing smile, but throw in anything with motion and it turns into something from back in the village."_ She frowned. _"The question is, how do we drown out the competition with what we've got?"

"What do you mean?" Ukyo seemed confused. _"We need to do better than them."

Nabiki laughed. _"Oh, Kuonji,"_ she said smoothly. _"It's so much more than making music. We need to top the charts, and that's going to mean manipulating the public. Honesty won't get us to the top."

The wheels seemed to turn in the younger girl's head. _"I'm guessing you have a plan."

"Yes, but there's one problem." Nabiki admitted. _"We don't need the best performance, but we need enough performances. Right now, we've got Kasumi's twelve songs, with CDs already out there that could remind people of what the 'club' used to look like. We need more."

"Kasumi?" Ukyo asked, and Nabiki shook her head. _"Well..."_ She suddenly smiled. _"I've got an idea."

The rest of the gym period for the girls of Otonokizaka went surprisingly smoothly, or at least as smoothly as it could with Mrs. Nakano's insistence on trying to keep up with Ranma's physical abilities. At least until it got to the softball game. Honoka nervously found herself up to bat against Ranma, frowning at the girl on the pitching mound. She just happened to glance back, over her shoulder at the first-years' classroom, to catch note of Maki watching out the window.
The younger girl almost didn't catch her, and when she did, she blew a raspberry. Honoka turned her attention back to Ranma, only to not see the ball blow by her, into the catcher's mitt, and send both her AND Mrs. Nakano, acting as umpire, into the back cage. "...Ranma."

"What? It's a match," Ranma smirked back cockily, only to deflate as she realized Honoka wasn't smiling.

"It's a game," she corrected. "For fun."

Ranma blinked, then nodded. "Okay...I guess it's no fun for you..."

Mrs. Nakano stared at the exchange, but only managed to get out a ground "Ball one."

The next pitch was much slower – at least this time Honoka saw it and was able to take a swing – but she missed by a wide margin. "Strike," The third, however, she managed to connect and sent it sailing. Taking off, she saw Ranma had already...she must have leaped into the air to catch it. She groaned and almost went off, but then heard Umi shouting and ran for the base, jumping forward in a dramatic slide into first. "...uhm...safe."

The warning bell rang. "All right, ladies," Mrs. Nakano shouted. "Everyone hit the showers."

Nobody moved.

"What's wrong? Everybody! Git!"

Ranma swallowed. "Uhm...everyone else go first. I'll just come in by the window again."

"You too, Miss Saotome," the teacher corrected. To no one's surprise but hers, nobody dared move. "Oh come on. I refuse to believe the principal's ludicrous . . . " She suddenly trailed off, finding herself staring down at the principal's daughter.

Kotori was furious. "You really think we'd make things like that up?" she was practically shouting. "Ranma's life at home was . . . ugh. If he needs a little more time for things like that, you should give it to him, just like your boss told you to!" She turned around. "As for right now, well..." she stalked over to Honoka and yanked the thicker hair ribbon out of her hair. "Ranma, do you trust us?"

"..."

Umi stared in shock. "Wait, are you seriously suggesting we blindfold her and everybody take a cold shower?"

"Well, we don't have enough time for anything else, do we?" Kotori said, back to her usual sweet and reasonable tones.

As Ranma was being gently led to the showers by Honoka, the teacher stared in shock as her authority was completely trampled on. "...wait, 'him'?"

SCENE BREAK

The doors to the Idol Research Club's room were papered over to prevent outside light from getting in. Once again, Honoka cursed herself for missing the signs - a club with only one member had an entire classroom to herself. But this wasn't the time for that kind of self-reprimand. She opened the door.

Honoka could barely see, the lights were turned off and the blinds drawn down. The room's sole
occupant, with her hair up in twin ponytails, was busying herself staring at the computer monitors at the far end of the room, a pair of giant headphones over her ears. Honoka could barely make out the shelves upon shelves lining the walls, filled with videos, everything from laser discs all the way up to blu-rays, judging by the shapes.

And, while she was having trouble making out the titles in the dark, every one of them seemed to feature one or more idols on the cover.

Honoka swallowed, not quite sure how to proceed, when Yazawa Nico finally seemed to notice the light behind her, pulling off her headphones and pushing back from the computer. "Kousaka," she said, in a carefully neutral tone. "First..." suddenly her demeanor cracked. "I'm really, really sorry,"

Suddenly, Honoka felt the air rush out of her chest as the girl threw her arms around the girl who had just walked into her office. "I didn't know! I was just trying to get you to stop trying to be idols!"

Nico was babbling and both knew it. "I didn't realize she was crazy! No one was supposed to get hurt!"

Honoka swallowed, gently returning the hug. "I...ah...thanks, but I'm fine. N...no harm done." Then it suddenly occurred to her that something wasn't quite right. "Wait, how are you at fault?"

"I..." Nico sniffed. "I told her about Ranma leaving their idol group..." Honoka blinked, and then found herself laughing. "It's not funny! You nearly died!"

Honoka shook her head. "Tendo wasn't like that because of idols or anything like that. She's engaged to Ranma and she thought I was making a play for her fiance."

Nico blinked. "I'd heard the rumors at school. So Ranma really is..." Honoka made a soft noise of confirmation. "Well, I'm still sorry," she said, with just a hint of haughtiness. "But...I also can't accept your group as school idols."

"Huh?"

Nico shook her head. "That's why you came, right? Well, it'll take you a hundred years to be worthy of the name 'idol.'"

"Eh?" Honoka repeated intelligently. "But we're working so hard! We're practically killing ourselves out here! All we need is a place to practice and..." Nico blinked. "I was going to ask if you wanted to join us."

Nico tensed up and suddenly pushed her back. "Didn't you hear me!? I said you'll never be real idols! Now, get out!"

Honoka blinked, but slowly backed away from the girl and shut the door.

"That's Yazawa all right," Eri said as she pushed Honoka forward during a stretch at the rooftop workout after school. "She always was an odd one."

Umi flattened herself against the ground, bending over at the waist with Nozomi barely having to push. "Well, we tried," she pointed out. "Will you please sign off on the club now? We've wasted enough time, and it's not like we don't have enough people. Nine is enough for the numbers we've got."

Ranma looked up from where she was gently assisting Hanayo in the exercise. "What do ya mean, nine?"
Maki blinked from her own stretch, groaning slightly with the strain of it while she spoke. "What do you mean? I wrote a solo for you and everything."

Ranma shook her head. "The deal was I get you into Love Live. No way I'm putting on one of those costumes...er, no offense Kotori."

"None taken," the blonde said. "But that does kind of throw all our plans off..."

Maki forced herself up and gave Ranma a look. "Are you sure there's no way you'll do it?"

Ranma swallowed nervously. "Okay... okay, we find out what Yazawa's hangup is, and if it's somethin' sane we get her on board. If not, screw her."

Umi rolled her eyes. "I don't know what sanity is anymore."

Nozomi smiled.

"Why NOT?!" Honoka was practically shouting, but it was in her room so she didn't care. "Ranma, what's wrong with it?"

Ranma shook her head. "Honoka, you know 'what'."

Honoka rolled her eyes. "You're being ridiculous, you know."

"Ain't that my line?" Ranma countered, chewing on a bit of sweet. "Look, it's bad enough you convinced me to go along with this crazy scheme until Mom calms down."

Honoka winced. "Ranma, you know that's going to take a long time, if ever."

"Dammit, I know Honoka!" Ranma snapped. "Did you say somethin' to her? I don't know why she's so... so..." she trailed off helplessly.

Honoka shook her head. "I think I was just... something that didn't fit."

"Yeah, sorry."

"I'm sorry too," Honoka said, sounding unusually subdued. "But she's wrong. You don't have to be just some ridiculous 'Man among men.' That's way too limiting for you."

"But I don't gotta do... stuff like that either," Ranma pointed out. "I just..."

Honoka smiled. "Well, I guess that's life. We'll figure it out." Her smile turned a little mischievous. "And as for Yazawa... I have a plan, but you're going to need to do something."

"I'm in," Ranma said without thinking.

"Good," Honoka said. "You can open a locked window from the outside, right?"

The bell had only barely rung when Eri opened the door to Nico's class. "Yazawa? We need to talk. Official business."

Nico swallowed, but stood up and walked out with her. The door had barely shut when she responded to the unasked question. "No."
Eri sighed. "You're being an idiot about this, you know. You don't even have a budget. You bought all that stuff except the computers yourself."

"It's not about the damn money!" Nico nearly snarled out.

Eri snapped back with "I'm still student council president. Show some respect."

Nico shrugged. "You're abusing your position for your own club. Why should I?"

Eri rolled her eyes. "Nico, please. It's not like we're repeating your mistakes. Kousaka just wants to have fun, and she was ready to give a performance to an empty auditorium. As long as that's the case, I don't see a problem with supporting her efforts."

"Because she's a disgrace!" Nico countered.

Eri groaned. "We're not getting anywhere. What is - HEY!" Nico took advantage of Eri's momentary distraction to take off. "Well, that was a bust. She went over to the window to wave to the waiting Rin."

Nico sprinted into her club room and shut the door. After the intrusion the previous day, she had made sure to stack up some heavy boxes next to the door. Once the door was shut behind her, she breathed heavly in relief. A glance was spared to make sure no one was under the table, then she took a few minutes to slide the boxes in front of the door, lock the door to the adjoining room, and make sure there were no cracks in the blinds over the windows before collapsing into her chair to watch some videos.

"Hi."

"Hi," Nico replied without thinking, before shrieking in shock. Ranma was in the chair next to hers, smirking.

"So, you're the one who..." Nico shoved her back, not doing much aside from rolling her own chair against the wall. With everything else locked, she dove through the open window into the thunderstorm she didn't know was starting outside. Not caring, she charged off, looking for a place to hide.

Ranma pulled out her old phone and quickly shot off several texts. Then, curious, she watched the video Nico had just put on play for a bit.

Nico ran through the pounding storm. Gotta get away from them! She beelined for the music room - hers was the only music-related club. Panting, she slammed open the door.

Only to find herself staring across the room at the piano. Augh! Right, the other redhead!

Maki stood up. "Why does everyone have to make this so difficult?" she asked... no one in particular, since Nico had already slammed the door and was sprinting again towards the rooftop. Surely with all this rain they wouldn't have anyone up there - she could hide in the stairwell until they gave up.

Only to run into Nozomi, smiling at her and holding up a Devil tarot card. "I don't see escape in your future..." she said with another of those mysterious, infuriating smiles. Nico completely missed the fact that Eri had joined her to sprint back down the stairs again.

"Your fortunes are getting to be a little too on the nose," Eri muttered.
Nozomi looked puzzled. "I didn't shuffle the deck or anything for this one. Of course, I didn't need to."

Nico missed the scathing retort that was no doubt being aimed at Nozomi for that one as she ran towards the school's dojo. *There's no clubs left that use that!* she thought to herself, desperately. *The archery range, yes, but the kendo and kempo clubs are gone!* She only barely remembered to take off her slippers...only to find that another of those 'Muses' was in there, busy kicking at a straw practice dummy.

Umi turned, amber eyes narrowing at her. "Are you going to give this up and actually talk to us?"

Nico slammed the door and ran out into the rain again, not caring that her stockings were being ruined now.

Umi sighed. *I can't believe I lost that bet,* she thought to herself, slipping her cell phone out of a hidden pocket in her gi to make the call.

*Th...the stable with those weird sheep things! No one will be there, right?!* Not even noticing the two blondes filling up the alpaca's water bottles, she dove into the straw and sought to cover herself up.

Kotori and Hanayo looked at each other. Hanayo was the first to speak. "Did she really just...?" she asked, not quite believing.

Kotori nodded. "This is what things have been like lately," she said blandly, leaning over the railing. "Miss Yazawa? We'd really like to talk to - " The air was split with a shrill scream as Nico scrambled out of the straw and back out into the rain, her uniform now a complete mess and probably a total loss as she finally gave up and made her way to the front gate.

Where, predictably waiting for her, was Honoka, with an umbrella. Nico snarled and charged, hoping to get by the girl. . . until suddenly Ranma came up from behind, jumping over her head and landing in the middle of the gateway. Behind her, Rin was in her track suit, waiting to cover any retreat angle.

Ranma had that infuriating smirk on her face. "Ya know, that was fun."

"Now will you *please* just sit down and talk to us?" Honoka asked, looking exasperated. "Eri thinks this is crazy. . . and she's right."

Nico glanced over her shoulder to see Rin being joined by Umi, and broke to the right.

The club room was now brightly lit again, and everyone could see that the walls were lined with DVDs featuring what seemed to be every idol performance released in the past decade, and quite possibly a few earlier than that. Hanayo glanced around and gave a brief confirmation that there were, indeed, some truly rare inclusions in the collection, but her enthusiasm was dampened by the reason they had all gathered in the room.

Restraining Nico had been no real challenge for Ranma, and the pig-tailed girl had carried her victim back to the 'club' room and 'borrowed' some of Umi's zip ties to restrain Nico to the chair by her wrists, and the table by her ankles, leaving her at the head of the table while the members of Mu's sat around it.

"THIS IS KIDNAPPING! THIS IS ASSAULT!"

...and waited for her to calm down.
Honoka shook her head. "This isn't getting us anywhere. Please, Yazawa, just listen!" She glared at Ranma. "I should never have listened to you."

Ranma winced. "Yeah, this was a bad idea," she admitted. "I'm cutting her loose."

Unfortunately, Nico reacted rather poorly to seeing Ranma approaching her with a pocketknife that seemed to appear from nowhere, just screaming her head off.

Eri winced at the noise. "Ranma, weapons are against school rules!"

"Oh come on!" Ranma responded. "This ain't a weapon, it's a tool." She glanced at Nozomi. "You gonna sign the form?"

Nozomi sighed, but nodded. That got Nico's attention, and she started. "What?"

Umi finally saw a chance to interject some reason into the 'conversation'. "Yazawa, the Principal's already on our side on this. We've got no objection to you sitting here if that's what you want. We don't have to call ourselves the 'Idol Research Club' to be Mu's."

Honoka nodded. "We just thought... you'd want to join us. Get another chance to do it right."

"And I keep telling you, you've got no business being idols, the way you're going on!" Nico shouted back.

That got Ranma's interest. "Oh, really?" Honoka stared at the martial artist. "Hey, I don't got a clue what we're doin' here. If she's got somethin' useful ta say, let her say it."

Nico stared at her. "How could you not know, DoCo's lead singer?"

Hanayo's jaw dropped as she made the connection. "Wait, you were that girl?" She ran up to grab Ranma's hands, staring deeply into her eyes and getting a startled yelp from Maki as she was pushed aside. "Oh, god, I have both your CDs. The underground Idol group DoCo! Why did you break up?"

Ranma gulped. "Eh...long story..." She paused, then nodded to Nico to continue.

"...you have to know what I'm talking about," Nico said in a puzzled tone. "That cute-as-a-million-puppies persona you used on stage."

Ranma paused for a moment, then immediately her voice rose a pitch, and her tone became extremely feminine. "Oh, I think I know what you mean miss club president!" Then it returned to normal. "That was somethin' Nabs wanted me ta do at the live shows. Never really got it."

The entire room went completely silent. Maki recovered first. "That is what this is about? You ruined a school uniform, ran yourself ragged over the entire school, tried to sabotage us, and so on... because... what? We don't put on some kind of act?"

"That's it exactly!" Nico said triumphantly. "So you see, you'll never be school idols!"

Ranma shrugged. "I dunno. I been goin' through the Love Live site, mosta the girls on there don't bother with that kinda stuff. I know A-RISE don't, not really."

"Hmph. Worthless..." Nico asserted, until the second part caught up with her. "Wait, A-RISE? Of course they do!"

"They're readin' from scripts, yeah," Ranma said. "But I think that's mostly them."
Honoka looked impressed. "So you have been paying attention. All to get us in the Festival, right?"

Nico's jaw dropped, as did Hanayo's. "The School Idol Festival!? You mean it's real!?" They said at the exact same time, in eerie sync.

"Yep!" Ranma said. "And we're gonna win."

Eri chuckled. "Well, we're going to try, anyway."

"And you can be a part of it," Nozomi added. "A chance to prove everyone who told you you couldn't do it two years ago they were wrong."

Nico paused... just a moment of doubt showing in her expression. Honoka caught it, but said nothing. Nico finally nodded. "All right... I'll go through your little tryout, at least."

Ranma chuckled and knelt down next to the girl, carefully averting her eyes from anything sensitive while cutting the zip ties holding her down. "Glad that's settled."

Eri nodded. "I'll deal with the choreography for the PV tonight. Ten girls, right?"

"Nine," Ranma countered. "I ain't joinin' in unless I gotta."

Eri blinked. "Okay. Nine then. Actually, that's a good idea anyway." She gave a passable imitation of one of Ranma's trademark smirks. "Understudy."

"...why you..." Although Ranma found she didn't really mean it. "What's the song?"

Maki thought about it, then looked to Umi. "Only one choice for that, really."

"Agreed," came the response. "Bokura no LIVE kimi to no LIFE. It's everything that brought us together."

Honoka grinned. "Sounds good, then. Email the song to everyone and get to work practicing."

Ranma grinned. "And as for you, Yazawa. . . go get changed into your gym clothes. We got two weeks for ya ta learn this song and get into shape."

Hanayo put a hand on the third-year's shoulder. "I'm so sorry."
Chapter 11

Ranma ran through the kata, relishing the chance to be a boy for a couple of hours before school. In deference to 'his poor host's hearts' he was sticking to one of the first forms he could remember learning. As he slowly moved through a high kick, he forced himself to evaluate things. What he felt wasn't promising.

While the relative calm of living in Kanda was certainly a nice change of pace, he realized there was a real risk of losing his edge if he stayed too long.

But what truly scared him was a part of himself asking if that was so bad.

*I gotta find a new sparring partner.* he decided, finishing up the form with a bow when a glass of water suddenly splashed him from behind. "Oy, Maki!"

The other redhead was grinning mischievously. "I thought it would be a good idea to work out in both your forms."

Ranma just grumbled good-naturedly before going into the next form. "I'll decide which form I wanna practice in, all right?"

Maki sighed, a little surprisingly, at that. "Well, okay. Sorry, it was just a joke."

Ranma just shook her head. "It ain't funny."

"Got it. Anyway, school at the usual time. Let's get going on breakfast soon, hmm?" Maki asked, leaning on her knees to look up at Ranma.

"It's no good!" Nico slammed the dance charts and sheet music on the table. "Honestly, you may know about ballet, but you don't know the first thing about being an idol!" She was shouting louder than strictly necessary, but she didn't particularly care anymore. "I already agreed to try this your way about the personas, but this is too much!"

The club room had changed a little. With ten members, one of the largest in the school, more chairs were needed and a second table was added. But the end result was still ten girls packed into a room barely bigger than a large closet. Eri was working on opening the room next to the meeting space, but at the moment she had a bigger problem. Her own 'colleague.' "What's wrong with them?" she asked.

Surprising everyone, it was Hanayo who answered. "Well, they're very nice, but it's not really how idols perform..." she pointed out in a quiet voice.

"I wasn't going to say anything just yet. But it ain't like the vids, really." Ranma added her own opinion. "That much Yazawa's got."

Eri sighed, defeated. "Fine, tell me what's wrong so I can change it."

"It was kinda off about the first number too. No offense, Umi," Ranma explained. "But when the other groups do something, they usually build each number around one member."

Nico gave Ranma an astonished look. "You know about this stuff?"
"Not a bit, but I'm tryin' ta figure it out," Ranma said.

Nico blinked, then nodded. "Right, that's called the 'center' and she anchors the whole group."

Ranma grinned. "Well, that's all well and good. . . but I think it ain't quite what Mu's is about." She sounded casual, but her eyes were on Honoka.

The ginger blinked, realizing she was being addressed, but caught on. "Right...Eri? Can you do something with this 'center' idea?"

The blonde thought about it for a moment. "Yes, I think so...actually that's even more like classic ballet, in a way. I'll get the revisions done tonight. Honoka, Kotori, Ranma, hold back on dance steps at practice, work on your solos."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" Nico said. "Who said they got to be center?"

Everyone stopped and stared at her. "Uhm...Eri did." Maki pointed out. "And I agree with her. Honoka, Kotori, and Eri have the major solos in the song for the PV, and that should be our focus right now. Ranma's just learning everything."

Ranma stuck out her tongue. "I am not."

"Now wait a second!" Nico protested again. "You can't just assign it like parts in a play! A center needs style, and charisma, plus she needs to be the strongest dancer and singer!"

Kotori blinked. "Uhm...isn't that exactly how you assign parts in a play?"

Nico glared at her.

Umi groaned. "Yazawa, we've got less than two weeks to get this done. We don't have time for tryouts right now."

Ranma sighed. "Yeah, Umi's right." She held up a hand. "I'm willin' to talk about this idea, but Eri and Maki are the experts on this. If they say the PV'll work best with those three, that's what we do."

Honoka nodded. "How about if we do the tryouts this Sunday afternoon after practice, then? We stick with those three for the first video, but whatever happens after that, happens."

No one seemed to notice the glint in Nico's eye. "Okay. I can see why we're in a bind on the PV. I've got some ideas for how to find the best center and lead, though."

After the main practice session, everybody tended to break up to do their own thing for a few hours before retreating for homes and the inevitable downer of studying. Usually, that would mean Honoka would go to her place with some combination of Umi, Kotori, and/or Ranma, Hanayo and Rin would go to hang out together, Nico would spend time on the Love Live website "researching the opposition," and Nozomi and Eri would go back to the student council room to finish up any work they couldn't get done during breaks in the school day.

And Maki, of course, would go back to her former sanctuary of the music room.

Sure, some days one or more of the others in the group would join her. But they quickly learned that these quiet times weren't open to interruption. 'Look, don't touch' was the order of the day when Nishikino Maki was busy composing her next piece.

Which was why it was extremely unwelcome when Umi cleared her throat, although at least she had
been polite enough to wait until Maki was done with that number. "Yes?" the redhead asked, not quite icily.

"I just wanted to say 'good job,'" Umi responded, a bit startled by the coolness of Maki's tone. "I got finished going through all those songs you tried to write lyrics for."

"'Tried?'" Maki raised her eyebrow in a definitely annoyed inquiry.

Umi winced. "Okay, they were pretty good. I know they're your lyrics, but they didn't always flow completely right. I only had to change a little…" She passed over the sheet music. "Here, I still thought you'd want to look."

Maki sighed, her concentration shot anyway. Looking through, she noticed only a few minor edits that she, grudgingly, admitted were an improvement. "I guess I'm not much of a poet," she finally admitted.

Umi laughed. "Okay, seriously, it was good. Anyway, can you upload these to our Love Live account tonight?"

Maki shifted uncomfortably on the bench. "Do we have to? I mean, between us we've got lyrics for way more songs than we're likely to use."

Umi shook her head. "It's mostly because of the contest. If we upload it there's no debate on whose songs they are later."

Her response was a laugh. "Seriously? Umi, I keep the only copies of what I'm working on with me. Can't we just upload the songs as we use them?"

"I guess."

"Whawhawhat?!" Maki flailed, embarrassment written all over her face as she flushed almost as crimson as her hair. "There's no boy!"

"Girl, then?" Umi smirked. "Come on, don't be shy, it's Heisei era."

Maki swallowed. "Uhm…you don't seem bothered by the idea at all…"

Umi rolled her eyes. "I'm friends with Honoka and Kotori. Neither of them would surprise me at all."

"…yeah, I guess you're right." Maki said, grumbling and trying to go back to her music.

Not that Umi was about to let her. "You didn't answer the question."

"You're right, I didn't. Because there isn't anyone," Maki managed to get her voice back down to normal from her strangled tones of moments before.

Umi wasn't having it though. "Maki, I know poetry. That may not have been the best effort technically, but it came from the heart. Without you we wouldn't have any of the traditional idol love songs and Yazawa would be screaming bloody murder. So come on, just admit it. If not to me, at least to yourself."

Maki seemed to think about it for a moment. Umi watched as she smiled softly, then suddenly, an extreme, far away sadness came over the first-year's face. Then her voice lowered. "Look, if I tell
you you have to promise not to say anything. Not to Honoka, not to the girl, not to my parents, not to anyone."

Umi swallowed, but nodded. For all her joking earlier, she knew times were changing, but hadn't changed. If this worried her, Umi wouldn't tell. Still, Maki would likely deny the conversation ever took place if she tried to bring it up again later. "All right. Who is it?"

"Ranma."

"Oh." Umi's brain nearly crashed as all the implications hit her at once. "Oh."

Maki glared, annoyed again. "Yes, 'oh."

Umi turned to look out the window to hide her pensive expression. "That's . . . probably even more complicated than you realize, you know."

"Why do you think I haven't said anything? And now she's - "

"He," Umi corrected. "If you're really talking about this, you can't forget that."

Maki looked as though she'd just swallowed a bug. "Fine, 'he's' living with me. Do you have any idea what she looks like just after a shower?"

Umi rolled her eyes. "Quite good, I'm sure, but that's not the point and you know it. What do you intend to do about the fiance problem?"

"I don't know," Maki admitted with a groan. "Three girls who want . . . 'him', how can I compete with that?" She shrugged. "But I can accept that, if that's how she chooses to go. I can even…"

Umi blushed. "That I don't need to hear about." For a few minutes, the pair sat in an uneasy silence, before Umi finally spoke again. "You have until the end of summer vacation,"

"What?!" Maki nearly shrieked. "You promised!"

"I won't tell your parents, or Honoka, or anyone else," Umi said firmly. "But Ranma's life is a whole other thing, Maki. It came out in your songwriting, it'll come out in other ways. He deserves to know about this. Even if you aren't going to do anything about it. So, you have until the end of summer vacation to tell him, or I will."

"And what if she blabs?!"

Umi shook her head. "She won't. Trust me, Maki, I know exactly how to make sure Ranma knows how serious this is." Suddenly, she was hugging the first year. "And don't worry. Whatever else, I know the five of us will still be friends through this."

It took a minute, but Maki returned the hug.

Meanwhile, across town and unaware of the impending disaster, Honoka looked at her revised meal plan with glee. "Finally! You have no idea how much I've missed chocolate!"

No one answered, because, in a rare moment, she was by herself. She may not technically be cheating on the new meal plan, but it still felt a bit naughty. So she had taken the train over to Akiba and slipped quietly into a cafe to enjoy this now rare treat.

The milkshake was slid in front of her by the waitress, and Honoka grabbed it and slurped down her
first gulp. "Hmmm...oh, delicious…"

"Glad you like it," a voice said across from her.

Honoka looked up, startled. "Uhh…"

Golden brown hair framing a pair of brilliant green eyes was Honoka’s first impression, given the girl that had sat across from her was leaning across the table with a bright smile on her face. She was wearing the tailored white jacket and red and green-stripe tie of UTX high school, with several of the golden buttons undone to give a slightly more disheveled appearance than usual. But Honoka still recognized her instantly.

This was Kira Tsubasa, the lead singer of A-RISE. Honoka did the only thing her brain could think of to do.

She gibbered incoherently.

Tsubasa let that go on for a moment, hiding any irritation she might have felt, before gently tapping the girl on the head. "Yes, I'm who you think I am. And I know who you are, Kousaka Honoka."

The girl, arguably the most popular school idol in Japan, sipped at her melon soda and smiled at her. "Shouldn't you be busy with your idol group?" she asked.

Honoka winced. "Well, we've got a PV filming this Saturday, and I'm trying to find a few venues for local concerts but it's all kind of last minute. We had some... personal issues to deal with."

"That other redhead on the train?" Tsubasa asked quietly. Taking Honoka's gasp of surprise for confirmation, she continued. "Yes, I was there. That was quite a show you put on." She waited to see Honoka's reaction to that for another moment before speaking again, but just saw a hint of a painful depression. "I'm not going to pretend to know what was up with that, but if it's getting in the way of getting Mu's up and running..."

Honoka sighed. "It was, and now with the Festival announcement we're all off-schedule."

Tsubasa blinked in surprise. "How do you know about that? It's not supposed to be public yet!"

"How do you know?" Honoka countered.

Tsubasa laughed. "Touche... but I guess there's no harm in telling you if you return the favor. A-RISE was invited to the announcement ceremony."

Honoka smiled. "You're not going to believe this... but an ancient perverted martial arts master gave us a copy of the contest rules. Ranma thinks he stole it."

Kira Tsubasa was a girl noted for her cute persona and a certain refined elegance that could only come from attending the top all-girls school in Tokyo. She was supposed to be the representative of the height of grace and poise. So Honoka was quite surprised when she spat melon soda all over her sweater. "ACK!"

Tsubasa herself was mortified. "Oh, god, I am so sorry!" She quickly pulled out her purse and put some bills on the counter. "Go ahead and have it cleaned on me."

"Ah... thanks, but it's not too bad..."

Tsubasa shook her head. "Nonsense...but you're right, it is pretty unbelievable." She gave it a moment's thought. "How would you like some help?"
"Eh?" Honoka blinked in surprise at the sudden change of topics.

Tsubasa's expression turned serious again. "Mu's already has the potential to be one of the biggest names in School Idols. It would be a crime if you guys don't even have a chance to perform because of whatever's been holding you back. A-RISE was originally going to run one of our PVs at the ceremony, but if you can get your new one to me the night before, I'll try to get that one run instead."

She smiled broadly. "It's better that way anyway - the Festival should be about all of us, not just A-RISE."

Honoka smiled. "I...if you're sure."

"I'm sure, Kousaka." Tsubasa confirmed. "And as for a venue... well, I can't promise anything, but I can put in a good word with some of the Saturday stages on the Electric Town strip. It would be a tough crowd starting out, but if you can make it here..."

Honoka gulped. "...thanks but... why?"

It took the idol only a second to process the question. "Because I can't stand to see that girl on the train crying," she settled on. "I don't know what was going on that night, and I'm not going to ask."

She held up her hand as Honoka went to speak. "No, please. Not without your friend there. That was private. But you showed me you have what it takes to be a worthy rival. Now take this chance and get there, and I'll see you again at the Festival."

Ranma sighed, opening her locker and running through her list of homework. *Math, physics, literature, English. What a pain. Just need philosophy and history to round things out.* Then she groaned. *Oh, right, they want the history in the book, not what I ran across in China.* She added the heavy history book to the pile, before sliding them all into her bag. "Right. Time to head home." She was just about to shut the door when the most terrifying sound in the universe set her pigtail standing straight out.

The demonic hiss was then punctuated by a meowing sound, and Saotome Ranma of the Anything Goes School of Martial Arts, unquestionably one of the strongest, toughest, and most fearless attendees of Otonokizaka Academy, vanished in a cloud of smoke.

Rin closed the locker behind her, giggling. "Ranma, it's just me."

"Yah, I figured when I heard the giggle!" she snapped back, still somehow gripping to the mostly smooth surface of the ceiling. "When are ya gonna *cut that out?!"

"When it stops being funny?" Rin asked. "Seriously, what's the problem?"

Ranma actually growled at her. "None of your damn business, Hoshizora!" she practically shouted out, grabbing her bag and stalking off as Hanayo came up behind her.

The blonde gave her best friend a rather disappointed look. "I think you should stop."

"Geez, you too?" Rin asked. "I just don't get it. She's supposed to be this really big time martial arts expert, but she freaks out at the first hint of a cat. And she can't even tell it's me?"

Hanayo was frowning at her now. "Whatever it is, it's obvious that it's a big deal to her."

"Yeah, well, she can explain it or..." Rin trailed off with a sigh. "Fine. I'll... I'll tone it down. But it's still kind of funny."
"No it isn't!" Hanayo suddenly snapped. "Look at her, Rin! She's terrified!"

Rin's protest died on her lips as Hanayo suddenly turned on her heel and walked away.

Eri sighed, leaning back in her desk chair in her own small office. "Yazawa, we agreed to bring this up after the PV."

"For Mu's! I'm talking about our trio!" the short girl responded. "And Nishikino keeps ignoring me!"

"Fine, fine." Eri groaned. "So you've got a request for the trio number." She cursed getting stuck with this idol-obsessed lunatic on that one, but she couldn't argue with the group's musicians. "What is it?"

"What's with the jazz thing?" Nico half-asked, half-demanded.

Eri shrugged. "I thought Maki won some kind of jazz competition awhile back. Might be something to do with that." She took a deep breath. "Why are you bothering me, anyway?" she asked. "Kotori's the one who does the costumes."

Nico winced. "Oh, right."

Eri came to a decision. "Nishikino, sit down," she said firmly. Once the other girl had done so, she continued. "All right, look, we both know what I'm about to say. Honoka wanted to give you a chance, and you're here because everyone agreed with her at the time." Nico looked like she was about to protest, but Eri silenced her with a glare before continuing. "Right now, you're rapidly wearing out your welcome. Believe it or not, we actually have some idea of where we're going, with or without you.

"You are welcome to make suggestions," Eri continued. "Ranma admitted you know more about the idol business than any of us. You know what polish looks like, what the audience is expecting and what they'll flatly reject. But you're going to have to separate that knowledge from what you, personally, like. And you're going to have to adjust your expectations. We're not A-RISE, we're not professionals, and we have to work with that. If this starts turning into a repeat of two years ago, you will be tossed out. Am I clear?"

"Hmph!" Nico turned her head away in disdain. "We'll just see about that. You need me."

"Not as much as we don't need that attitude," Eri countered.

Nico smirked. "Big words coming from the girl who was trying to stop this almost as long as I was."

Eri tried to think of an answer, but Nico stood up and walked out, apparently looking for a more receptive audience.

Kotori raced for the exit to the schools' gate. "I'm late I'm late I'm laaaaaaate!" she wailed as she ran. . . right into something rather soft, bouncing off and landing on her butt. "owie."

"Late for what?" Nozomi asked.

"Ah...uhm...." Kotori looked around in a panic before pointing off at a tree. "Look over there!"

Nozomi barely spared it a glance, letting Kotori suddenly run by her. "Ah...ah well," the third year said under her breath as Ranma came jogging up. "Strange. Have you noticed Kotori's been leaving
after school a lot lately."

"Yep!" Ranma said, a little too quickly even as she jogged in place. "Don't know what it's about, so far ain't been a problem so I wasn't gonna ask."

"Hmm…" Nozomi shrugged at last. "I guess you're right about that," she said. "Any problems settling in?"

Ranma chuckled nervously. "Nope. But I was just headed to the shrine for Hanayo's catchup workout, then Honoka's place for a study session."

Nozomi's smile broadened. "Right. Well, have fun. Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

"I ain't sure I'd want ta do somethin' you'd do," Ranma countered with good humor, before taking casually to the nearby rooftops.

It was shortly after that that Hanayo came practically storming past. "Whoa, did something happen?" Nozomi asked, shocked by the uncharacteristic rage on the first-year's face.

"It's Rin!" came the reply. "I don't know why she's poking at Ranma like that!"

Nozomi let out a little hmm to disguise her despair. "She's still on about that?"

"I know." Hanayo said, attitude softening. "I mean, the cat thing is something she's always done, but she's never been this . . . insensitive before. I can only think of one thing that might set her off, but I don't think Ranma ever called her . . . "

Nozomi's jaw dropped "'Tomboy?'" she said, really only half asking, the pit of her stomach dropping.

". . . oh no." Hanayo agreed. "That explains it."

Nozomi sighed. "I'll handle this. Get going, Ranma's waiting for you."

Hanayo groaned. "Don't remind me. Maybe if I jog all the way there she'll go easy on me." And with that, the first-year was gone. Nozomi decided to wait around for a bit, pulling out her phone to do some idle browsing.

She completely missed Rin's approach until the sporty redhead had run by. "Dammit. Oh well. Tomorrow's good enough, I guess."

Eri was just finishing shuffling her papers into her folder when Umi half-stalked, half-shuffled into the room. She just raised an eyebrow. "Are you here to complain, too?"

Umi glanced up at her. "Sorta, I guess. Not about anything we can solve." A can of tea was put on the table. "Want to share?"

"What's there to say?" Eri took it and cracked it open. "Yazawa."

Umi sighed. "Well, that explains it then." She took a sip from her own can. "And I just found out there's a ticking time bomb just waiting to go off."

"Wonderful." Eri rolled her eyes. "Care to fill me in?"

"...I promised I wouldn't," Umi said slowly. "I'm taking steps but it's really delicate."
The blonde raised an eyebrow. "This wouldn't happen to be about that duet you assigned to me and Nozomi, would it?"

Umi snorted. "Hardly. Although as I recall you turned as red as a tomato when you saw it."

"Well, it's far from subtle," Eri pointed out. "Seriously."

Umi winced as she recalled the blatant lyrics. "I didn't write that one. . . and to be fair, I'm pretty sure Maki didn't write it with you specifically in mind."

"How do you know that...oh...oh." Umi felt the blood drain from her face as she watched Eri make the connections. "Do you know who?" There was an awkward silence between them, then she took another long pull from her tea, obviously wishing she were old enough for something stronger. "How big is it going to be?"

". . . it probably won't involve more 'freak weather patterns?'" Umi tried lamely.

Eri groaned. "Oh, just beautiful. This is the last thing we need. Nozomi was sure Honoka would be able to take care of this stuff."

"Please keep this to yourself," Umi pleaded. "I promised I wouldn't tell anyone, and as it is. . . "

Eri nodded slowly. "Just as long as it isn't me."

Umi collapsed into a chair in relief. "Thank God, no. Nozomi would kill us all."

Eri blushed. "It's not like that!"

Honoka's room had turned into the hosting point for these regular study sessions. The need for Ranma's grades to stay perfectly on track had meant that the martial artist had to keep on it after all the practice sessions, and Honoka was determined that her hard work wouldn't be destroyed.

Right now, the martial artist was staring at a physics textbook. "I don't see how this can be right," she said, pointing at one problem. "I can jump an eggshell and not break it, no problem. Numbers goin' in can't be right at all if-"

Honoka cut her off with raised eyebrow. "Ranma, you're a real-life superhero. Of course you can. Think about it like a normal human being would for a sec."

Ranma raised an eyebrow. "Okay, that makes sense." She did a few more of the calculations in silence. Finishing the homework, she turned it around for Honoka to look at, but the ginger just kept staring. "Uh, hey, Honoka?"

"Yeah?" the named girl said, sounding distracted.

Ranma frowned at that. "You wanna check my work?"

Honoka frowned. "Yeah, sure..." but she made no move to look at the paper.

"Do you wanna take a break, look over the choreography again?" Ranma tried.

"Okay."

The martial artist glanced out the window. "You know, there's a dragon looking for your sister. Somethin' about a virgin sacrifice?"
"Yep, probably next door," Honoka replied.

Ranma raised an eyebrow. "Have I mentioned my hair's on fire and there's a horde of killer rabbits outside looking for bean sweets?"

"Mrr." Honoka said. "The dance chart, right?" she muttered, looking into her bag.

"...Honoka, forget the dance chart. Seriously, you okay?" Ranma asked, leaning in.

"NO!" Honoka shouted, her eyes wide in terror. "The charts are gone!"

Ranma's reaction was just as immediate. "WHAT?!" She started tearing Honoka's bag apart. "Are ya sure? Why would someone steal that?!"

"Eh..." Honoka said nervously. "Uhm...I probably just lost it..."

"Ya...lost it?"

Honoka gulped. "Probably?"

"Is that why ya were distracted?" Ranma felt bile rising in the back of her throat. "Honoka, ya can't take that stuff all casual like, not with my friends!"

"It wasn't that!" Honoka shouted. "I met Tsubasa today?!"

"Kurenai? Geez, that all?" Ranma sat down.


"...she musta stole it!" Ranma shot up. "I'll go to UTX and make her give'em back!"

Honoka was about to reach out to stop her when a shaken voice called up from the shop. "Ho-Ho-Honoka! So-so-someone's here to see you!"

Ranma made a gesture. "Stay here." Honoka looked like she was about to object, but the pig-tailed martial artist's glare silenced any objection. "That was your sister, Yukiho, right?" she said, wanting to be sure there was no confusion. When Honoka nodded, she asked "Yukiho knows everyone in Mu's, right? Everyone who would normally drop by lookin' for you?" Another nod. "Okay, you stay right here until I send a text. If things go quiet, sneak out the back." And with that, Ranma carefully made her way down the stairs.

Ranma carefully slipped out into the hallway and down the stairs, peering just around the corner to see a girl in a UTX uniform holding a folder under one arm and a plastic bag straining to hold the boxes inside in the other. She staring intensely across the doorway at someone. With a mixed sigh of relief and annoyance, she came the rest of the way down the stairs, still calmly palming her cell phone, when she saw who the green-eyed idol was staring at.

Shampoo. With a full delivery box of food.

"Oy, Shampoo!" Ranma snapped. "Whatcha doin' here?"

The Amazon smiled brightly in return. "Airen!" she shouted with glee, dropping the boxes (without spilling a single bit) and throwing her arms around the transformed martial artist.

Tsubasa was caught completely off-guard by the sudden show of affection. "Bu-bu-but! I thought you were here for Honoka!"
Shampoo purred. "Was here for pervert-girl," she confirmed. "But not know Airen here too. Is even better day!" She turned her head to look up into Ranma's eyes from her glomp. "You come back to Nerima with Shampoo, yes?"

Ranma started pushing back. "Shampoo, how'd ya find this place?"

"Is on web site, yes?" The amazon purred, with just a bit of smugness. "Just need find same letters as pervert girl wear all time in pictures, yes?"

Tsubasa looked between them, confused. "I thought you were with…" she said, gesturing vaguely in the direction of the stairs.

Yukiho, looking for all the world like a younger version of her sister, spoke up. "Yeah, no way. Dad would have a coronary if Sis was actually into girls and inviting Ranma upstairs."

"Pervert girl like girls," Shampoo said slyly while maintaining her koala-like grip, seeing a chance to stir the pot. "Why you think she pervert girl?"

"SHAMPOO!" Ranma screamed and struggled to get loose without hurting the Amazon.

Honoka turned the corner. "What's going on down here?!" she asked, holding her forehead. "Ranma, quit playing around and let's get back to…" she trailed off as she realized just who was in the lobby of her shop. "Uh...Hi Kira, hi Shampoo," she said. "Uhm...I guess I can invite you in."

"Shampoo no can stay," she said, dropping Ranma to the ground with a sudden thud. She held out the food box. "Brought food as gift for Honoka." She opened it, and inside were a number of steamed buns, still hot despite the trip halfway across the city.

Honoka blinked, then started to literally drool. "Really?! Oh, wow, thanks..." She was about to reach out when suddenly another redhead was in her way, pulling the bun right out of her hand.

Ranma looked at Shampoo in annoyance. "Nuh-uh. I've fallen for that one too many times."

The amazon gave her a brief, hurt look, and reached out to take the snack from Ranma. . . whereupon she opened her own mouth and ate it. "Is good, see?" she half-asked.

"Uh...yeah, okay. Sorry Shamps," Ranma said. "Still, we got a lot of studyin' to do tonight, and I can't if you're gonna be all…"

Shampoo winced. "Is okay. Need to get back to Tendo Dojo before Akane make dinner. Kasumi... taking many night off."

Ranma paled. "Yes, please..." She might be having differences of opinion with the Tendos, but that, in her opinion, was a fate she wouldn't wish on her worst enemies.

Once Shampoo had gone, jumping on her bike and speeding away in a manner that seemed to defy physics, Tsubasa glanced back at the pair. "Uhm...does that happen often?"

"All too," Ranma said. "But not lately...Speakin' of which, what brings you here?"

Tsubasa grinned. "Oh, Honoka may have accidentally dropped these dance steps into my bag." she said airily. "I had someone at school look them over and brought you something to help out." She held up the heavy bag. "Ta-da! They're something we use since we can't really afford a heavy crane or anything for some of our camera work. I got the directions too, you'll just need someone reasonably tech savvy at your school to set them up."
"Eh?" Honoka asked, before opening the top box. Inside was a small robot, intended to be held aloft by multiple propellers, and underneath a high-quality camera mounted to it. ". . . a drone?"

Tsubasa nodded. "These aren't a gift, mind. UTX won't need them for a few weeks, but I am going to need these back."

Ranma scratched the back of her head. "I'm batting a thousand today, aren't I?"

Honoka laughed with more amusement than scorn. "With your life up 'till now, it's understandable."

Tsubasa grinned. "As I said, I expect to be seeing a lot of you two this year. Don't disappoint me, my cute little train-rider." Ranma's expression could best be described as 'broken' in that half of her face clearly wanted to swallow in fear while the other was in shock, eliciting a giggle from the idol. "Oh, and one last bit of advice?" she added. "Don't store your music and dance steps on loose-leaf. Really, get yourselves a secure server. If your school doesn't have one yet, pay for it."

Honoka suddenly thought of something. "Oh, hey, Umi and Maki ought to be dropping by later. Want to meet them, share some of these?" she asked, gesturing to the box of food. "Ranma's the only one of us who could eat the whole thing and get away with it."

"I still ain't sure we should eat any of it," Ranma commented. "But Shampoo don't usually go for the lethal stuff, so you'll probably be fine. Might end up a little loopy, though."

Tsubasa blinked. "Uh...how loopy?"

"Don't ask." Honoka deadpanned.

The leader of A-RISE eyed the food, along with everybody else. "I can't believe you talked me into this." Three layers in the box, of five buns each. Shampoo had eaten one, but the others had split the remaining four, Umi volunteering to be the one not to eat the rest of the first layer in case of tampering. The second layer everybody had had a single bun, one at a time. "I mean, they're good. Best I've ever had, but we're deliberately eating poisoned food here."

Ranma shrugged. "Well, yeah, but way I figure it, Shampoo ate one. That means they ain't all poisoned, right?" Tsubasa and Maki both nodded hesitantly, the scarlet-haired girl obviously agreeing with the idol's assessment. "Right. Now, Shamps is gonna be waitin' ta see if me or Honoka eats...whatever it is. If we don't..."

Umi nodded. "She'll try again, and probably get sneaky about it."

Maki sighed, finishing off her second serving. "I guess. And they are good..."

"Yeah, Shampoo makes them like no one else," Ranma said. "But this is weird. Sure no one's feeling nothing?" Everyone made noises of agreement.

"You know, there's just one thing I don't understand," Maki finally said...before pointing across the room at Tsubasa. "What's she doing here?"

"...eheheh..." Tsubasa rubbed the back of her head nervously. "I guess I was a little peckish when this started..."

"Plus she has been giving me some good advice." Honoka said.

Umi raised an eyebrow. "And just why would you be doing that, hmm?"
Tsubasa wriggled in her seat. "Look, it's private. I shouldn't say..."

Ranma coughed. "She musta seen us on the train. I haven't done that flip into the car bit recently..."

Umi swallowed. "Okay...that explains that. I think." She gave the idol a long look up and down. "Unless...there's something else."

"...you implying something?" Tsubasa asked, doing her best to sound innocent.

Umi nodded. "I am, actually. And if it's Ranma, I really suggest you look elsewhere before things get even worse."

Ranma's jaw dropped slightly, but Tsubasa just smiled. "Well, she is gorgeous, and they do make a cute couple..."

"We aren't a couple!" Honoka and Ranma shouted together. Honoka, however, continued. "...although I guess after what you saw it's understandable."

"Eh..." Ranma looked down at the food. "Look, we got one more layer to get through. Can we just drop this and get to it?"

Tsubasa nodded. "Sure thing." She picked up the first bun and smelled it cautiously. "This one seems different from the others..." She bit into it delicately, then her eyes widened. "Oh! Oh my!"

"What?! What's wrong?" Maki snapped out suddenly, her eyes widening in a panic.

Tsubasa managed to swallow. "It's so sweet!" She stared. "Apples, and some kind of filling!" Everyone else stared at it. "No, really! I can't believe it, but it's really good!" She took another bite. "Yellow-skinned apples are never this sweet! What did that girl do?"

Everyone else watched their guest but, when she didn't immediately start behaving any more weirdly, they all ate the treats. "Yeah, you're right." Ranma said. "These are really sweet."

Umi and Maki were somewhat more reserved, but still grinning. Honoka looked like she'd died and gone to heaven for a bit. "Okay..." she finally said. "This was...actually kind of fun."

Umi laughed. "Yeah, since we knew Shampoo wasn't going to do anything too dangerous. But still..." She sighed. "There's problems, and we do need to talk about them."

Tsubasa quickly stood up. "That's my cue to make a quick exit, I think." She winked as Honoka looked like she was going to protest. "Now, now. I can't do everything for you or it wouldn't be help, it'd be running a second idol group. I've got plenty of headaches with my own. Good night, Honoka, Ranma...Sonoda, Nishikino," she addressed the latter two a little more formally. "Email me before you head out on your summer break."

Once she was gone, Honoka sighed. "Okay, what's the problem?"

Umi glanced at Maki, but then decided to ignore it. "You know what? I think you need to see for yourself after school tomorrow. Show up to the meeting ten minutes late. You too, Ranma, I think you intimidate some of the newer members."

Somehow, the room seemed gloomy to Honoka. Even though the lights hadn't changed, the atmosphere seemed to cast a pall over the meeting, and threatened to drag her down. She could sense Ranma, behind her, stiffen and placed a hand on the girl's shoulder, to steady herself as much as her
friend.

Kotori was fidgeting, obviously trying to tune out everything going on around her as she tapped her pencil on a sketch pad. Eri, similarly, was obviously trying to work out some new choreography over the atmosphere. But they weren't nearly the cause.

Hanayo and Rin, normally inseparable, had taken chairs at opposite corners of the table and were pointedly glaring at each other. Maki had her head on the table, covering her ears to try to ward off the loud haranguing of Nico.

But worst of all was Nozomi. Honoka felt her heart break a little inside as she met the third-year's green eyes, and seeing some vital spark missing from them as she looked positively miserable while everyone slowly fell apart around her.

Umi just gave the pair a quick nod.

"STOP!"

Everyone suddenly shot up and stared at Honoka in shock as she stepped in. "What is wrong here? Seriously, I take one day off and everything's..."

"It's not just one day, Honoka," Umi said quietly. "You've been busy with... other things. They're important too, but..."

"...right." Honoka winced at the implications, but just said. "Well, I'm here now, and I guess I was wrong about some things." She paced back and forth in the limited space for a moment, before looking up. "All right... who here isn't here because they want Mu's to succeed?" No one raised their hands. "...and who's lying?" Honoka took note of a whole room full of guilty expressions. ". . . fine." She took a deep breath to calm herself, then pulled ten blank pieces of paper out of her notebook and numbered them. She shuffled the order, then handed one out to each of the other girls, keeping one for herself. "Now, I want each of you to write your real reasons for joining Mu's. No one but you and me will see it, and you don't have to own up to it. But be honest. We can't go on like this and we can't fix it if we lie to each other."

In silence, each of the girls wrote something on the piece of paper she'd been handed and then, silently handed them to Ranma, who obediently shuffled them face down, looking guilty herself. Finally, Honoka picked them up and read each one.

I wanted to be with my friends.

I wanted to make my mother proud of me.

I want to get my mastery Be with my best friend. Honoka nearly dropped the sheaf of papers on reading that one, staring at Ranma for a moment in shock. The girl blushed in return.

I joined to find what I was missing.

I wanted my best friend to pursue her dream.

The next one was in sketchy handwriting, labeled number three. I need to become an idol.

I wanted to keep my crazy best friend out of trouble. That one prompted her to give Umi a half-hearted glare which prompted her target to just smile softly at her.

I wanted to be with the girl I love Honoka's eyes widened fractionally as she read that one. ". . .
Number two, can you come to my family's shop after practice? That one's important," the room stared at her in shock. "...and private," she continued. When everyone settled down, she returned to reading.

*I want to be the best school idol I can be.* Honoka knew that one was hers.

Taking a moment, she pulled out the last sheet. *I wanted to bring everyone together.* That one hit her nearly as hard as Ranma's. Someone had just admitted to . . . trying to get this started, and it wasn't her. "Ah. . . Number Eight? Can you...uh...I want to read this out loud, but I said I wouldn't say..."

Ranma came to the rescue. "Everyone put your cell phones in your book-bags and leave your hands there, and don't look up. Eight, if you want her to speak, just send a text."

Nozomi spoke up. "No need. I wrote it." Everyone stared at her, and just how quiet her voice had become, even though it was perfectly audible. "I'm the one who originally suggested the name Mu's. The nine singing goddesses of the Greeks." Her voice became a little stronger. "The cards said it had to be all of us. At first I questioned whether I should bring Ranma too, but the cards also said that was a good idea. Some fortuneteller I turned out to be." Her voice cracked, ever so slightly. "Instead of bringing us together, I drove us even further apart. I'm so sorry everyone."

Rin gulped down her own nervousness. "No. . . I'm sorry. Ranma, I don't like being called that word. . . but you only used it a couple of times way back and I've been taking it out on you ever since."

Hanayo stood up. "Well, I'm glad you realized that. . . and I'm sorry I got so mad."

Ranma blinked, obviously perplexed. "Uh...wait, was this about the tomboy thing? Geez, I didn't mean anything bad. It's a damn good look for you."

". . . even so. . ." Rin said, feeling her irritation rise.

Honoka lifted her foot to stomp on Ranma's, but surprisingly the martial artist beat her to it. "Okay, okay. I'm sorry."

Kotori spoke up suddenly. "Uhm...how much to do you mind?"

Rin winced. "What do you mean?"

"Well...a lot of your costumes are kinda...."

The athletic girl groaned. "I'll deal with it, as long as I look cute."

There was silence, but then all eyes turned to Nico. "...whaat?"

No one else spoke.

Finally, the girl broke. "Okay, okay, I get it," She stood up, hanging her head in defeat. "I'll get out of your way."

"That's not it!" Honoka shouted. "Nico, really, just try to . . . " She groaned, having trouble coming up with the words.

"Respectful," Umi finished for her. "We know you worked really hard, but *so have we.*"

Nico gulped. "But... but..."
Honoka gulped. "...three?" Nico jumped, startled. ". . . I can't promise we'll end up where you said you wanted to be. That's not what we're trying to do. But if you can accept that..."

Nico swallowed, obviously considering it very carefully. "I don't have any choice."

Honoka sighed. "Nico. . . . go home. No, you've probably got all this stuff there too. Go. . . somewhere. Think about what you're saying and give me your answer tomorrow."

The president of the School Idol Research Club slowly got up and walked out of her own clubroom.

"As for everyone else. . . " Honoka sighed. "Almost everyone else. Ranma, can you run practice without me?" She glanced at Eri significantly. "I have a promise to keep."

Once everyone else had been pulled out of the room, Honoka grabbed her cell phone and a small pair of speakers next to the computers. "All right. Classroom next to us is empty, right?" she asked of Eri, who nodded numbly. "Okay, give me a couple of minutes." Once it was set up, Eri was both surprised and bemused to hear, not some pop song, but the last strains of a number from Swan Lake. "I guess you know this one," Honoka said with an embarrassed chuckle. "It's the only ballet I've heard of."

"Well, I guess it's all right. None of my instructors will be here," Eri answered with an odd mix of bemusement and horror. "Never tell anyone. I'm guessing you'll be Odette?"

Surprising her, Honoka shook her head. "I think I'm strong enough for Siegfried." She held out her hand. "Shall we?" Eri took it, and turned red as she suddenly felt herself twirled by the surprisingly strong girl. It took all she had to land properly, and they were off. At first, it was awkward. Honoka, despite her strength from the recent training, was the wrong shape, the wrong height, and didn't have nearly the skill to adapt the steps to make it work. For the first minute Eri could barely compensate for the differences to keep them moving through a parody of the famous scene.

Then, it clicked. After that it only took a few steps, and suddenly she felt like it wasn't two girls dancing, but rather, she really was the enchanted princess, trying to earn her love's trust and vows. It somehow didn't matter that they weren't on an elaborate set, being played for by an orchestra and complemented by a corps of dancers.

And then she met Honoka's eyes again, and understood. There was sadness there, and a disappointment in herself, and a desire for. . . something. It all hit her like a slap in the face and the illusions were all broken as Eri stumbled and nearly pulled Honoka down on top of herself. "Oh no! I'm so sorry! Uhm...come on, I'll try again!"

Eri stared up at the other girl for a few moments, completely incredulous, before she started to laugh. Honoka returned the stare as Eri's laugh slowly grew more and more hysterical, before finally it broke into genuine mirth. "No...no, Honoka, it's all right." She chuckled a few more times, wiping a tear from her eye. "Thank you. Thank you so much."

"Er...you're welcome?" Honoka asked.

Eri pulled her into a sudden hug, causing the ginger to flail for a moment before returning the embrace. "I think I finally understand."

"Then...I was good?"

Eri smirked. "You were terrible." Honoka pouted. "But it didn't matter."

"Uhh..."
Eri smiled. "Forget it. Let's... get to practice."

Honoka had the snacks out and was just brewing tea when Umi opened the door and took a seat, brazen as anything. Honoka glanced up at her. "Uhm, Umi, I know you're not Number Eight. I don't mean to be rude..."

"I wasn't going to stay... if she shows up," Umi said ominously.

Honoka felt a familiar bewilderment. "Wait, you know what was on the note?"

"I can guess," Umi said back. "You really planning to serve all those?"

Honoka shrugged. "It might be Hanayo."

"It's not," Umi said firmly. "I was surprised she was honest enough to admit it anonymously. I had to force it out of her."

Honoka's head hit the table. "Do you mind not being so mysterious?" she asked.

Umi sighed. "I wish I could tell you, Honoka. But she made me promise."

"...fine, fine." Honoka said after a fair bit of thought. "I guess she's not coming. She's late, anyway."

"Yeah, about what I thought." Umi took her customary one sweet and chewed on it. "Still...you surprised me today."

Honoka couldn't hold back a blush. "Huh?"

"You're turning into a real leader," Umi pointed out. "I know you inspired everybody, somehow, but today you actually took charge. The only weird thing was the private talk with Ayase."

"I said I had a promise... and I made another one never to talk about it, and I won't." Honoka said, smiling slyly. "Unless you want to trade."

"No thanks."

Ranma stopped just outside the door to her new home, Maki just ahead of her. Without a moment's hesitation, she took the usual thermos that Mrs. Nishikino set outside, opened it, and poured the just-barely-warm-enough water over his body. "Right, I gotta sort the trash, may as well do that while I'm drying off," he told Maki.

"Yeah." The other redhead's reply was somewhat resigned. "For the record, you don't need to soak your uniforms. Kotori worked hard on those."

"Yeah, she did," Ranma said. "She actually took frequent soakings into account. Won't last as long as they could, but it's gonna happen so..." He shrugged. "Anyway, I gotta get ta work. Let me know when dinner's on."

Maki went up to her room to work on homework, noting with some amusement when the bags of trash went over the cement wall. She didn't bother to check whether they landed in the right trash bins anymore. A bit later she heard the water being run and (briefly) considered taking a bath herself. The tub was certainly large enough for three or four, never mind two.

But no. That was something certain others might do. She would not sink so low. She sighed in
resignation as the water from the bathroom stopped running and then the splash signaling that the aquatransexual had entered the hot water for what would probably be the last time that evening.

Eventually, she heard the front doorbell ring. She went past the bathroom and peered in, just enough to confirm he was still there by the mist from the uncovered bath. "Ranma, that'll probably be dinner. Mama and Papa must both be working late tonight."

"Gotcha. I'll be down in a bit." Ranma said. "And do ya gotta look in on my guy form? I got enough of that back home."

"Meh, doesn't bother me at all," Maki said truthfully, although she tried to inject some of her usual slyness when she was making a joke. "But I'll keep it in mind."

The next day, Honoka went through the school gates looking disappointed, and found herself surprised to be facing Nico. "Uhh…"

Nico had an uncharacteristically pensive expression. "I . . . I thought about what you said. But . . . this is still my best chance. I can't think of anything else, so . . . "

". . . will you stop trying to push your idea of how to do it?" Honoka asked. "I'm not asking you to completely change, but. . . "

Nico swallowed. "I'm not making any promises about myself. But if no one else wants to. . . "

Honoka nodded. "Okay. Practice as usual, then." Then, Honoka smiled. "Say, we're going to put together another PV over the break. I know Umi and Maki have the song picked, but Kotori's a little overwhelmed on costumes. If you could throw an idea together that she could do quickly, that would really help."

Nico grinned in a way that made Honoka almost regret the offer. "That one's easy. We're going to the beach, right? Just let me see everyone's swimsuits…"
Chapter 12

The big day had arrived. Saturday afternoon, school let out after only a half day. The school's athletic field had been completely reserved, and the weather was with them, the storms of early summer giving way to clear skies just in time for the performance. Mu's had quickly traded out their school uniforms for a rather stylized "dancing uniform" in a similar cut, but in bright red with golden highlights. Each girl had their own variations, courtesy of Kotori. The added coats varied in length, some wore them closed and some open, and the hair decorations each wore had been carefully chosen to complement their personalities while not clashing.

Ranma nodded to herself in satisfaction. "All right. School cameras are set up." She gave a quick gesture around. Surprising the girls, while the main camera was in front of them on the tripod the other two had been strapped to large helicopter drones. To help control them, three laptops were set up on a table to capture the stream from each camera in real time. "I think we got them programmed right, but we'll do one run of the steps without recording just to be sure." She grinned like a loon at that thought. "I really gotta thank this new friend of yours," she added to Honoka. "If this works we're gonna knock'em dead."

Nico, perhaps surprisingly, gave a thumbs up to the idea. "Finally! Someone who understands!"

Umi winced as she thought about it. "With the dry run, that only gives us enough time to get in four tries. Is that going to be enough footage?"

"It'll have ta be," Ranma pointed out. "Uh...Eri?"

The blonde smirked in amusement. "Places, everybody. On the director's mark."

The new routine was, in a word, amazing. It was the first time the group had managed to put it all together into a single run, and compared to the Start-Dash performance almost two months earlier, there almost was no comparison. Even just adding six girls to the lineup made things more complicated. But Eri had turned that into a strength, with more interaction between the girls and a shifting lineup that gave the whole thing a dynamic that was just absent from the last work.

And that was before the drones and pre-programmed camera angles were in play. As long as everyone hit their marks, Ranma estimated it would put them in the perfect positions for close ups, sweeping shots, and other things that would give their first real PV a look most other groups couldn't match. In short, it was perfect.

On reflection, Ranma would have one thought. I shoulda known!

The sun above the martial artist suddenly blacked out. "RAAAANMAAAA! PREPARE TO DIE!"

She didn't need to look up to know the source - a boy about her own age, incredibly muscular and wearing a shabby yellow shirt and black pants, with a distinctive tiger-striped bandanna on his head and wielding a 'bamboo' umbrella.

This was Ryouga Hibiki.

The biggest problem was the equipment – no way they could afford to have Ryouga crash through that. Ranma solved the problem by leaping straight up to meet him, kicking nearly vertical and risking the opening created.

The umbrella cracked into her side, sending pain shooting all through her ribcage as she was sent flying. "Keep goin'!" she shouted. While startled, Honoka quickly picked up the step and Eri
counted out the pace, getting them back on track as Ranma landed behind the performance, circling around. "Don't stop!" she said. "We gotta stay on schedule!"

That direction given, she turned to Ryouga. "Dammit, Ryouga," she snarled, adopting a ready stance. "Don't you got anything better to do?"

"As a matter of fact, after the way you've been treating Akane, I don't!" he replied, snapping his umbrella up. "Which one's the new fiance this time?" he asked.

Ranma rolled her eyes. "None of them. Just shut up and let's get this out of your system so we can talk."

"Oh, we're way past TALK!" Ryouga said, charging and leading with his fist. The pair exchanged several blows, before he stepped back. *Something's wrong. Ranma's holding back. Ranma never holds back!*

Ryouga noticed the catchy pop-ish tune that had been playing stopped, but that wasn't enough to convince him to give up his surprise attack. Ranma felt herself being pressed back, again towards the desk with the valuable computers. "Dammit, Ryouga!" she repeated. "Why can't ya listen just once?"

"Shut UP!" Ryouga wound back for a heavy blow, but Ranma slipped around it.

*Kachuu Tenshin AMAGURIKEN!* came the shout, and was immediately followed by gasps of astonishment. The pig-tailed girl suddenly seemed to get even faster, her arms a blur as they landed against the same spot repeatedly on Ryouga's side.

The gasps turned to horror as they realized the attacker was still standing, looking only a little dumbfounded rather than halfway dead from the crushing attack. "Heh. You've been slacking off, Ranma!" The boy said, sounding amused. "Well, that will make it all the easier to punish you for what you did to Akane!"

Ranma twisted around the first attack, again trying to lure Ryouga away from the precious equipment. "Ryouga, we're busy!" she tried again, punctuating the words with a frontal kick that managed to get past the boy's defense, but only getting a grunt from him before feeling his heavy forearms crack into her shin. Ranma stumbled back, feeling more pain shoot up her leg as her foot landed. Ryouga reared back for another blow….

And suddenly found himself staring into a pair of enraged blue eyes that did not belong to Ranma. "What. Are. You. Doing?!"

"Hu-wha?" The 'Eternal Lost Boy' wasn't quite used to this situation. People normally did not toss themselves into the path of one of his punches, for good reason. He barely managed to check the punch in time, and then settled for staring at the girl in front of him, completely dumbfounded.

"In case you hadn't noticed, this is a school!" Honoka said in a tone of nearly impossible incredulity. "And yes, Ryouga Hibiki, I know exactly who you are! That still doesn't excuse interrupting our recording session!"

"Honoka!" Umi said, shocked, running up to pull her out of the way. "Have you gone crazy!? What about last time?"

"Wha...recording session?!" It was only then that Ryouga managed to recover, seeing the cameras for the first time. "You must be Kousaka Honoka," he said, cautiously. "But what's this about 'last time'?"
Ranma facepalmed. "Who ya been talkin' to, Ryouga?"

"Uh...just Ukyo. She said you'd broken off all the engagements and run off with some girl..." the boy in the bandanna admitted sheepishly. "Yeah, that's kinda stupid...sorry..."

"Thank you!" Ranma practically shouted the sentiment to the heavens. "Finally!"

Ryouga smirked. "Yeah. You'd never have that much backbone. But what did happen?"

Umi sighed, stepping in before someone more volatile could re-escalate the situation. "Look, we don't have time right now and Ranma's kinda running the behind the scenes stuff. If you can hang around we'll unlock the dojo and you can have your fight in there once the sun goes down enough that we can't shoot anymore, all right?"

Ryouga was not, generally speaking, seen as a man in control of himself. The reasons were fairly obvious after seeing his traditional greeting for his rival. There was some truth to the idea – he wasn't exactly given to long periods of introspection, and his usual reaction to a pretty girl in less than expected clothing was extreme embarrassment and stammering. One might have thought, then, the idea of running into nine girls wearing what, in his opinion, were extremely abbreviated school uniforms doing a dance routine would have caused his brain to shut down.

However, one does not learn techniques like the Bakusai Tenketsu, involving repeatedly slamming one's body into giant rolling boulders, without patience. It took discipline to not only fully master the Shishi Hokoudan, but survive the process. Enhancing his ki with depression had nearly killed him, but he could do it now without many of the side effects.

Any other day, he might indeed have suffered a mental 'blue screen' on seeing pretty idol singers at random, but the extremely bizarre thing in the scene was that Ranma wasn't one of them. Instead she, and she was a 'she' at the moment, stood back in something that looked like the male school uniform.

She looked at all three of the computers in front of her with the situational awareness born of constant ambushes, and an intensity that Ryouga thought could only be brought out of his rival by the most intense of battles.

Even stranger, she was frowning and whispering into the mic while flipping switches. "Umi, you're a beat behind," "Nico, left," "Hanayo, you're off camera, take two steps to the left and pick up on my mark with the chorus, and...mark." The girls, with Ranma's help, actually stayed mostly on beat, and when the music faded out, Ranma was grinning like she'd just won the fight of the day. "All right. We lost some time, but I think we got usable footage for the whole PV."

The ginger, Honoka, grinned broadly through her panting. "So...we're done."

"Hell no!" Ranma shouted back, eliciting a series of groans. "I said usable. We'll make the PV deadline, but that's it. I want ya ta get through the whole thing in one take! Remember, we gotta do this on stage next month!" She clapped. "Two minutes! Drones are resetting." A few buttons were pressed, and the hovering robots moved obediently back while the girls quickly took drinks of water and returned to their starting positions.

What Ryouga wanted to know was how Ranma was doing this! It didn't seem like a skill set she'd pick up willingly, but here she was, almost like a professional. He strained to hear the comments this time through, apparently being fed into the girls' earpieces. "Eri, remember to breathe properly. This isn't the ballet, you've got to dance and sing." The tall blonde gave a quick nod towards the desks, and Ryouga understood. The girl who had been addressed subconsciously spread her legs to shoulder-width and held her hands down in a common breathing exercise from certain Chinese
martial arts that Ranma's Anything-Goes had acquired somewhere.

Ranma grinned. "One, Two, THREE!" The music started, and the girls began stepping through the routine like a well-organized kata, Ranma barely needing to call out the time this runthrough. The drones buzzed through, but unlike the first run they were ignored... and with the little bits of advice Ranma had handed out before, they were going much more smoothly. The pigtailed martial artist only had to step in once, this time to correct Hanayo's steps before she got out of sync again.

Of course, Ranma adapting just about any damn physical activity, and a few non-physical ones (Ryouga's mind still boggled at the Martial Arts Text Messaging tournament a few months back) to martial arts was nothing new. But now he was showing he could do the same in reverse!

And Ranma didn't even seem to realize he was doing it.

At the end of the second attempt, the girls held their final pose for several seconds, before two of the girls, Hanayo and one Ryouga had identified as 'Nico', fell over, barely being caught by the two next to them. Ranma was at their sides in a second with wet towels and sports drink bottles retrieved from a cooler. "Hey, you two all right?" she asked them.

Hanayo nodded, forcing herself to sit up. "Just...just a little light-headed."

There was a groan from the other girl. "I'm going to die."

Ranma chuckled. "If ya can talk, no ya ain't Yazawa." Her voice was a little chiding, but not unsympathetic. She pulled the girl up and held the drink to her lips. "Right. Take twenty this time. We'll get these two caught up."

"Nyaaaa..." Rin exhaled in a distinctly feline sigh, causing Ranma to wince. "Uh, sorry. Just so exhausted."

"It...it's cool," Ranma said. "I'll swap out the drone's batteries and reset. Grab a drink and get inside."

Everyone did as told, heading into the school's lobby. Even the two girls who had collapsed seemed to be doing much better. Just a taste for the dramatic then, in Ryouga's estimation.

Finally left alone again, Ryouga grabbed Ranma by the shoulder. "Okay, what's going on here, Ranma?"

"The old lech's idea of a mastery test." Ranma shrugged. "I still don't get it, but neither does Mom."

Ryouga's eyes widened as all the implications hit him. "...in that case, Ranma, I wish you the best of luck. How long will this last?"

"Next spring, probably," Ranma said. "The girls have got a long way ta go, but we might make the entry and the lech could just decide to run a different test earlier, but..."

Ryouga gave him a quick, formal nod. "Then I'll leave you alone about the idol thing until then. After that, of course, a real man would drop it like a sack of potatoes."

"Ha ha." Ranma groused. "At least I don't gotta wear the costumes."

"There's that." Ryouga agreed. "Spar after?"

"Yeah, sure." The pair walked into the school to cool off.
Unfortunately, said spar ran into a problem. "No." Umi and Eri stood in the doorway to the school's dojo. "Ranma, you're injured," Eri said firmly. "I cannot, in good conscience, open the dojo for you."

"I'm fine," Ranma countered.

Umi smirked, and suddenly launched a double snap kick at Ranma's leg and side. Ryouga almost laughed – there was no way an untrained girl could actually manage to hurt Ranma like that, but it died as he saw the aquatransexual wince - ever so slightly, at each blow. Umi shook her head. "Better than I thought, but not today."

Ryouga stared at Ranma, putting the pieces together. "You're not getting your morning spars in?"

"Can't talk ta pops, so no," Ranma admitted sulkily. "I guess I'm a little out of practice at actual fighting."

Ryouga thought about that for a second, then nodded. "Well, I can't be here every day either, but you need to get back on that..."

"But I don't know anyone..."

Umi stepped in. "Ranma, why don't you come home with me after dinner tonight?" Ryouga looked like he was about to explode, so she quickly elaborated. "My father, who trained me, said he wanted to meet you...maybe he can help."

Ryouga grinned weakly. "For the moment, I guess this is where I say goodbye. I've got to get back to Akari. Maybe I'll stop by Chicago on the way back." Everyone stopped to stare at him. "What?"

Ranma's eyes narrowed. "Chicago? Ryouga, I know you get lost, but do you have any idea where Chicago is?"

Ryouga's bafflement was clear on his face. "It's just outside Osaka, isn't it?"

"Harajuku," an unexpected voice said. Kotori winced as everyone stared at her. "It's in Harajuku."

Ryouga blinked, and pulled out his cell phone to punch it into the GPS. "Bah, this thing never works right."

Ranma took the device and peered at it. Sure enough, it was showing 'Chicago' somewhere in the Harajuku district. "...ya know, I don't believe it."

Kotori gave the boys...well, boy and transformed girl...her cutest grin.

The Sonoda home was, if anything, even more scarily traditional than the Tendos', for all that it was in a modern building. Tatami floors through everywhere Ranma had been, and sliding doors (albeit mostly wood and plaster instead of paper) combined with faint light bulbs gave the whole thing the feel of a home trying very hard to look traditional while still moving with the times.

Ranma was led to the dojo by Umi, having transformed back at the party. The room was almost as large as the Tendo's dojo, and obviously much better maintained. With no exterior to the building, straw dummies had been replaced with modern sandbags, hung in the far corner, and the weapons rack was a weapons closet.

Her father nodded to them. "Daughter, if you wouldn't mind, I wish to discuss things with Ranma
that require some of the secrets of our school you're not yet privy to."

Umi blinked. "I...yes father."

Ranma frowned. " Eh, what's so important? And ain't Umi your heir?"

Mister Sonoda gave them a weary sight. "Saotome, there are things my daughter has not yet shown
the proper commitment to," Umi made a loud noise of indignation, but was silenced by a glare. "You
have, and have learned of these things from your own instructors. I wish to speak to you, not as
master and student, but as...near equals, let us say. Will you indulge me?"

"Uh...sure, I guess," Ranma said uncomfortably.

Umi sighed. "It's fine, Ranma," She turned and shut the door behind him.

Mister Sonoda waited until he was sure Umi had left before speaking. "Tea? You don't seem the sort
to stand on proper ceremony, so we can skip the formalities if you wish."

"Ah...yeah, I should get back ta the Nishikino's place soon," Ranma said. "I got a couple of hours,
though."

"That will be enough time," the older man stated, turning serious. "The first thing that I need to
address is ..what were you thinking?" Ranma winced at the sudden sense of power coming from the
man. There were very few martial artists who could pull that trick off. "I had intended to wait until
Umi had graduated college before inducting her into the higher levels of the school...if I chose to.
Now she is aware of their existence, and demanding explanations and training!"

"I...uh, I just thought she was ready for it," Ranma said. "She's as good as some other people who
could be training that I know..."

Mister Sonoda frowned. "You must be aware of how dangerous the training is. That isn't your
decision to make."

"Well, no," Ranma said. "It's hers, and yours. But I don't see what good holdin' out on her would do.
If she can do it, she can do it."

"Even at the cost of her life!?" Mister Sonoda demanded. "Saotome - "

Ranma glared. "Look, it ain't my place. She wanted ta ask me, I told her ta ask you. I had ta do it in
front of her, and she knew something was up. How was I supposed ta know you were keeping it
some kinda big secret?"

Mister Sonoda stopped, startled. "...see. Forgive me. ..I still have a problem, but I see it was not your
fault." She seemed to take a moment to compose himself. "I understand you are undergoing your
Mastery exam, which means that soon you will be ready to instruct your own students. How would
you do it? Especially if it were your own daughter?"

Ranma blinked. "Well, pops always threw me in head-first. Literally, usually."

"I did not ask how your father did it."

Ranma gulped. "Well, it's the fastest way ta learn...but you're right, it's the most dangerous. I'd
probably tell her what the steps involve, then ask if she's willing ta do it."

"I will take your advice under consideration. And now... " He took a deep breath. "UMI!!"
She arrived a moment later. "Yes, father?"

"If you will...please oversee our spar."

Umi blinked, nervously. "Ranma was injured earlier today father."

"Don't worry, I will be gentle." Mister Sonoda explained to his daughter with a light smirk. "I thought you would be eager to see what your father can really do."

The two quickly faced off, bowed, and then Ranma quickly ducked away from a rapid flurry of punches, planting himself firmly and returning with a kick. "I'm doin' a lot better. Heal quick, you know."

Mister Sonoda blocked the strike, one Umi had seen wind the crazed Akane, with seeming effortlessness. "I expected no less. This takes me back to when I was Umi's age."

Ranma smirked and slid in, managing to land an elbow strike on Mister Sonoda's shoulder which should have broken it clear down through the spine. Umi stared in horror at the casual way the pair were beating on each other and shrugging it off. She expected it from Ranma, but her father. "What, your pops hogtied you and flung you into trees too?"

"No," the man admitted while kneeing Ranma in the solar plexus. "But he did do the one with the red hot nails and the pickaxe."

Ranma winced, as much from the memory as the blow. "Yeah, that one smarts. Worth it, though."

"Not to everyone." The pair stepped back from each other and, to Umi's shock, Ranma bowed. "I must admit, it is nice to finally have someone on our level to spar with again."

Ranma grinned. "I could come here in the mornings to practice. Give Umi someone to practice against she can beat up as hard as she wants too."

Mister Sonoda stopped to consider that idea. "Umi? Are you willing to join us?"

Umi swallowed. "I'm...not sure I want to be this good," she admitted. "But if you just want to work on technique, sure."

"Then it's settled." Mister Sonoda said. "I do expect you to address me as 'sensei' during these sessions."


It was late when Ranma returned to the Nishikino household. Rather than annoy people going through the front door, he decided to slip in through the window. He looked for the only one that the light wasn't on in, jimmed the simple lock, slipped in, and nearly choked.

Maki was sitting up, watching a movie on her laptop. The angles had meant he hadn't seen the light, but that wasn't why he stopped. Maki was sitting there in a bright pink bra and panties that set off her eyes rather nicely and why was he thinking like that!?

The girl just looked up calmly, albeit with a heavy blush. "Ranma, what are you doing?"

"Eh...was tryin' not ta wake anyone up." Ranma said sheepishly, waiting for the inevitable violence.

Maki blushed even more heavily. "Well, either stop looking or get some cold water!"
Ranma gulped and zoomed out of the room. Maki sighed. "Honestly, no wonder her home life was so messed up."

Once he was back in his room, Ranma sighed and pulled up Honoka on voice chat. The girl was there, wearing much more concealing pajamas and a grin. "How did things go?"

"Great. Sonoda's gonna be sparring with me from now on in the mornings." Ranma grinned even more. "How about the PV?"

Honoka glanced at her inbox. "Eri just finished editing it, and Tsubasa's got the link and is downloading it now." She frowned. "You're back late, will you have enough time to pack?"

Ranma moved the camera to the pile of camping supplies. "Never unpacked."

"Ranma," Honoka sighed. "How can you expect to live if you don't ever plan to settle down? There's not exactly much call for wandering martial artists anymore."

Ranma gave her a smirk. "And what are you planning to do with your life, huh?" Honoka made a cute little 'glirk' sound. "Exactly. We got time. Plus... guess this don't quite feel real yet, y'know? I'm livin' in a huge mansion. Ain't to Kuno standards, but..."

Honoka gave it some thought. "Well, anyway, we do have to get up early tomorrow. We'll head to the school and watch the announcement ceremony together, then get to the train station. Everything's set up?"

"Yep," Ranma confirmed. "Maki's parents said it was all right to use their beach house. I'm even allowed to stay there, if I use one of the bedrooms."

"Awww...I wanted you to have a real sleepover."

Ranma smirked. "Those are for girls, Honoka."

"So?"

"..."

"Exactly. But I guess they've got a point." Honoka conceded, though not at all with good grace.

Ranma finally couldn't restrain a sigh. "Ya know I would like ta make up with my mom one day, stuff like this won't help."

Honoka's eyes glanced away from the screen. "I know you would, Ranma. But 'make up' can't mean just giving her everything she wants, not when the list is not being who you are."

Ranma stared at her. "I just gotta find a cure..."

"...how has that gone?" Ranma winced. "Have you actually asked anyone who might know?" Another wince. "Has anything you have tried come close to working?" Another. "Ranma...I don't think there is a cure. At least, not one that you're willing to take. Too many people could have used it against you."

For a long time, the two just sat there, staring at each other across an internet connection. Finally, Ranma just said "You've got an early morning, Honoka. Get some sleep." Honoka was about to protest, but Ranma cut her off. "Don't worry, I can pull an all-nighter if I gotta, and I gotta. I need an answer."
A low half-moon over the restaurant district of Nerima. All the shops had been closed for hours, with all the cleanup long done. Cologne had just settled down to sleep when her eyes snapped open at a presence she hadn't felt in months. And it was approaching at high speed.

Thus, she wasn't surprised when she hopped up to the roof only to find Ranma already waiting for her. Balancing precariously on her staff as she was wont to do when combat was in the offing, she gave her son-in-law a calculating look. "Yes, Son-in-law? If this is about Shampoo she's staying at the Tendo Dojo."

Ranma filed that away before. "Is there a cure for Jusenkyo?"

"Oh, there are many ru-"

"DON'T YOU GODDAMN LIE TO ME, OLD MUMMY!" Ranma cut her off, suddenly glowing in righteous fury. "For the last year everyone's been jerking me around with that leash. Yes or no, straight up, is there a cure?"

Cologne debated it internally...for about two seconds. Saffron might not have been a god in the truest sense, but he was certainly in the same weight class as the elders. She quickly ran through the same logic as had happened with Happousai, and concluded that, no, this was no longer an issue worth sparking a fight over. She could win, but it would be far too costly for, at this stage, too little gain. Instead, she spoke carefully. "As I was saying, there are rumors of such. There are definite ways to control the curse, make its' effect on your life more bearable, temporarily stop it from changing your form, and so on. You've experienced many of these yourself, of course." Cologne stopped there, taking the measure of his aura and nearly unreadable expression. "I am not offering to give it, as I don't have it myself, but would the recipe for the waterproof soap satisfy your conditions of a 'cure'?"

A shake of the head. "That may be the closest you can ever come. Is that acceptable?"

Ranma let out a curse. "Old ghoul, I'm not here to play games."

"I am not playing, Son-in-law." Cologne felt her patience dwindling. "Many of the ways to remove the curse are not for the faint hearted."

"I'm up for anything Old Ghoul."

Cologne narrowed her eyes. "Are you? Then draining the life's blood of a virgin boy is an acceptable step in your cure?" Ranma turned immediately pale. "I thought not. If you aren't willing to go that far, then it is likely a true cure will remain beyond your reach for the remainder of your life." She sighed. "I am sorry, Ranma. I should have told you the price for what you truly sought earlier. I had actually hoped the Locking Ladle of the Musk would work, even if it weakened that particular hold on you in this game we all play. It was the only thing that seemed it might."

Ranma snorted. "I ain't ready to go all girl."

Cologne smirked. "Considering it?" Her voice dropped into a mock-threat. "Shampoo might decide to go with the Kiss of Death after all." Ranma spluttered incoherently at that suggestion.

Cologne sighed. "Son-in-law, I'm telling you what I know. The traditions of the Chinese Amazons extend back millennia, but I don't claim to know even of a fraction of what magic is truly capable of. It may be that there are places where magic runs strong aside from Jusendo. I have heard tales of the islands of Britain, the outback of Australia, the dark sorceries of the ancient empires on the American continents, or possibly even closer to home, such as the mountains of Tibet where orders of mystical monks may yet dwell, hidden from the prying eyes of modern civilization."
Ranma's eyes lit up. "So there's some hope left."

Cologne shook her head. "Only if you can get to those places, learn enough of what they know or knew. You're no scholar."

Ranma winced, but nodded. "I. . . yeah, Honoka and I were just talking about that."

Cologne laughed. "Oh, the irony. The first girl with a hold on your heart isn't even a fiance, girlfriend, or lover." Ranma made another choking noise of indignation. "On that note, I take my leave. You do have much to think about."

Ranma bounced off, alone, into the night.

Umi reached for a rather large mug of tea. "This is not the time. Why did you have to drop that on him tonight?"

Honoka sighed. "Because. . . I couldn't lie."

Umi shook her head. "I guess it's a good thing you're finally using your head a bit, but. . . "

"Hey!"

Umi continued as if she hadn't heard. "Honoka, Ranma's obviously got a lot tied up in that self-image, and the promise doesn't help. What you said. . . it was as good as telling him the separation from his family's permanent. He could even be cast out of his family."

Honoka's skin took on a sudden deathly pallor as the implications went through her head. "You don't think he takes that seriously, do you?"

"Absolutely," Umi's response was cold as ice. "And so do a lot of people, although not as seriously as his mom. It wouldn't be horrible. . . except he's a martial artist. It's his life, and a lot of the people who still take this kind of thing seriously are in that community, one way or another."

Honoka tried to swallow back her tears. "I didn't mean. . . "

"Honoka, it's not your fault for pointing out...what's probably true," Umi pulled back from her screen. "Besides, Father seemed to approve of him. I didn't tell him everything, but I think he might be willing to adopt, if it comes to that."

"Are you sure?" Honoka asked. "Isn't that usually done for marrying into the family or things like that?"

Umi chuckled. "Usually. But in Ranma's case, I think we can make an exception. I'm not marrying the dope."

All ten members of Mu's filed into the club room silently, and rolled, threw, and stacked their various belongings into the far corner. In anticipation, a class television had been rolled in and hooked up to the computer. Nico grinned and started the stream. "Your 'friend' got the video?" she asked Honoka.

"She did," Honoka said. "And she said it was good enough for the last minute substitution."

Eri shook her head. "I still don't know who you could possibly have found to do this for us."

Umi winced, but the stream came up. "It's already started."
The stage was done up to the nines, a curtain covered with sequins with A-RISE standing next to the MC, who was speaking. "Well, ladies, that was a lovely performance, but can you talk to us more about what we can expect from Love Live?"

Tsubasa gave a winning smile. Rather unlike the self-contradictory blend of laid-back, sarcastic, and earnest she had been in private, here she was almost all sweetness, but with a touch of sincerity that held the crowd spellbound. "Well, of course I don't know all the details. You'll have to check the web site for that. But, I do know everyone who follows the School Idol scene will be in for a treat over the next three months. It's a free for all, and I want to see everyone put their best foot forward. Live concerts, PVs, publicity stunts, anything you can do to boost your popularity is fair game right now, so you need to give it your all, okay!"

The MC smiled. "And I believe you ladies have an example of one of those PVs for us."

Tsubasa gave the camera a wink, which seemed to be aimed right at Honoka. "Well, the judges wanted one of ours, but I think today is for all the School Idols who are even now dreaming of the professional stage of Love Live. So...I just wanted to say I found a girl whose dream of being an idol inspired me to do even better, and her best friends, giving it their all." Suddenly, everybody stared at Honoka and Ranma, who couldn't seem to meet anyone's eyes and were blushing heavily. Tsubasa, across town from them, went on. "And so, I proudly present, for the first time, Otonokizaka's School Idol unit, Mu's! And, their new song, Bokura no Live, Kimi to Life!"

The crowd, probably hand-selected for the ceremony since it hadn't been published, stared, spellbound at the sudden change. The song rang clearly through the hall. Mu's themselves were breathless as the music played on, the scenes of their dance routine intercut with ones taken from ordinary school life and, on occasion, their prepwork. Days in the class. Lunch on the roof. Maki and Umi at the piano. Gym classes with the first years. Ranma leading a practice. And then, finally, the day of the performance, setting up...as the song ended.

The crowd broke out into wild applause. Spontaneously, all the girls threw their arms around each other. "We did it!" Honoka grinned broadly. "We really did it!"

For almost five minutes, they stayed like that...until Hanayo's phone beeped. ". . . ohmygoshohmygosh!" she shouted. "We dropped without putting anything out while we were training. . . but we just jumped back up to 100th place!"

"Oh god!" Umi suddenly felt short of breath. "So many people...."

Eri grinned. "It's a definite start and a real way to kick off the competition. But now we have a summer training camp to get to."

Ranma nodded. "Right, girls. Pack up, we've got to get to the station!"

(A/N: Sorry about the delays - Chapter 13 will be published this afternoon. I will be trying to get 14 done by New Years Eve.)
Chapter 13

The train pulled into the station, and Mu's piled out. Before them was an expansive beachfront property, lined by various seaside houses as far as the eye could see in both directions. At the far side of the bay a ferris wheel and roller coaster peeked into view, and signs everywhere were advertising the local festival celebrating the start of summer.

Everyone took a moment to take it in, before Eri stepped to the front. "I'd like to make a quick announcement?" When no one seemed to object, she smiled. "I know we've had a rough patch, but last night Nozomi had an idea. I think we should make an effort to call each other by our first names from now on. No more Yazawa, Nishikino..."

"Ayase," Maki spat out like a curse, before smiling to let the upperclassman know she was mostly joking.

Eri glanced at her. "Yeah, we're trying to avoid slipping back into that." She regained her good-humored smile. "Does everybody agree?"

Honoka spoke up. "Yeah, it does...Hanayo!" she squealed out the last word, trying to get the first-year's attention.

She squeaked. "Kousa...Er, I mean, Honoka!" She took a deep breath. "Uhm...Nico?"

"Feh. Yeah, okay, I'll try it," the named girl said brusquely. "Umi, right?"

"...you can barely remember it?" Umi asked. "Uh...Nozomi?"

"Right." Nozomi gave one of her mysterious smiles. "I think that's enough practice for now..."

Ranma rolled her eyes. "Well, yeah. Whatever works. Now, I wanted ta go over the schedule. Yaz...er, Nico, ya had costumes?"

"Well, more like accessories," Nico admitted. "We've only got two weeks, but we won't be putting on any concerts so we can do another PV here."

Ranma nodded. "We'll use one of the songs we've been working on for the concerts. Got just the one picked out too. So, we'll stay light on the training for the first week and get the PV done, then ramp it up the second."

Umi quietly hid the portfolio folder she had been carrying. "Er...I guess you have it all worked out then."

Ranma chuckled. "Well, it is my only job in this loony bin we're calling a band," she said easily. "But yeah. Honoka?" she turned to the girl. "Did Tsubasa come through on those contacts?"

"Not yet," Honoka admitted. "But there's still time."

"Right." Ranma nodded. "The plan right now is to give the PVs a couple of weeks to build hype for the concerts in Akiba, so we'll push training in the second week to give everyone time to rest up after before the concert circuit, per Doc's orders." She broke out in a sudden grin. "So for the first week, outside of shooting hours, go ahead and enjoy yourselves on the beach." The pig-tailed martial artist started stacking up the luggage. "Hit the lockers and get changed. Maki, I got the keys, so you go with'em, I'll go ahead and set us up in the beach house. We can get stuff for dinner later."
With that, she picked up the entire pile of luggage, all at once, and ran off, her own duffel bag slung over her shoulder, to everyone's shock.

Kotori was the first to speak. "Sometimes I forget he's not normal…"

The beach itself was of the sort that catered carefully to the ideals of a vacation beach, because few places in the world had this type of perfection naturally. The white sand had zero rocks, and the little harbor stretched around in a perfect crescent where the ocean flowed over it. There were no ships or boats to spoil the view in sight, and the whole simply seemed to be an exotic resort, somehow situated less than an hour by train from the heart of Tokyo.

Dotting the beach side were the traditional stalls of various local restaurants looking to cater to the vacationers, with a mix of frozen treats and light meals. In between the little clusters of these buildings were the occasional barbeque for those who wanted to cook their own. A few volleyball nets also dotted the landscape, just enough that there was always one available. The sole building on the beach, a worn but well-maintained brick structure that, presumably, contained showers as well as lockers. There was only one visible hotel, a three-story building in the middle of the area that would give access to everything, cut off by a two-lane road. Every other building in the complex was a privately-owned house, or at least seemed to be, all of them very well maintained.

Left with nothing better to do, Mu's made their way to the beach's only 'public' locker area. Which seemed to be a lie, because the attendant wouldn't just give anyone keys, leaving Maki to argue with him over how her family did own property here and yes, they had invited the entire school club along to vacation.

Nozomi had her ways of persuading young men, but really, Maki could use the practice dealing with people. Leaving them to it, she simply started pulling off her outer clothing.

Eri stared at her, utterly scandalized. "What are you doing?"

Nozomi smirked, revealing her purple two-piece swimsuit underneath. "I had a hunch."

"And you couldn't have shared?"

Nozomi grinned and picked up her own beach bag, along with slinging their picnic basket over her shoulder. "While you girls...negotiate I'll go find us a spot."

Umi swallowed. "...that Nozomi has no shame."

Eri groaned. "Remember to get me a key too." She followed after her friend, needing to half-sprint across the sand. By the time she had caught up, Nozomi seemed to have changed direction. "Oi, you're being rude! I thought we were trying to stick together more."

Nozomi raised an eyebrow. "I told you, I had a hunch...and it looks like I was right. Or does okonomiyaki sound like a typical beach snack to you?" she asked sarcastically, indicating a particular beach grill with her head. A heavy cast-iron plate had been fitted on top of it, several spatulas were hanging from one of the handles, and two pitchers full of a distinctive sauce were sitting next to it. The cooler sitting on the ground nearby was large enough to feed a number of people, but there were no indications of a party nearly that large.

Nozomi looked carefully at the spatulas as soon as she got up, careful not to touch anything. "Razor sharp. She's definitely around here."

"Who?!" Eri snapped.
Nozomi frowned. "One of Ranma's fiancées."

"...oh no."

Nozomi nodded. "And where there's one...chaos follows."

"I see you know my Ranchan pretty well," an ominous voice answered. "Toujou Nozomi and Ayase Eri of Mu's," Ukyo said, slowly turning around from where she had been nearby, smoothing out a beach blanket. "So, Ranma's finally come out of hiding, has he?"

Nozomi held up a hand to signal to Eri to let her handle things. "Ranma was not hiding. If you couldn't take an evening off to come see him, I hardly see where that's our problem."

"I have a restaurant to run, you know," Ukyo countered. "It's a little slow this time of year with everyone going to the beach and I decided to join in for a change, but that doesn't mean I can just give up a dinner rush just because."

"Oh?" Nozomi said, a bit impressed despite herself. "You mean to say that you're capable of running a restaurant by yourself at your age? I mean, you have employees of course, but to be in charge..." she smiled to herself at that. "Interesting."

"What do you want?" Ukyo asked brusquely. "Because I'd really like to enjoy my vacation."

"Oh, I just have one question," Nozomi said. "One little question...that's all."

Ukyo raised an eyebrow. "And then you'll leave me alone?"

"For today."

Ukyo frowned. "All right, ask."

Nozomi pretended to consider the idea, before she asked "What would you be willing to give up for your Ranchan?"

Ukyo blinked, staring at her. "Are you offering? I mean, seriously?"

"...maybe," Nozomi admitted. "Nothing supernatural about it, if that's what you're asking."

Ukyo grinned. "My restaurant. I'd happily give that up just to have my fiance all to myself."

Nozomi raised an eyebrow. "I hear you're pretty good. Would you really not be able to find work in a restaurant?" Ukyo spluttered at being so easily seen through. "Hang up the spatula. For life. No cooking except for your family for the rest of your days. Swear me that on your word of honor and I will do everything in my power to set you up with Saotome Ranma." She paused, and before Ukyo could respond, she added. "But don't even try to lie to me, or I will know."

Ukyo was stunned, as she had strongly been considering doing just that. "Wh...what do you know about it?!" She spat out. "I knew you were just pulling my chain. I bet you want him for yourself."

Nozomi grinned. "What do you mean? I have a wonderful girlfriend." And with that, she grabbed Eri, who had been staring at her in shock given the reputation the Nerimans had built up, and gave her the most passionate kiss Ukyo had ever seen in person, regardless of the genders involved.

Ukyo stared at the two, completely stunned. "wh...wha..."

Nozomi broke the kiss, revealing that Eri seemed to share much the same sentiments as the chef.
Unrepentant, Nozomi explained. "I'm giving my girlfriend a kiss. That's normal, isn't it?"

"Bu...but..." Ukyo shook her head out. "That doesn't change anything with Ranma."

Nozomi hmm'd thoughtfully. "I suppose it doesn't, except for one thing. Mine." She hugged Eri close. "And I don't want more than one. Good day, Kuonji." She turned around, pulling Eri away from the glowering girl.

Some distance away, Eri finally found her voice. "Have you gone crazy?"

"You keep asking that when you know the answer is 'yes,'" Nozomi pointed out. "But I had to do something or Ranma would have had to save us."

Eri rolled her eyes. "How about not provoking them?"

"Then how would I get to ask my question?" Nozomi asked, smiling in a way that suggested she was riding the boundary between serenity and madness.

Maki groaned. "Oh, for the last time, please just check the account!" Letting her frustration get the better of her, again, she slammed the printout down on the narrow counter. "You already said this was definitely your boss' email, and the receipt, everything's approved. Now either give us our keys, or let me talk to your manager!"

The argument had been going on like this for about thirty minutes now. Nozomi and Eri had yet to reappear, but the rest of the idols didn't have much choice as long as Ranma had the house keys and they were still fully dressed. So they waited. Honoka and Nico lounging back to back, Umi looking tempted to intervene, and most of the rest getting bored enough to start consulting their cell phones.

"I'm sorry, but there's no way this was approved!" the poor attendant said nervously. "There must be some mistake. There has to be an adult present at all times to take respons-

"Oh, we are not little kids!" Maki screamed. "That's it, get the manager, now!"

The attendant smirked smugly. "I am the manager."

"...not for long." Maki hated to do this. She really did, but her family were paying customers. Even if they didn't really need the lockers, it was the principle of the thing now. They were paid for, and even if they were just for the sake of appearances so Ranma wouldn't need to be involved in the changing process, she would get them. She picked up the phone and dialed the beach property's customer service number.

Suddenly, there was a hand on her shoulder, and Ranma was whispering into her ear "Yeah, let me handle this." Then, the redhead, who had changed both body and clothes at the house, stepped forward in her red bikini that flattered the rather abundant figure. Maki felt her cheeks redden and looked away.

And then Ranma turned on 'the act.' Her entire posture changed so that, already short, she was now all but peering up over the high counter. Her voice changed pitch, neatly matching that of some of
the most flirtatious women Maki had ever seen on television. In the window's reflection, her eyes seemed to sparkle. And, she realized, the attendant was getting a near-perfect view right down Ranma's swimsuit. "Mister, can't you please just let my friends have their keys. I promise that we won't be any bother."

The man didn't have a chance. "Uh...yeah...okay.." He swallowed and quickly slid an envelope through the slot.

Ranma grinned, but kept it up. "Oh, thank you." She turned and seemed to half-wiggle into the locker area. Maki felt an uptick of jealousy at the display, but silently followed behind.

Luckily, Umi was willing to be outraged on her behalf. "What the HELL was that?"

Ranma blinked in surprise. "What? It got us the keys, didn't it?"

Umi facepalmed. "Not. The. Point."

Nico grinned madly. "But you see, that's exactly what I was talking about all along!" Everyone looked at her. "...okay, not exactly."

Honoka shook her head. "Ranma, we...we'll talk about why that wasn't a good idea some other time. Just don't do it unless you decide you mean it, okay?"

Maki winced. Of course it was an act, she thought. Ranma doesn't like boys.

Umi was only slightly annoyed that Ranma had overruled her on the topic of the training schedule. That was, after all, her job. But what did annoy her was the way the entire day had been set aside for 'playtime.' It wasn't until tomorrow that they'd begin shooting for the video, and that only left five days. Less, given that they'd need time to do homework.

But even that couldn't hold up to Honoka's infectious enthusiasm.

So, instead of dedicated training time, here she was, splashing about in the sea that was her namesake with her friends, trying desperately to avoid being shot by Kotori with her squirt gun, and generally letting herself relax.

She backed away from a particularly large splash by Honoka, and directly into someone's back, who fell over from the impact and started flailing like she was drowning. Umi blinked, rolled her eyes, and reached into the water, pulling one Tendo Akane out. "What? What are you doing here?"

Akane spluttered for a few moments, coughing imaginary water out of her lungs, before she returned the surprise and irritation. "I could ask the same of you."

Umi narrowed her eyes. "Mu's training camp. Although it's the first day, so..."

"Uhh...yeah," Akane replied nervously, even as the others were gathering around. "Training trip, yeah..."

"...for what?" Eri narrowed her eyes suspiciously.

That was when a new voice, who most of Mu's quickly identified as belonging to Nabiki from the descriptions, cut in. "Akane, trying to learn to swim again."

Honoka blinked. "You passed the training? Congrat-"
Akane's hand lashed out in an instinctive flare of anger. Honoka was too stunned by the sudden display to dodge, despite earlier lessons… but when the hand hit, she couldn't even feel it.

"...oh. Sorry."

Akane thrashed about in the water, somehow managing to stir up splashes. "I can still move just as fast, and water didn't seem to be affected, so I thought maybe I could at least train my strength back by swimming!"

Ranma just rolled her eyes, finally catching up to the group. "Akane, it don't work like that."

Akane stiffened. "Wait, you're staying with them?"

"Wh..well, yeah," Ranma replied. "Got my own room on the second floor."

"Hmph," Akane snorted. "Like I care, but these girls deserve to be -"

Umi cut her off. "Let's just ignore them."

Honoka and Kotori made agreeing noises, starting to walk away. Eri waited a moment longer, then grabbed Ranma by the shoulder when the redhead seemed to hesitate. "If she's not going to be reasonable, you don't have to talk to her. We know you're an honorable person, so what if she wants to think otherwise."

Ranma blinked, and turned to go, looking thoughtful.

Akane snarled. "I knew it. You'll all just perverts."

Nobody moved, nobody blinked. Slowly, Umi's hand curled into a fist. "What did you just call me?"

"Pervert! Because you are!"

Umi turned slowly back around. "You...you dare. Umi said, slipping into a rarely used formal tone. "Maybe it's time to enlighten you, Tendo. Your 'school' is a joke."

"Akane hissed at her. "You have no students, two named masters, one of whom is currently under censure. Although how you were declared a master given the performance of an unranked student of a related school is beyond me."

Nabiki smirked. "Now now, Sonoda. No one talks like that about my family. Better stop now before you regret it."

"Or what?" Umi asked sarcastically. "Did you study?"

Nabiki blinked. Akane glared at her. She quickly ran through her options. If she lied, Akane would out her immediately. On the other hand, her involvement in the martial arts was more like an exercise regimen. She certainly didn't dirty her hands with fighting. "...a little, but I'm not a member of the school anymore if that's what you're asking," she settled on. Akane gave her a betrayed look, but she ignored it.

Umi smiled. "Fine, then your school has one member. Get him out here."

"Sorry to say this, but daddy's back home. You want to tender a formal challenge, use the back door."

Nabiki regained her confident smirk. "Fine."

Ranma stepped up. "Okay, okay, that's enough. You wanna settle this, let's do it here and now."
Nabiki blinked, and realized Ranma was serious. She looked over at the beach in desperation, and saw it. "Fine. How about a volleyball match."

Umi grinned. "You're on."

Ranma sighed in relief. *At least she ain't gonna challenge Akane's pop. That would be bad.*

"Oi, Rin!" Umi called out to the athletic girl. "I need you for some volleyball!"

"Nyaaaa!" Rin's excited cry came back from some distance away, making Ranma flinch.

Maki watched the proceedings with a carefully cultivated indifference. *Really, times like this I wonder what I see in that girl*, she thought to herself, before pulling out her own folder of blank music sheets and getting to work. *Someone may as well.*

She was so absorbed, in fact, that she barely noticed when the young woman slid into the lounger next to hers. When she did, she didn't even bother to look up. "You know, that chair's ours," she said.

"Oh, my," the calm, almost serene voice came back. "I thought you wanted to talk to me about my music."

Maki looked up at that, taking a minute to remember the photos from the few DoCo promotional materials. "Oh, right, you're Kasumi," she said. "I have to say when I asked I didn't expect you to be an ordinary homemaker."

Kasumi seemed a little amused at that. "And what were you expecting?"

Maki shrugged, flipping her folder closed. "A college student, maybe. A professional songwriter? Your stuff's *good* pop, you know."

Kasumi actually blushed at the compliment. "Oh my. How could I do that to my family? They'd practically collapse without me."

Maki snorted. "Might not be a bad thing, from what I've heard."

Kasumi just shook her head. "No, I couldn't do that. I'm afraid I've been taking more time off than I really should."

Maki sighed. "Well, it's a shame, in my opinion. A songwriter of your talents being wasted on not doing any songs."

Kasumi shook her head. "Maybe once the contest is over, but I don't know any bands who would perform them."

Maki shrugged. "I could point you at some people who would *love* to have your songs. Anything to stand out. Not school idols, I'm talking about the real thing. Club bands, that sort of thing."

"After the contest," Kasumi said firmly.

Maki nodded. "Suit yourself. If I could I'd try to get a career doing music in a heartbeat." She sighed and stood up. "Looks like that mess is going to take all afternoon. I'd better go get food for us."

Kasumi stood up as well, putting on her cover-up. "You know, I think I might join you. This is nothing new anyway."
The scene was set. Ranma was seated in the normally-empty referee's seat over the court, and the appearance of the beautiful redhead literally seated over the girls had drawn onlookers. Normally, they'd have been admiring the beautiful, scantily-clad girls, but there was a chill of menace in the atmosphere that seemed to have them focused on the game.

On the side of Team Furinkan, Akane, Ukyo, and Shampoo, with the ball already in hand. Opposite them, Umi had chosen Rin and, surprisingly, Nozomi to stand with her. Ranma stood off to one side. Both teams were glaring at each other, with a single exception.

"I'm nyat sure about this," Rin muttered, just softly enough so Ranma couldn't hear the cat-sound.

Shampoo stared at her. "You making fun of Shampoo?"

"...no?" Rin half-asked. "I always do that."

"Oh."

Ranma clapped her hands. "All right, all right. The rules are simple. Two-point lead to win, no contact." Ukyo and Shampoo snorted. "I mean it, anyone gets hurt, the one who did it loses. You do it on purpose and this becomes a real challenge match...between me and whoever did it, got it?" The two paled and nodded. "Good. Then let's get this over with so we can get back to our own sides of the beach. START!"

Akane tossed the ball up. Ranma bit her lip, knowing this was the moment of truth. The "ultimate weakness moxibustion" was something of a misnomer – the effects were remarkably inconsistent, but looking back on his own experiences he realized that it didn't actually drain the strength of the user. He wasn't quite sure how it worked, exactly, but he theorized that it created a subtle disruption in their ki flow, allowing almost any other entity with more ki than the natural environment to overpower them no matter how much strength they had, and also sapped their energy if they tried to use it against such a being. Hence, Akane could walk, push water, and even jump around, while Ranma could still move like his old self when he had been under the mark's effects. But ki could be a fickle thing. If Akane started subconsciously tapping hers, she might feel the effects of the moxibustion even trying to hit the ball.

The ball fell towards the ground, and Akane's arm cocked back for the serve. She hit...and it flew, high and true, over the net towards Nozomi. The third-year moved, blocked it, and set Umi up for a surprise spike back over the net, intercepted by Ukyo. The game was on.

The pattern quickly established itself. Shampoo found herself best suited to being on the defensive, for a change, quickly both halting the momentum of the shots and usually making a good setup for either Akane or Ukyo to return it. But, what they soon found was that, almost no matter how tricky they tried to be about it, Toujou Nozomi seemed to have anticipated their move and was already there, waiting…

Earlier, Umi has been stalking around looking for her third player. "Kotori, you're in the best shape out of any of us, except Maki." She paused, glancing over where their composer had been. "And she seems to have vanished."

Kotori shook her head. "I don't want anything to do with this fiance business."

"This isn't about that!" Umi practically shouted. "That little...she called us all perverts, deviants, and -"
"Don't take it too far," Nozomi's voice cut in. She was smiling, but there was a little edge to it. "Besides, I have a bit of a score to settle with Miss Kuonji myself. So I think I'll just butt in on your little match."

Umi raised an eyebrow. "Are you sure? This may not be martial arts, but at least two of them are like Ranma..."

Nozomi smiled placidly. "Oh, I'm sure..."

Ukyo saw that damned, big-breasted...no, Ranma likes her, I can't let myself think that way... Toujou was once again standing in the way of her spike. She's been doing this for four sets. HOW?! With no more time to consider, she aimed it to the right of the girl, only to have her dive in the direction she had picked, and barely manage to bounce it up perfectly for Sonoda's return hit. Umi hit the ball with a crazy spin, and it curved just around Akane's interception into the sand.

Ranma declared the point blandly.

"Ranchan!" Ukyo snapped at him.

Ranma immediately turned defensive. "Look, it was fair."

"It's not fair!" Ukyo moaned.

Akane was also panting. "She's cheating! I know it!"

Shampoo was in much better shape, but also seemed put out. "Is using magic. Seeing future, or something."

Nozomi smiled at them, although she was sweating profusely and grabbing a water bottle during the brief time-out. "I don't recall that as being against the rules, even if it's true."

Nabiki sighed. "Girls, please. That sort of ability can't possibly exist. Let's just get on with it. We've got work to do."

Shampoo glared at Nabiki. "Does exist! How she moving before we do?"

Nozomi's smile only got a little more strained. "Maybe you're just that predictable..."

Ranma sighed, adjusting her swimsuit. "Just get on with it. Ukyo, your serve."

Ukyo growled, picking up the ball and glaring at Nozomi. I can't hurt her, but that doesn't mean I can't take her out... She noticed Nozomi was at the back of the court. Rather than even try to get around her, Ukyo suddenly jumped up and "served" the ball with a hard slam. Putting a massive spin on the ball, when it landed it did so in the sand, kicking up a cloud that send Nozomi crying back in pain. Can't see everything, can ya?

"Ukyo!" Ranma shouted at her. "Do you wanna turn this into a fight?"

Oh, right. Ukyo scrambled back. "Ranchan, it was an accident."

The response was a raised eyebrow. "Umi, your serve."

Nozomi winced. "Ranma, I can't see!"

"Huh?" Ranma abandoned her spot at the referee's post, gently tilting Nozomi's head up. "Well, I
don't think you're hurt..." Eri was at their side by now, and Ranma gently put Nozomi in the blonde's embrace. "Get her to the drinking fountain, flush her eyes out."

Eri gave a quick, curt nod before whispering "Make them pay, Ranma. If you lose you'll never hear the end of it." Ranma paled and nodded while Eri took her friend off.

"But without Nozomi, we can't play..." Rin pointed out.

Umi winced. "No way, I'm not losing..."

Ranma gulped. "Well, I can't take her spot..."

Nabiki grinned at him. "Why not? I'll ref. Not like I've got a horse in this race..." Absolutely everyone glared at her. "Well, it's true."

Ranma sighed, climbing down. "Fine, but call it fairly or this deal's off and it ends up in the dojo. Trust me, Nabs, I've seen Sonoda-sensei fight. I wouldn't wanna call it now."

It took a minute for Nabiki to climb up the tower, but Ranma took Nozomi's place. She gave a sidelong glance to to Umi and Rin. "Get this done quick?"

Umi nodded, and served the ball straight to Akane, no longer feeling the need to be charitable. Amazingly, Akane still hadn't gotten angry enough to trigger the Weakness Moxibustion, and the game was back on.

Surprisingly, while intense, the match managed to stay mostly normal. Both Ranma and Shampoo held back on the insanely impressive things, holding out for a quick victory rather than trying to look impressive. Hence, the ball stayed intact, and the game, while intense, managed to stay off the internet as anything other than an exhibition of cute girls being athletic.

Until Shampoo made the mistake of looking at the crowd. Watching the proceedings, with a glare of disapproval, was Honoka, her blue eyes clouded with a sadness she couldn't identify. It was only a moment's distraction, but when dealing with Ranma, only a moment could spell the end.

Ranma did, indeed, notice the moment's hesitation and jumped up three meters, doing a front-flip and slamming the ball with her fist, more for power than control. It flew straight and true, and landed in the sand right in front of the Amazon.

Suddenly Akane was yelling. "Shampoo!"

The Amazon stood there, obviously considering. "Is stupid anyway. We go practice now, yes?" Akane and Ukyo stared at her as if she had grown a second head. "Not understand why we do this. Is waste of time."

Nabiki joined them. "I'm with Shampoo. Shock, I know," she drawled. "Besides, we've got better things to do today. Let's just get as far away from these..."

She was cut off by Ukyo with "Hussies."

"...yes, that." Nabiki sighed. "Come on, this isn't the time or the place. Besides, there's better ways to deal with this..." she concluded, giving Ukyo a significant look.

Meanwhile, Ranma was fending off a hug from Umi. "We did it! Geez, I didn't think they'd be that much of a pain," she said, elated. "That made today worth it."
Ranma groaned. "Anyway, I'm just glad it's over. I need to go check on Nozomi..."

Honoka managed to push her way through the crowd. "Ranma, was there any point to this?"

"Honor." Ranma's statement was simple, but final. "Yeah, Honoka...can we not ruin the rest of the day with this stuff? It was important, leave it at that?"

Honoka nodded. "I guess..."

There was a sudden, unexpected intrusion. "Ah...I believe this is yours," Kasumi said, holding up Maki. The girl was obviously insensate, with a huge grin on her face, and just flopping into Kasumi's. "I don't know what happened, but she caught the tail end of that match, and she just fell over like this."

Honoka blinked, peering into the kitchen to realize they had picked up an extra person. "Uhh..."

Kasumi had taken over the vacation home's kitchen, with pots and pans set out and gently steaming, a series of dishes where salads had already been set up and covered, with more dishes standing by and waiting. When the uninvited homemaker heard her, she turned around with a smile. "Oh! Maki helped me shop, and I noticed she was picking up convenience store food."

Honoka leaned against the door frame, glancing around skeptically. "So you...decided to cook for us?"

"Oh, I love to cook!" Kasumi said breezily. "Anyway, I'll be done in about twenty minutes. Would you mind setting up the table?"

"Right..." Honoka felt a little dazed as she turned around to set out chopsticks and napkins. She was about done when she heard a knock on the door. "Oh, honestly, who else even knows we're here?"

She set down the last set of chopsticks and headed to the door, opening it. "Yes?"

"Oh...uh..." Akane was standing on the other side. "Could I talk to you? Alone?"

Honoka glanced around, but on seeing no one, nodded and walked out into the night. They walked in silence out to the beach, quiet and shrouded in the light of the moon. They sat down on a bench, looking out at the water rather than each other. Finally, Akane broke first. "I...I'm really sorry."

"What?" Honoka nearly fell off her seat, she was so startled. "Sorry for what?"

Akane blinked. "For trying to hit you? For trying to slap you on the beach? For...for ruining everyone's day and getting caught up in that stupid honor feud?"

Honoka glanced at the other girl, trying to decide if she was sincere. "Tendo..." She trailed off, but then tried again. "Akane...do you understand how much your words hurt?"

"Huh?"

Honoka shook her head. "I know you really insulted at least two of my friends today." Her eyes grew hard. "And I don't mean Ranma," she added quickly. "Nozomi is one of the nicest, sweetest girls I've met."

"Hmph. That doesn't match up with what I saw," Akane said with a snort. "She's more perverted than Ranma." Honoka glared at Akane after that comment.

"Tendo Akane, what the hell? Seriously, you keep using that word!" Honoka tried to keep her..."
breathing under control, but it was an effort. "Do you even know what you're saying?"

"What?" Akane suddenly felt herself being put on the defensive, and she didn't like it. "They're both perverts!"

"How do you even know?" Honoka shot back. "Have you ever, even once since you met Ranma, bothered to find anything out?"

"Wha...it's obvious when Ranma's being a pervert!"

That elicited a growl. "Tendo Akane, Ranma has never, not once, done anything even the slightest bit questionable around me, or any of my friends. She even changes for gym by jumping out a window and running ahead of the entire school, then waits patiently for everyone to get done with the lockers before she steps in. Wearing a blindfold."

"RANMA IS A BOY!" Akane finally felt herself on more firm footing. "He shouldn't be in a girl's locker room, ever! He shouldn't be in that school of yours, if you can even call it that!"

"Did it ever occur to you…" Honoka said, her voice suddenly going much more quiet. "That it might make Ranma a better person to know both sides of things?" Akane flinched back as if struck. "He gets what it's like to have a boy looking in on you as you change, or fondle you in a subway, or even just want to buy pictures of you for...whatever." Honoka took a deep breath. "You didn't, did you? Do you think about anything but yourself?"

Akane stared, her jaw dropped. Honoka plowed onward, her eyes narrowing. "And that's to say nothing of Nozomi! You act like she's some kind of she-devil because she likes other girls and likes to flirt. Sometimes, she makes people a little uncomfortable, but she just wants to live her life her own way."

Satisfied she wouldn't be interrupted again, Honoka continued. "Is she a bit crazy? Yeah, probably. But she works at the shrine and tells people's fortunes, and even gives blessings out. Did you know that?" Akane shook her head. "Even more...you saw that volleyball match. Before Ranma, I would have wondered, but I think her magic might be real. And she uses it to help people with no real thought to personal reward. Is being a bit different so wrong you'd reject someone like that?"

"YES!" Akane shrieked. "It's unnatural!"

"What does that even mean?" Honoka felt herself starting to despair at ever getting through to this girl. "People around you change genders and turn into animals! You can normally smash things with barely any effort that I couldn't do without explosives!" Seeing Akane's fist ball up, Honoka quickly added "And that was taken from you, yes, by a moxibustion point!"

"Rub it in, why don't you?!" Akane snarled. "If I wasn't weak, I'd...

Honoka drew herself back. "'Kill me?' Akane bit her lip. "Go ahead. I'm sure you could find a bow or something." Seeing Akane go completely pale, she smirked. "Right. I'll just ignore that, then." Honoka's voice softened, intentionally. "I don't think that's really who you are Akane. But you have to get over that."

"Or what? I'll lose that jerk?" Akane turned her head away, muttering. "I don't even want him."

Honoka just rolled her eyes. "Keep telling yourself that, Tendo. I see this is a lost cause." She got up. "Good night. I think I'll go actually talk to people who can get through a conversation without an emotional crisis."
"Why are you doing so much for Ranma?" Akane asked. "Not that the jerk deserves it."

Honoka sighed. "Of course he deserves it. Everyone deserves a little love and understanding."

"Love? So you're admitting you like him then?"

Honoka groaned. "No, not like that. You people have a one-track mind."

"So does everyone else where that idiot's concerned." Akane countered. "If it isn't that, they're trying to kill him. Aren't you scared?"

"Tendo Akane, I'm terrified!" Honoka returned. "I have to check over my shoulder just to be sure I'm not being followed, and every day some crazy might come after me when Ranma isn't around."

Akane stared at her. "But...if you don't love him, why? It's not honor, you don't have any obligations. And if it's not love, then why?"

"Because she's my friend, Tendo!" Honoka took a breath to try to forcibly calm herself. "I don't get all this 'honor' stuff. I thought most of it went out with the Sengoku era. But in the real world, a friend like Ranma is worth all the yen, all the hardships, and everything in the world. Because I know, as long as I stick by her, he'll stick by me." She stood up. "And until you get that, I don't think there's anything else to talk about."

"What about honor, though?" Akane asked. "I may not like it, but Ranma's still got to marry into my family!"

Honoka sighed. "I don't agree, but if Ranma decides he has to I'll still be there for him. Good night, Tendo." She walked back to the house, leaving Akane behind. Once she got back inside, she noticed the trays for dinner had been set out, and with them, the condiment trays.

Wait, I don't remember setting those out. She was just about to grab the closest furikake bowl to check on the contents when she felt a pair of hands close over her chest, hefting and squeezing. With a shriek, she tried to leap forward, but Nozomi held her fast.

"Now, now..." the third year said chidingly. "We've only got so much time here. You should put those idiots out of your mind and get ready for dinner."

Honoka frowned. "You're one to talk, miss 'I have a score to settle.' And what was that about, anyway?"

"I wonder," came the rather breezy response. "But that doesn't excuse you holding up dinner."

Honoka glared over her shoulder. "I'm not going anywhere while you're doing that."

"Do you mind?"

"NOZOMI!"

She let the matter, and her hands, drop. "As you wish. But please, Hanayo's getting hungry."

The girls (and one boy) of Mu's returned from their own preparations for dinner, fully dressed for the evening in their traveling clothes, a bit of exhaustion from a day's hard play etched into their faces. They each took a seat at random, looking at the elaborate place settings in front of them before glancing at Maki in astonishment, with the exceptions of Honoka, Nozomi, and Maki herself.
The redhead smiled mysteriously. "I found us a chef. Just for tonight, though."

Umi sighed. "Maki, it's too much. How much did you pay her?"

She held up her hand. "Nothing, nothing. She actually volunteered." She raised her voice. "Kasumi, I hate to rush you, but the natives are restless!"

The homemaker stuck her head out of the kitchen door. "Just a few more minutes for the rest. Why don't you all get started?"

The girls looked down at what had been delivered already. Rice, a covered soup bowl, salad, and some tempura. "Let's eat!" they all called out the brief ritual, before a brief tussle for the furikake for the rice ensued – only four bowls for ten people just wasn't enough. It only took a minute though before everyone's rice had been seasoned to taste, with only Hanayo going straight for her rice. The salads were also all seasoned with dressing, and they settled in when Honoka clapped her hands. "All right everyone. I think Ranma wanted to say something."

Ranma swallowed his bite of rice and stood up. "Okay. There was a festival here last week. They agreed to keep the stage set up for us, but we only got it for five days. So, for Nico's PV we gotta get done first. We're gonna have more takes, but that just means we need to make a better video."

Honoka nodded. "A-RISE helped us out, but Tsubasa's not going to be that generous again. We're still competing for the top spots, and I want to see Love Live and save the school." She looked around the room, and noticed Eri wiggling in a distinctly uncomfortable way among the rapt stares. "Eri, is something wrong?"

The student council president visibly steeled herself. "Honoka, I'm sorry. I should have said something earlier, but I got some news. The board's...already made the preliminary decision to begin shutting down the school. Most of the teachers already got their notices."

The entire table was stunned into silence. Eri found her voice again first. "It's not the end!" she said, in a rush to clarify. "There's a lot of paperwork involved. Arranging paychecks and pensions and all that kind of thing, plus the trusts need to be paid out and so on. We're not completely out of time, but we don't have until Love Live to save the school."

Umi looked around meaningfully. "When will the question be settled?"

Eri quickly pulled out her phone, looking at the various dates on the calendar. "It looks like the Nationals round will be finishing up shortly after the decision is final."

"So we'll just aim to make the National round!" Nico declared. "We still have until after the school festival at the end of the summer, right?" Eri nodded. "Then that will be our biggest performance."

Ranma nodded, impressed. "Sounds like a plan." He took his seat. "Okay, now, seriously, let's dig in. If Kasumi made it, it's the best in Japan."

"Oh, Ranma," Kasumi said with amusement. "I'm sure there's better in the entire country."

"Ain't met'em yet." He said before shoveling some rice into his mouth.

That served as a signal, and the girls all began to dig in while Kasumi brought out the remainder of the meals. Nozomi's eyes, in particular, lit up a the grilled meats on display, and she greedily bit into one, before noticing that, beside her, Maki was already yawning. "Tired already? Didn't you nap enough today?"
"I don't know wh..." The redhead yawned again. Nozomi stared suspiciously, before she realized that Maki wasn't the only one yawning. Honoka was already leaning against Umi, who was threatening to collapse against Kotori next to her. Ranma seemed almost ready to nod off into his soup. "Wh..what?"

And then the room exploded into a rainbow of colored lights as Maki's fell back to the floor.
Chapter 14

A/N: Songs are “Silent Tonight” from the single of the same name, and “UNBALANCED LOVE” from the "Pure Girls Project" single. Author's Notes for Make or Break to date will be in my profile for awhile.

Rin blinked some sleep out of her eyes. The noonday sun was making her rather sleepy, and she just wanted to stay slumped over her desk, but somehow the sounds of the fish swimming outside the window kept waking her up, like the wind blowing just a little too hard. "Nyaaahhh." She let out a yawn, clutching her pillow more tightly to her head while she turned away, hoping the teacher didn't decide to take issue with her little nap.

...wait, fish outside the window? She cracked one eye open reluctantly. There, swimming happily in the sky, were a school of sunfish, happily glowing away and illuminating the sky. A golden, not naturally yellow but actually gold, beach with sapphire blue waters lay just beyond the school's fence, with nary a tree or skyscraper in sight. She closed her eyes again, everything being completely normal.

Then what she had just seen actually registered, and she sat bolt upright. "What the?" She tapped at the window, and the sunfish swam off, leaving the school room completely dark save the unnaturally bright, glittering stars.

"Whaaaa?!" she exclaimed, the noise echoing through the room.

There was a sudden knock at the class door. She spun, terrified at what she might see, but it was only Eri on the other side. The third year tried to say something, but all Rin could hear was an unnatural quiet. "WHAT! I CAN'T HEAR YOU!"

Eri said something else, then pulled at the sliding door helplessly. Rin got the hint, and tried to open the door herself. She looked down and noticed the turnkey lock was in the 'open' position, but tried it anyway.

The room filled with an earsplitting screech of an alarm, but didn't open. Eri seemed to have it even worse, slamming her hands over her ears and curling up as if in agony. Rin quickly turned the lock back into place, and waited for the Student Council President to recover. "I think we're going to have to break it down," she said, being careful to enunciate each word clearly. She had to repeat it three times before Eri got the hint, grabbing the door's opposite handle. With a bit lip, they simultaneously braced themselves against the frame and pulled, pushing with their legs to try to force the door open.

Which then slid aside with absolutely no effort, sending the both of them tumbling to the ground.

Rin recovered first, rubbing a bump on her head where she hit it against the ground. "What happened?" she asked, almost dreading the answer.

"I don't know," Eri replied, nursing a bruise on her arm "One minute we were all in Maki's vacation home, the next I was on the stage in my old ballet outfit." She gestured over her body, and Rin finally saw for the first time that the girl was, indeed, wearing a bright pink leotard. Dreading the answer, she looked down at herself in . . . well, absolutely nothing, and blushed heavily. Eri chuckled. "We can stop by the gym, there's some emergency uniforms in there. Assuming it's not as crazy as the rest of this . . . place . . . " She trailed off as the sunfish returned, and with them the daylight. "I just wish I could say I knew this would happen when we let Ranma start hanging out at the school."
"Who would?" Rin asked.

Nozomi groaned as she pushed aside one beaded curtain only to be confronted by the next. "Really, this place can just go to -"

"Nozomiiii!" Kotori's voice echoed. "I'm stuck!" Nozomi turned around to see, a few of the blasted things back, Kotori had managed to get herself entangled in them. The scent of incense was thick in the air, and the lights seemed to flicker with every step either of them took. Nozomi, dressed up like some kind of old gypsy fortuneteller in her long, hooded dress and veil (pulled aside so she could breathe) gently untangled the long strings of beads from the underclassman, currently wearing her winter uniform despite the heat of summer. "Th..thanks."

"Don't mention it," Nozomi said, looking around. While she could still see the small table with the crystal ball, wherever they were the room seemed to be nothing but an endless expanse of the damned things. "I'm curious, why did you dream up a fortuneteller?"

"Huh?" Kotori said intelligently.

Nozomi just shrugged. "Well, it's not my dream we're trapped in, and you're wearing the clothes you'd be caught dead in, so it stands to reason. . ."

"Eheheheh…” Kotori's nervous chuckle had her scratching the back of her head. "I was just wondering if I'd ever get a boyfriend."

Nozomi smiled, pulling out her deck and quickly shuffling. The Lovers were quickly pulled out. "Signs point to 'yes'. Now, let's get out of here."

"Eh?" Kotori was stunned as, suddenly, all of the beaded curtains pulled aside, revealing a pathway to a single school door. Without any hesitation, they opened it and walked out into…

"The school?" They asked at the same time, before a giant cat-demon bounded down the stairway at the far end of the hall. "...let's get out of here," they said in eerie sync, making for the exit.

The white limo turned onto the beach, and drove up the street carefully. Tsubasa, wearing a green sundress rather than her school uniform, looked at the pastries she had sneaked out of UTX's cafe with a fond smile, when she felt the vehicle slam to a halt. She slammed on the button of the intercom. "Driver?! Why did you stop?"

"Ma'am," Came the respectful response. "The address you indicated is having . . . issues. Please wait, I need to get you to safety."

Tsubasa thought back to that night with the 'poisoned' savory buns. "Shit. No! Stop the car! Do you hear me, STOP THE CAR!"

"Ma'am!" The driver objected. "You need to be aware of your place!"

Tsubasa was keenly aware of that. Her own friends at UTX would be counting on her. She was the lead of A-RISE, the face of her school. So why was she forcing the door open and jumping out?

Heck if she knew. All she knew was she was grateful that her driver took the hint and stopped the car so she wouldn't have to risk jumping from the moving vehicle.

When she looked down the beach, she saw what had spooked the man so badly. One of the vacation
homes was very much not like the others. It was as if a balloon had been placed over it, only somehow inverted, the three dimensional space showing a tiny Otonokizaka in the distance. But as she approached, it was clear that the school wasn't small, but rather, it was somehow equally distant from the edge of the affected area, regardless of what angle you looked at it from – even though this would place it well on the other side of the 'bubble.' "What...what is that?"

"That is the question," came the voice of an old woman from somewhere low to the ground. Tsubasa looked over, and down, and shrieked for a moment before the amazingly old woman gently clocked her on the forehead with its' long staff. Not hard enough to hurt, just enough to get her attention. "I'm not a ghoul, a mummy, an old freak, or a demon, so let's just skip that part."

"Yes'm." Tsubasa said weakly, feeling faintly as though reality was being pulled out from under her. "Ah, what is that?"

"For once, dearie, I haven't got a clue," the old woman admitted. "My name, as you Japanese tend to mangle it, is Cologne. Let's not bother with you trying and failing to get it right, either," she added. "I take it you know my Son-In-Law and his friends?"

"Ah...no?" Tsubasa said, still feeling a bit disoriented. "I was just bringing some snacks to celebrate their success with Honoka's video…"

Cologne actually gave a quick nod. "Yes, those are Ranma's new friends."

"...Ranma's a girl."

Cologne sighed. "I don't have time to brief you on everything, girl. And I don't know what caused this…"

"...what brings you out here, then?" Tsubasa asked warily.

"I sensed a magical power, far greater than anything seen in two ages of this world," Cologne replied mysteriously.

The idol's eyes narrowed. "You don't say…"

"Of course not, girl. This is a monthly occurrence where Ranma is concerned." Cologne chided her. "I just happened to be staying at the hotel with my great granddaughter and her charge and looked out the window."

Tsubasa winced. "Do you have any idea what caused it?"

Cologne held up a hand for silence. Tsubasa watched her suddenly bounce back and forth on her staff like a pogo stick, similar to pacing.. "Normally I'd assume this was some Amazon artifact first, but I don't remember anything going missing except for the Lotus-Apples of Hypnos."

"...apples?" Tsubasa felt a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach.

Cologne nodded. "Yes. A gift from some of our ancient sister tribes in Europe. Long dead, as far as I know, but a single branch on a tree in the Jusendo valley still allows the apples to be grown and harvested once every five years. By itself, though, it couldn't explain anything like this. When the apples are prepared properly with the seeds, you have a dream of your ideal world... of course, it lasts a few months if it's not interrupted. Very useful sleeping potion, but not much good for anything else by itself. I suppose it might have been mixed with some of the more common passion spices…"

Tsubasa felt her stomach drop further. Really, it felt like it was lower than her feet. "Are these apples
golden-skinned, and incredibly sweet?"

"Why, yes. How did you know that?" Cologne pogoed right up to her.

Tsubasa's eyes hardened. "Your great granddaughter is Shampoo?" When she got another nod. "She fed them to five of us a couple of weeks ago, in some sweet buns."

"Well, nothing unusual then," Cologne conceded. "Although she really does need to learn to leave other people out of it. Still, you seem all right. . . ."

"I don't think she added the seeds at the time," Tsubasa clarified.

Cologne paled. "Oh dear. That might cause the effects to be . . . unpredictable, but still." She gestured to the bubble of unreality where a house should be. "Nothing like that."

Tsubasa shook her head. "Honoka and Ranma are in there."

"Are you willing to take that risk?"

Tsubasa nodded.

Cologne eyed her carefully. "You're not exactly heroine material."

"I don't care. Those are my friends in there."

Cologne sighed, and shook her head. "I'll go get my granddaughter."

"You do that," Tsubasa said, staring at the miniature Otonoki . . . until the old woman had bounced off. Then, she took off running.

"I could get used to this." Nico had been saddled with a pair of khaki shorts and a survival vest over a tank top, along with a belt with two holsters and a variety of pouches. Hanayo was hiding behind her amidst the tall trees and low-hanging vines on the path leading up to a large Mesoamerican temple. Although Hanayo was pretty sure those things weren't habitually topped with giant skulls.

There was another sound rustling in the trees, and Nico quickly pulled out her guns, spun, and shot it straight between the eyes. The creature, whose features were just oddly ill-defined, fell out of the branches it was perched on and hit the ground before fading away completely. Hanayo yelped and jumped back. "Quit doing that!"

"Relax, it's just got to be some virtual reality game," Nico said calmly, looking over Hanayo's outfit. "Although why we got put in here in cosplay is anyone's guess." Poor Hanayo hadn't been as lucky on the outfits, having apparently been stuffed into a typical cheerleader uniform in Otonokizaka's cream yellow and blue. The outfit was now torn from where Nico had dragged her through some thorny bushes, although strangely there was no damage to the skin underneath.

"So – someone save me!" She shouted to the heavens, jerking her arm away from Nico, wishing above all else that she could get away from the mad third-year. Her arm obliged her, detaching just below the elbow. Both girls stared at the bizarre sight. There was no bone or muscle, just a smoothness at the two points where the limb had just separated from her body. It didn't hurt, not exactly, Hanayo reflected for a moment as she tried to comprehend what had just happened. Her hands squeezed tightly, and she screamed in horror anyway. "MY ARM!"

The scream was answered by one of pain from Nico. "Ow! You're squeezing so tight my bones
might break!"

"How can I be doing that when you pulled my arm off?!" Hanayo shouted back.

Nico winced. "I couldn't possibly be pulling that hard! I'm not Ranma!"

"GIVE ME BACK MY ARM!" Hanayo shouted. Nico, sensing this was not the time to argue, let it go and the first year was on it a second later, desperately holding it against the spot where it had once belonged. Incredibly, it fused back into place.

"That was weird," Nico summed up. "Let's get up to the temple there. They may have answers."

Hanayo didn't argue, just starting up the long flight of stairs two steps behind Nico, nervously glancing back at the jungle, but nothing followed them. Silently, they glanced at each other, then stepped across the threshold to the temple's only chamber...and found themselves in the first floor corridor of their own school.

"..."

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Eri stared up the stairs. "Harasho…." The reason for her astonishment was obvious. Blocking the way up to the roof was a glittering, swirling barrier of red, orange, and blue lights that seemed to fill the entire stairwell. Reluctantly, she pulled off her hair clip and tossed it into the field of lights, only to see it dissolve.

"I don't think we're going that way," Rin concluded. "Eri, I think we need to get out of here."

"Not without the others." Eri said firmly. "It's my job to keep you all safe."

Rin thought about it. "Actually, isn't that Ranma's job? I mean, she's the most qualified for it."

Eri grinned. "And I lean pretty heavily on her help, yes. But I'm still Student Council President, and so everything stops with me."

Rin nodded. "Until the end of the summer, anyway,"

Eri winced. "Right. I still need to figure out a replacement...but not now." She said firmly. "We've still got another two floors to...check?" Heavy panting could suddenly be heard, along with the slamming of feet running up the stairwell, until suddenly Tsubasa, wearing her sailor cap and the "school uniform" costume from her Private Wars video came into view. "Just another weird thing, I guess." Eri said dismissively, starting to walk down and going right by her.

"Hey!"

Eri gave her half a look. "I know you probably think you're Kira Tsubasa, but this place has all kinds of..."

Tsubasa sighed. "I just came to get my drones back," she said. "But with all this going on."

Rin shrugged. "Who cares if she's a hallucination or not, won't do any harm."

"Oh, thank you sooo much," Tsubasa groused. "Anyway, have either of you seen Ranma or Honoka?"

Eri considered that carefully. "No, we haven't seen any of the others...and a hallucination would probably just be congratulating us, so... okay, fine, I guess you're more likely than not real. Why
Tsubasa blushed. "Would you believe to see Honoka in a swimsuit?"

"...at this rate, yes." Eri groaned. "I think it statistically unlikely, but right now I've obviously completely cracked, so..."

"I wish it were just you, believe me. A monkey tried to give me flowers on the way up here." Tsubasa said. "And no, I haven't seen anyone else either."

"Eriri!" Nozomi's voice called out from the far stairway. "Kotori's just downstairs."

"Gotcha!" Eri called back. "We're in the central stairwell!"

"I hear you!" A minute later, Kotori and Nozomi had joined the trio, looking out the window to the courtyard where the sunfish had decided to start swimming in circles, alternately plunging one half or the other of the school into pitch night. "Does anyone know how we can get out of here?"

Tsubasa nodded. "Yeah, weirdly enough, the front gate. Just walk right out, down the path and you're on the beach. I even tested it a few times just to be sure."

Eri nodded. "Right. Nozomi, this is kind of your thing, what gives?"

The dark-haired girl couldn't do anything but shrug. "Beats me."

Tsubasa piped up. "Some kind of spirit told me something about the apple buns I had with some of you a couple weeks ago being some kind of poison, but she was confused about what could do all this from that. I didn't get the second part, so that just leaves Ranma, Honoka, Sonoda, and Nishikino."

Rin whimpered. "Poison? This is crazy."

"I would say you get used to it," Eri said, but then conceded "But I don't think that you should get used to stuff like this." She turned to Kotori. "Look, could you lead everyone out? Nozomi and I will sweep the school for the others..."

Tsubasa spoke up. "I think that's a bad idea. Now that I've seen how insane this is, I think it would be better to stick together. We should head out though. That spirit said she was coming back with some extra help."

Eri frowned, but found she couldn't argue with the logic. "Okay, fine..."

Hanayo followed after Nico. Her fellow idol nut seemed to have taken to poking her head into the classrooms, even though each seemed to lead to a deathtrap. "Why are we doing this? Why not just head out? What if the next door is just full of water? What if it's a volcano and we burn alive!? HAALLLP!"

Nico stared at her. "Because the front door is an obvious trap." Before Hanayo could get an explanation, she opened the next classroom door. Hanayo quickly recoiled from the disaster of... the sounds of conversation. Slowly, she opened her eyes to see the classroom was... an ordinary class, with the girls pulling out lunches and having fun conversations. The sun was shining brightly through the windows, giving the room a cheery atmosphere. Umi was apparently lecturing Honoka and Nico on some point of misbehavior while Ranma gently smoothed out the skirt of her uniform as she leaned against Honoka's desk. Nozomi was calmly reading Maki's fortune, as Eri watched the
cards carefully and a bit jealously, retying her blue ribbon. Hanayo and Rin were deep in giggling
gossip with some girls Nico recognized as being in second year, while Kotori and Tsubasa joined the
slowly growing group around Honoka.

The two girls in the hallway blinked at the seemingly ordinary scene among the deathtraps. Nico
looked up at her junior. "... does this seem off to you?"

"Yeah," Hanayo said, leaning in to peer around. "Why are we all in the same classroom?"

Nico frowned. "Not just that, we're in the same year." The two girls glanced at each other, unsure
about what to do. Then, Nico shrugged and shouted into the classroom. "Uhm, is anybody here
real?"

Rin looked up. "Of course we're all real!"

Ranma chuckled. "What's wrong with you two? Ya never head up ta the roof for lunch."

"Huh?" Hanayo blinked, then noticed that the other Hanayo had vanished when the girls in the room
took notice. "Uhm...it's a nice day out?"

Honoka blinked. "Uhm, no?" She pointed to the window, where storm clouds came ripping in at a
speed that simply didn't happen in the real world, and the rain started pounding down on the
window. "Come on, why don't you spend some more time with us?"

"Uh...I can't." Nico said uneasily. "I need to do the budget for the club?"

"Budget?" Umi asked. "What budget?"

Hanayo chuckled. "Well, we know Umi's fake."

Nico frowned briefly in concentration. "You're right. . . so is Ranma." She pointed to the skirt. "No
way he'd be caught dead in that."

"Whatcha talkin' about?" Ranma asked. "Got over that hangup months ago."

"HALT!" Another Ranma, also in feminine aspect, shouted at them. This one pulled Nico and
Hanayo's attention away from the door, and they stared at this new Ranma, standing way down at
the end of the hallway. Like the fake in the classroom, they were both fairly sure the real Ranma
would never be caught dead in this getup. In her red, silken halter top and extremely short skirt, plus
a set of bangles and chains draping her body, she looked almost like an Arabian princess apart from
her Japanese features. Her hair was worn loose, and her face was heavily made-up, especially around
the eyes. The lower half of her face was "concealed" by a wispy, see-through veil that did nothing to
actually hide any of her features. At her waist, though, was a jeweled scimitar with a deadly serious
edge that they could see even from down the hall. "The Sultana demands the sanctity of her palace
be respected."

Just to add to the chaos, the party from the upper floors arrived, including Tsubasa. The general cries
of confusion on seeing this other Ranma were shouted down. "More intruders! Draw your blades or
surrender!"

Surprisingly, it was Rin who came to her senses first. "Run for it!"

Eri was only shortly behind. "Go! The front door's clear!"
As they started to run, the hallway seemed to extend out ahead of them, becoming infinitely longer. "Wh-what's going on?!" Hanayo cried out, starting to fall behind along with Nico. Still, she was pumping her arms as fast as she could while the harem girl Ranma swung that sword at Amaguriken-level speeds.

Tsubasa wasn't looking back, but managed to get out "It's some kind of dream! It has to be!"

Nico ducked, feeling that blade slice through her ribbons. "The sword's real enough!"

"Submit and be escorted to the Sultana!" Not-Ranma shouted, but was mostly ignored.

Nozomi was the one who came up with the solution. "Just think to yourselves 'We're out of the school!'" While still running down the infinite hallway, the girls realized what Nozomi meant and focused...and then the front door slowly slid forward, until it was right in front of them and Nozomi ploughed through. Moments later, they were on the beach, panting and flopped over, completely out of breath.

"Well, now, at least you made it out alive." Cologne said, bouncing up and down and looking over them all in turn. "None the worse for wear, either." It was at this point that the Muses (plus one) looked around to note who had arrived. Surprisingly, only Shampoo had joined them, with her bonbori already out and a rather cool expression. "I'll ask you to wait here while Shampoo goes in to retrieve my Son-in-law and the rest of your friends." Eri raised one highly skeptical eyebrow.

Shampoo took notice of the gesture and pouted, speaking in Chinese briefly to Cologne. The reply was in Japanese, just to be polite. "Great Granddaughter, what have I told you about alienating potential allies? I will see all of them brought out safely."

The Amazon pouted, but dutifully took off into the phantom school without another word of protest. Cologne coughed. "There, now that that's taken care of...I already told Shampoo this, of course, but after speaking with her about what she used, I believe I know what may have happened. The Lotus-Apples of Hypnos could not do this alone, but if some of you might have been touched by magic in the past..."

Everyone looked at Nozomi.

Nozomi backed away uncomfortably. "Uhm...I didn't do anything," she said, raising her hands defensively

"Perhaps not consciously...and certainly not on your own," Cologne conceded. "Normally, something like this might take a great ritual, or powerful artifact."

"I think that might be my fault." It was the voice of a little girl. Everyone turned towards it...and saw a little girl, with scarlet red hair and shining purple eyes, standing just at the edge of the bubble leading into the dream world. "I'm so sorry...I just wanted to say something to all of you, but it all got weird when I had a chance to get out."

"Wh..what?" Eri swallowed. "Are you...Maki?"

"Uh...sorta?" The little girl didn't seem to know how to answer the question, looking lost. "But anyway, now you've got to get the others. I can't say it unless everyone's here."

"Why not?" Nico asked, obviously restraining herself from just exploding.

Cologne shook her head. "She's just a dream. She can't break her rules unless you convince whoever is dreaming her to change them."
"Thank you, Ma'am," The young Maki curtsied politely. "I've sent the guard back up to the roof, so you can wake the others up. But you'll have to be careful of the other dreams. . . "she trailed off. "I've got to go, someone bad's trying to break in." And before anyone could stop her, the little girl vanished.

Moments later, there was the sound of an explosion, and Shampoo came flying back out of the false Otonoki Academy, bowed over at the waist and without her bonbori. She landed on the sand and skidded for almost ten feet before coming to a halt. Over sounds of general dismay, she managed to stand up. "What...what happen? Was just about to open door to school, when. . ."

Cologne sighed. "It seems that the red-haired one doesn't want you present. . . or maybe one of the others. I'd go get Ukyo or Mousse, but I believe the results would be the same." She eyed Tsubasa. "Although why you'd be allowed in. . ."

Hanayo managed to squeak out. "Uh....where's Kotori?"

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"So, after school do you want to go watch the soccer match?" Honoka asked. "Or maybe I could get back into the Kendo club..."

"I'd teach ya," Ranma said easily. "Not exactly my favorite, but I know my way around a sword."

If the girl in the hallway was any indication, Kotori was forced to agree. But really, this whole thing was sort of silly. The lunch hour had stretched on, well past where class should start. Still, that told her what she wanted to know. And got her away from the crazy sword-lady. "Honoka. . . don't you think this is wrong?"

All eyes in the classroom focused on her.

"I know you're the real one, Honoka," Kotori said, unusually firmly. "And I also know this is how you want it to be, but you've never been one to stop trying just because things are a little rough."

"...but why should I want to leave?" the ginger asked, although the classroom was suddenly empty. "Everything's perfect here."

"But it's not real. You and I are the only two actual people, the rest would just be talking to yourself."

Honoka giggled. "I guess you're right. Usually Umi would be giving this talk."

Kotori winced. "Uhh...she's somewhere else in the fake school."

"Oh." Honoka stood up. "Well, let's go get her then. Where's everybody else?"

Kotori shrank back a little further. "We got separated. . ."

"Oh well."

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Eri realized quickly that everyone was looking to her. The "sensible" Student Council President. *Right, like there's anything remotely sensible about this. Still, I can do this. Just remember the school's evacuation plan." Right. Nozomi, you take Rin and sweep the first floor. I'll go with Nico and Hanayo to handle the second. When you get to the last stairway, head up to the third and start from the far end and work your way around to me. We'll meet in the middle stairwell. Check every classroom, every closet, and *don't get separated.*"
Nico glanced at the still-recovering Shampoo. "And what if we run into that sword-swinging loony again, huh?"

Eri shrugged. "Run for it. Or surrender, she'll probably take you to Maki."

Tsubasa pouted. "And just what do you expect me to do, huh?"

"..." Eri pinched the bridge of her nose. "Well, I can't let you go in there. We'd be blamed if anything happened to you."

Nozomi was the one who came up with the solution. "You take my cell, I'll take yours. We swap numbers, and that way if anyone tries to call up here they'll eventually ring my number and you can both explain things and hopefully help us coordinate."

"...will you even get signal in there?" Tsubasa seemed kind of skeptical of the idea. "Never mind, you're right. Someone needs to be on the phones, and I guess if I got in trouble it would be bad news for the rest of you."

"Right." Rin grinned. "Let's get going!"

Saotome Ranma stood in the stone doorway at the top of the stepped pyramid, peering into a shadowy stone entrance. He pulled out a flashlight and shone it around, strange symbols suggesting change and gender carved into the walls. "Welp, if I was in the market right now, this would be the spot," he admitted warily. Noting a skull on the ground near his feet, he practically rolled his eyes before kicking it down the long corridor.

The walls started repeatedly slamming inwards, all up and down as far as his light extended. "Yeah, this ain't right. Probably should just set up camp." He took stock of the surroundings outside, but it was just jungle, jungle, and more jungle as far as the eye could see. The only good place was right outside the door, which he could at least adapt to.

Not long after, a full campsite complete with campfire was perched rather precariously on the second-to-top step of the structure, up against the staircase to protect it from the sudden storms Ranma was sure would be sweeping through at irregular intervals. He also pulled a sandwich, strangely fresh, out to start snacking on while listening to the monkeys howl. "Guy could be all set here for weeks, if he wanted," he mused to himself, pulling out the ancient scrolls that he suddenly remembered were next to the sandwich.

He was reasonably sure he wasn't fluent in ancient languages other than Chinese, and even that was a stretch. After his pops had led him into one disaster too many (and, admittedly, at some prodding from his new friends) he had tried to spend some time learning, but could only recognize a few variant characters. Regardless, even he knew you didn't find structures like this one in China. Nevertheless, he could somehow read the notes perfectly.

With a shrug, he read them over again while eating his sandwich. No point exploring ancient tombs on an empty stomach.

With the various dangers the rooms presented, it didn't take long for Nozomi and Rin to work out a system. First, Rin would put her hand on the door, while Nozomi drew a card. Assuming the quick reading didn't come back with something terrible, Rin would open the door while Nozomi peered around for signs of their friends.

It all worked so well that by the time they found Honoka and Kotori, she nearly just walked on by.
After all, all it was was Ranma standing in her underwear – feminine underwear, at that, in an empty classroom. Rin choked while Nozomi blushed and stared. Ranma looked over her shoulder. "Eh, do ya mind? I'm getting fitted here!"

Honoka rolled her eyes. "Nozomi! Don't you think you're being a little forward?"

"What? She's hot," the third-year explained. "Uh…"

Kotori giggled. "We figured out this is a dream awhile ago, but Ranma's proportions are perfect compared to the real one, so since there was no way I can get Ranma to sit still long enough to measure her for costumes. . . . "

Rin stared at Nozomi in shock. "Wait, you're . . ."

". . . surprise?" Nozomi's tone betrayed her confusion. It wasn't like she bothered hiding it.

"Anyway…" Honoka waved a hand to dismiss the dream Ranma, much to Kotori's disappointment. "What's going on? How is it my dreams are all coming to life?" Nozomi and Rin quickly got her caught up. "I see. . . I guess that's why I couldn't just walk out? I'm the one holding this room together?"

"Something like that," Nozomi agreed. "I never heard of anything like this, so for now I guess we just have to go with what the old woman said."

"Okay...so how do I get out of this?"

Rin shrugged. "I usually try to pinch myself."

Honoka reached up and grabbed her cheek, hard. Suddenly, reality seemed to snap around them and...the classroom didn't change a great deal, except the sunfish were swimming around outside again. ". . .okay. Life's getting weirder. Let's go find the others."

Nico rubbed soot out of her eyes. "An active volcano? Really?" She coughed, a cloud of noxious gas leaving her lungs and floating down the hallway like a stray balloon. "Let's let the crazy martial artists deal with this."

Eri sighed, closing the door to yet another deathtrap of a classroom. "Wish we could, but Shampoo got kicked out. Or do you think the others would do any better?"

Hanayo glanced out the window. "I...I hate to say this, but aren't you both right? We should let the people who can handle this try to figure it out, but they might not get here in time and Maki doesn't seem to object to us."

Nico sighed. "It was just an idea." The red-eyed girl opened up the door across the hallway. When it didn't immediately explode, she opened one eye and peered in. "Huh...wait, this one's safe."

"Huh?"

Nico leaned in a bit further. The door opened up into an alleyway cast in an eerie blue light, the street beyond bathed in the neon midnight of Shinjuku, people walking up and down the street dressed in fashions that would have been right at home nearly thirty years ago. Black leather jackets were heavily favored, as were piercings. The strangest thing was the completely empty street.

An oddity quickly explained, as two men rode down the street on strange vehicles, all smooth lines.
They were almost like a fusion of motorcycle and a hovercraft, save without the restricting skirt, a yellow glow suggesting upward propulsion. But the two helmeted men on the hovercycles were wearing plastic armor, face-concealing helmets, and carrying spears tipped with glowing 'laser blades.'

Eri stared at them in shock. "Well...uh...."

Hanayo swallowed. "This is the only safe room we've come across on this floor."

Nico nodded. "Let's check it out."

"That was a fast reversal," Eri said.

Nico shrugged. "I'm not stupid. I don't think we should be doing this, but we don't have a choice, right? So let's get it done."

Rin opened the next door, ducking just in time to avoid having her head taken clean off by the swinging battering ram. "Not this one either!"

Nozomi frowned. "No, I think this is the right one."

"I do too," Honoka said. "That was dangerous to us, but to Umi or Ranma. . . "

Kotori nodded to them. "That probably just surprised whoever it was." She immediately stepped into the stone hallway, and onto a pressure plate. For a second, nobody moved. Nothing seemed to happen. "See?"

Then a boulder turned the far corner of the school hallway. The girls screamed in unison and ran into the "dungeon corridor", only daring to spare the briefest glance over their shoulders to confirm that the boulder did, indeed, follow them in.

Rin shouted "Whose bright idea was it to show Ranma those weird gaijin movies!?"

"Well, it's not like Umi would sit still for a romance!" Honoka countered.

"It came highly recommended!" Nozomi added. "And it was pretty good!"

Kotori screamed, taking off ahead with a cry of "Less talking, more running!"

There were more pressure plates triggering darts in the walls. Beams of sunlight functioned like primitive security lasers, somehow triggering the ceiling to collapse. Even more battering rams slammed through the walls, seemingly at random, threatening to crush them. The floor opened up in front of them, forcing them to make a running jump at the last possible second. But, somehow, the girls made it to the end of the hallway, plowing through the narrow doorway and slamming the heavy stone doors shut behind them.

"Oh, hey guys," Ranma's voice called out to them. "Mind the boulder."

"We noticed!" Rin screamed at him. "You've got dangerous dreams, Ranma!"

Ranma seemed to ignore her, examining the weird symbols on the walls. Nozomi frowned as they seemed to be shifting while she looked, but the boy seemed to be having no trouble. "Looks like there's a curse on this place to reverse gender, according to this," Ranma mumbled. "Just need to grab the central idol as a girl and I should be all set."
"...Ranma." Honoka walked over to her friend and put a hand on his shoulder. "You know it's not going to be that easy, don't you?"

"You call this 'easy?'" Ranma asked. "Did you miss the traps on the way in? Someone really didn't want me getting that idol."

"Yeah, but Ranma, it's you." Honoka smiled sadly. "For anyone else, this place would be a deathtrap, but is it honestly that hard for you?"

"Nah. By the way, you really should wait for me back at the base camp." Ranma said slowly. "I don't wanna switch anyone but me."

Honoka held up a hand to silence everyone else, before taking a seat next to the boy. "Ranma? I know you didn't ask for the curse. But you know this isn't real, don't you?"

"Real enough, isn't it?" he replied. "It might work."

Honoka swallowed. "Maybe." She sat down. "But... the problem is, we need you now."

Ranma glanced at her nervously. "What do you mean?"

"There's a crazy version of you out there," Honoka explained. "None of us can fight her. She's faster than Umi, and stronger. We probably need to beat her to save Maki from this."

Ranma turned from Honoka to stare longingly down the corridor towards the potential cure for the curse. "Did ya know the Old Ghoul told me that the best ways ta cure the curse are... well, better not talk about it. There's a limit to what I'll do, and the only sure ways to do it cross all the lines." He took a deep breath, then glanced at Nozomi. "What do you think? Is there a chance?"

Nozomi sighed. "I'll need to use the cards." She went through the usual routine, slowly, drawing it out more than necessary. When the card was drawn, she sighed. "The two of pentacles. The dilemma seems real enough. If we take the time to explore the temple, Maki or Umi could get seriously hurt. But... the cure might last past this dream."

"...dammit." Ranma pulled out a cigarette and put it in his mouth, shocking the girls. "Eh, they're made of sugar." He gave Honoka a long, pained look. "You'd never forgive me if I let something happen to them, would you?"

"...maybe," Honoka winced at how hollow her own attempt at reassurance sounded.

"... and I can't come back here, can I?"

Nozomi answered with "No, once you're out the temple will vanish, and this whole thing was an accident so we probably can't make it again."

"...dammit!" Ranma suddenly cursed. "Every goddamn time." He took a deep breath. "But... let's get going." He pulled Honoka to her feet. "I'm gonna be kicking myself later... but some people are worth it."

Eri stared up at the impossible structure. "Harasho."

The castle, atop a tall hill, was separated from the rest of the futuristic city by a pool full of dark blue, glowing water. Fountains dancing in the neon lights caused the whole area to light up, but somehow not disguising the walls that seemed to have been forged of metallic sunlight, with a roof covered in
tiles somehow made from silver threads. The castle gates lay open, wide enough to admit four lanes of traffic, with guards in blue armor similar to the ones who had been riding the hoverbikes earlier.

Hanayo gulped as her attention was drawn to the long energy polearms they were wielding, standing at attention. "Uhm...are we sure anyone's actually in here?"

Nico shrugged. "Only one way to find out..." She started making her way up the bridge, confident that the guards were nowhere near close enough to casually take her head off. She made it right up to the threshold before a number of ninja dropped in around her. "...ulp."

One of the guards shouted "State your business!" in an electronic voice.

Nico noted a sword blade at her throat and gently pushed it aside. "Uhm...Yazawa Nico here to meet with the lady of the castle, along with Ayase Eri and Koizumi Hanayo..."

The ninja vanished as quickly as they had appeared. "Why didn't you announce yourselves? Lady Ayase is always welcome in the Daimyo's court!" The three idols all mouthed 'Lady Ayase," but they were quickly hurried in through a small garden and into the castle's main chamber.

Ranma opened the flap of his tent and noted the halls of Otonoki beyond. He gave Honoka a rather skeptical glance. "All this was caused by an apple?"

Honoka was about to respond when one of the snaps on his shirt split open. In a flash, Ranma was through the door, snapping up into a ready stance and taking in the barely-clad vision of his attacker. He had been in one too many ridiculous situations to be paralyzed with laughter, which saved his life when the scimitar blade tried to bisect him. "You are not welcome here, intruder!"

Ranma finally smirked. "Never thought I'd get a challenge from myself 'till Nerima. Trust me, you're nothing special." He stepped right up to his counterpart, sliding easily inside the reach of her blade. "Kachuu Tenshin Amaguriken!" Suddenly, his arms blurred as he threw hundreds of punches in the space of a second.

Each one impacting against the wide surface of the blade. "No man shall set foot in the Sultana's sanctum!" Ranma suddenly found himself dodging a return Amaguriken - delivered by the sword. The real martial artist was forced to backflip away from the storm of blades, ending up almost fifty feet down the hallway. He tossed off a bullet of raw ki, only to see the girl bat it aside casually.

Damn, she's fast, Ranma thought to himself. And that sword....well, it's worth a try. "Oh, so you think you're something special 'cuz you've got a sword? Why don't ya fight without it?"

The dream Ranma seemed taken aback for a moment, but returned the smirk. "Very well." She returned the bejeweled scimitar to its' sheath. The two Ranmas approached each other again, this time both a little cautious. They exchanged a few short punches, and then the girl smiled. "You're slow."

"What?!

Honoka had peeked her head out. "No, Ranma!"

The dream girl ignored her. "Care to prove me wrong?"

"You're on!" The real Ranma responded. "KACHUU TENSHTIN AMAGURIKEN!" The cry was echoed, and they both started punching at each other and blocking, their arms, legs, and even bodies moving so quickly the ordinary viewers couldn't see more than a blur. But from the real Ranma's
perspective, it was all perfectly visible, a fight seen in high speed. A real battle was almost like a
dance, with each move falling into a natural rhythm. To speed things up, you needed to match the
beats of your opponent until you spotted an opening, and then you would win. It was a method that
served well when trying to coordinate the 'kata' of a dance.

The problem was, that wasn't the only way to lose. If you weren't fast enough, you would fall behind
and an opening would be created. Ranma felt himself falling behind. He reached into his reserves of
ki, trying to speed up still more to compensate for his girl side's natural speed, only to find her exactly
matching the increase. Of course, more than one way to win a fight. If it really is just like fightin' my
girl side, I'll be stronger and tougher, so...

Intentionally, he braced himself at the last second as his
defenses inevitably failed, instead pushing forward into a punch that he knew he would have to get
off despite being punched himself. Time seemed to slow as their two fists flew past each other.

The dream girl's punch hit first, and Ranma felt himself being propelled off his feet and down the
hallway like a bullet out of a gun, flying into the window at the end and cracking it in a circular
pattern.

"Ranma!" Kotori shouted down the hall, dismayed.

Honoka was no less stunned at the outcome. "Are you all right?"

The dream Ranma snorted. "You've been warned. Leave." As she turned away and vanished up the
stairs, the real Ranma groaned in agony.

By the time Ranma had recovered, he could feel his head being held up by someone while a blurry,
but distinctly carrot-topped shape was shouting something at him he couldn't understand. "Oh...hey,
did which way did Taro go?"

Rin blinked. "Who's Taro?"

Honoka sighed. "Guy who turns into some kind of monster the way Ranma changes to her other
form,"

Nozomi blinked several times. "That dream is that strong?"

Ranma managed to answer with "Ahh, he ain't so tough." It would have been slightly more
convincing if his eyes hadn't crossed to the point where he seemed to be simultaneously looking at
Rin and Kotori while trying to address Honoka.

"This is not good." Honoka glanced down the hallway where the phantom had disappeared. "If
Ranma can't beat her. . . "

Eri found herself being ushered into a tiny tea house with the others, easily curling up to fit through
the small space of the entrance. Inside, the only feature was the soft tatami floor. She forced herself
into the somewhat unnatural kneeling position to wait, with Nico and Hanayo also taking spots.
When the larger door opened, it was to everyone's surprise and shock that Honoka, her hair tied up
and combed ridiculously straight, was behind it. Wearing a plain apron over her kimono, she bowed
before stepping aside.

'Lady Sonoda's' kimono simply wasn't real. It couldn't be. Real cloth didn't shimmer like actual ocean
waves, nor did it seem to crash over the floor like the tide. Eri actually felt her throat go dry as the
younger girl took her seat. "Lady Ayase. It's good to see you," The blue-haired girl's smile
threatened to melt her on the spot, but Eri collected herself quickly.
"L-lady Sonoda," Eri replied, her voice only hitching slightly. "Erm...Umi…"

"Shh." Lady Sonoda's gentle smile held a rather unladylike promise. "Not in front of my servant. She's a bit sensitive, you know." Eri took that as her cue to glance at the door where Honoka was sitting, and staring at her jealously.

"Ahh...right." Eri swallowed down her nervousness. "You...what is this place?"

Sonoda's smile faltered slightly. "This is my city, of course. I assumed you came to congratulate me on my victory."

Ayase grinned nervously. "Ah...I fear I may have taken a blow to the head from one of the hovercyclists," she tried to say, but before she could go on Sonoda nearly dropped the whisk she had just retrieved.

"Well, then, I shall have my men line up for you at once!" the girl-daimyo declared. "He'll need to be executed, of course…"

Nico suddenly nudged her. "Remember, not real."

Eri calmed down, slipping back into the role. "Unnecessary. It was my own fault, but do remind me again. Your victory against whom?"

"Why, the Tendo clan, of course!" Lady Sonoda smiled. "Surely you wouldn't forget that. Weren't they your enemies as well? Or...of course, you were more interested in their Kuonji allies. Fear not, my armies swept them aside just as easily."

"Oh...of course." Eri nodded uncertainly. "Umi…"

"Nonsense!" Sonoda snapped. "Lady Ayase, are you well? You seem to be…"

Hanayo gently coughed. "Umi...uh, I mean, Lady Sonoda, are you feeling quite all right?" She squeaked, covering her mouth. "I mean, running a war must have been awfully hard on you…"

"It was exhausting, but without hard work, nothing gets started," Umi replied easily....too easily, and after a second even she seemed to catch it. "Wait…"

Honoka bowed respectfully. "I don't mind if you steal my lines, Lady Sonoda," she said, her voice both oozing deference and tinged with something more.

Nico groaned. "Umi, you've got to wake up. We may not have a lotta time."

"No," Umi replied, her voice suddenly quiet. "Everything's fixed in here. Everything's okay. The world's nice and organized and I never have to think about what those psychos will do to my best friend. I know it's not the world we all know, but it's fine."

Eri swallowed. "Umi, this isn't like you."

"Of course it is!" Umi screamed back. "Honoka's always been reckless, but now she's dragged us into something that will probably get us all killed!" The tea room began to waver around them. "I thought I was the sensible one, the one who could hold her back, but I can't, and she's going to get hurt or die and it's my fault!"

"No it isn't!" Hanayo shouted over her, stunning everyone in the room. "Umi, Honoka brought us together! I don't know why it happened, but we're all friends. Even Ranma! He may have his
problems, but... but..."

Nico continued before Umi could come up with a counter-argument. "Even if I don't like him, I saw him stand up for us today. He'll keep us safe from the loons till this gets sorted out."

Eri smiled. "And, really, if Honoka's not in here with you, is there really a point to this scene?"

"...no." Umi admitted. "I thought...maybe that really was her...but she's not, is she?"

"Probably not, no."

The tea room finally vanished, leaving an Otonoki classroom behind. Umi wiped off some tears. "Maki's on the roof....I heard her voice, telling me it was all right."

Eri swallowed. "That might be a problem...."

Tsubasa sat down on the bench, gently wiping down Shampoo's forehead with a cloth. The amazon had been laid out beside her, still unconscious from whatever had happened to her inside the bubble. Amazingly, so far the other residents at the property hadn't come to check on the thing, but by morning when they woke up it was inevitable that bit of good fortune would run out, and she wasn't looking forward to explaining why she was hours away from the training camp she was supposed to be at. She spent the time waiting poking away at the phone Nozomi had traded with her. At another busy signal, she was almost tempted to throw it to the ground in disgust before she remembered it wasn't hers.

Cologne shook her head. "Girl, what's your angle on this?"

"Who said I needed one?" the idol shot back. "But if you must know, I loaned Honoka some of our school's cameras, and someone's probably about to notice they went missing."

"So you came out here, instead of going to their school or Kousaka's home?" Tsubasa winced as Cologne punctuated her statement with a light rap on the head. "Are you after my son-in-law, or not?"

"If you must know..." Tsubasa replied acidly, rubbing her forehead, "I was more interested before I found out she's a guy, and I like Honoka more anyway."

"...well, that's all technically legal I suppose," Cologne mused, getting a weird look in reply. Before Tsubasa could ask what she meant, though, the phone rang.

Tsubasa winced, and noted the name of the caller. "It's Toujou's mother..." She picked up. "Uhm...hello, Ma'am. I'm Kira Tsubasa..." The phone's speaker seemed to explode with the sound of a parent in utter outrage. She hastily tried to explain, realizing this 'long night' had just gotten even longer.

Seemingly by coincidence, if that word could even be applied to this bizarre place, everyone gathered at the foot of the central stairwell leading to the roof. The strange cloud that had blocked their progress was gone, but instead the little girl who resembled the last of their friends was back, looking pensive. "I never meant for this to happen..."

Surprising everyone, Nico stepped out in front of the group and took a seat on one of the steps, patting the spot next to her. The 'young Maki' took it, staring at her with more than a little surprise. "I'm sure you didn't mean any of this, and it's not your fault." Nico's voice was unusually soft and
patient, and she gave the small girl a gentle, sisterly hug. "What's important isn't who's to blame. What's important now is that we have to fix it."

The girl sniffed. "That's going to be a lot harder. Maki doesn't want to wake up. I don't mean like the rest of you. She's running away into her dream."

Nozomi frowned. "Hence the guardian. The strongest person Maki knows keeping her safe. . . " Umi's wince at that went without comment. "What's she running from though?"

The young Maki frowned. "I don't know, but she's already pulled the nice woman down with her. This won't be like the rest."

Eri nodded. "Anyone who wants out, now's the time."

Honoka mirrored Ranma's trademark smirk. Kotori seemed to hesitate for a moment, then nodded with unusual resoluteness, prompting Rin and Hanayo to nod as well. Nozomi just gave Eri one of her little smiles, while Nico was the one to speak up for all of them. "Maki's our friend. If she needs someone to pull her back out and slap her, that's our job too."

Eri nodded. "Okay, plan. Ranma, can you keep that fake you occupied?"

Ranma grinned and nodded. "I don't know what trick she's usin', but she won't catch me that way twice. And I feel great."

"She didn't really want to hurt you," Nozomi said. "And in this place. . . well, physics applies even less than usual where you're concerned." She stood up. "And since now we know Kasumi's in there too, I'll focus on getting her out first."

Umi smiled. "And I'll do my best to help Ranma," she said. At the pig-tailed-boy's protests, Umi put a finger on her lips. "I know that normally that's a bad idea, but like Nozomi said, the rules don't quite apply here. If I'm getting in the way, I'll back off, I promise."

Ranma seemed to consider that. "Well, I don't like it but as long as you listen to me I guess we can try."

Honoka grinned. "Great! Sounds like we have a plan then."

Silently, they ascended the steps. When they reached the top, the door opened on its' own, revealing the roof of the school, but not as it had ever or could ever exist. The only thing that was truly the same was the tiles of the roof, but only half of them were still in place, the other half covered by a fountain with displays of brightly glowing water dancing about in an impossible display, lighting up the night beneath a sky that truly glittered like jewels. The safety bars surrounding the roof were now a gold filigree cage, delicate loops and whorls that stretched up towards the heavens before curving up to meet in the middle, a ring seeming to perfectly encase a silver moon that never moved across the horizon. Beyond the school wasn't the Kanda ward, but a whole city of landmarks from around the world – from the shores of America, to the great castles of Europe, to the palaces of China and Arabia, all lit up in rainbows.

They weren't alone, however. On a central dais in the middle of the fountain sat Maki, her eyes closed. While she wore a tiara, she was otherwise only barely more clothed than the fake Ranma. Surrounding her were faceless girls in similar attire, feeding her various little unidentifiable fruits while her closed eyes nonetheless scanned book after book in front of her. There was only one other person, trapped in a smaller cage on the roof. While she had the same halter top as the other girls here, Kasumi at least had the dignity of a longer skirt as she sat at the piano, playing away with
similarly closed eyes.

As soon as the last of them stepped in, the door slammed shut behind them, and vanished. Nozomi shot ahead, running towards the cage holding Kasumi, while Ranma and Umi came up just behind her to cover her approach. However, the guardian never appeared, and Nozomi managed to make it up and squeezed in between the bars with ease. "I've got this," she said over her shoulder, and Ranma and Umi spread out from there without another word.

Honoka couldn't hold herself back any longer. She sprinted away from the others and ran right up the bridge and onto the dais. "Maki!"

"Please, be quiet." The younger girl's response was quietly exhausted. "I'm busy."

Honoka felt the blood run out of her face. "Maki, what's wrong?"

"Working."

The others caught up to her, Eri barely catching the whispered word. "Working?"

"I have an empire to rule," Maki explained in that same joyless tone. "I don't have time for friends anymore."

"What are you talking about?" Rin practically shrieked. "Maki! This isn't real!"

Maki's eyes barely cracked open as she looked at Rin. The athletic girl found herself completely transfixed by those blank purple eyes. "You don't have to be afraid of it, you know. You're one of the prettiest girls I know. If you really want to help me, why don't you stay?"

Everyone else stared in horror as Rin's clothes seemed to dissolve into a copy of one of the other girls. "Wha...you think I'm…"

"Of course I do. I'd much rather spend time with my friends, but I have to do this. I have to stay here," Maki replied. "Please...if you want to help..."

"I...uh...."

Hanayo slapped her best friend. "Rin! Something's wrong!"

Rin didn't answer. Instead she stepped up onto one of the pillows. "Maki…"

"Maki! Give her back!" Hanayo shrieked. "Give back Rin!"

Eri put a hand on Hanayo's shoulder. "Don't!" she hissed, trying to be quiet enough that Maki wouldn't hear. "That younger version was right. Maki's way too dangerous to just provoke. We need to think about this...what's she really dreaming about?"

Normally, it was said that going into a fight believing you would lose meant you had already been defeated. Umi had had that drilled into her head by her father, and assumed Ranma was much the same. Never thought it was meant to be taken literally, though! ran through her mind as she ducked under the dream-Ranma's blade for what seemed the twentieth time in two minutes. She backed away and held out her hand, trying something, and found the energy naginata from her own dreamscape in her hand, bringing it around to block the next strike.

She was then holding a laser sword and a pole. Taking another step back, she twirled around to try to block the next impossibly-fast slash and, this time, the weapon was stopped. Umi felt her lips twist
up into a savage smile that would probably have scared Honoka. "You're not invincible. I can beat you."

The dream Ranma returned one of those trademark smirks. "You're going to try." Suddenly, all of the air was forced out of Umi's lungs by a kick to her stomach, and she felt herself go flying towards the ledge. Slamming the laser blade into the ground, she managed to arrest her momentum just enough to avoid going over the side.

Ranma, the real one, interrupted his counterpart's smirk with an actual kick to her head. "What are you paying attention to?" This time, Ranma had taken advantage of Umi's example. While he didn't bother with weapons, preferring not to use them, he had added a pair of heavier bracers to let him block the wicked blade that blurred into motion, throwing improbably dramatic sparks everywhere.

"You are not welcome!" the girl Ranma snarled. "Not in here, not now, not ever! I'm the only Ranma she needs!" A two-handed overhead swing slammed into Ranma's bracers, forcing him to his knees. "Get out! Go away and never come back!" Suddenly the dream was forced back by Umi's restored weapon. The pair traded slashes while Ranma stood up and tried to circle around behind, but he was quickly spotted and, to Ranma's eyes, she seemed to speed up even more, becoming fast enough to handle both of them at once effortlessly.

"That's not possible!" Ranma's eyes widened as he realized what he was seeing. "No one's that fast!"

Umi glared at him. "She's as fast as Maki thinks she is! We can't beat her on raw speed!"

"Go AWAY!" Suddenly, they were flying up into the air, the tornado of the Hiryuu Shoten-Ha carrying them upwards while sharp blades flew through it, cutting into their clothes without actually breaking the skin.

Ranma tried to focus on flying towards his current fighting partner, but Umi shook her head. "We're not going to die from falling! I'll be fine!" Ranma nodded and tried to concentrate, recalling one of his past fights when the Hiryuu Shoten Ha was used against him. He tried to sense the strands of ki in the attack, pull them in.

Nothing.

"You've gotta be kidding meeeeeeeee!" With nothing to grasp, the whirlwind couldn't be stop. Ranma felt himself carried up, out the top, and fell towards the roof. He tried to twist around to land safely, but there was his opponent, spin-kicking him off the edge. He managed to use another push of ki to avoid that fate, but he couldn't correct his course in time and slammed into the roof, creating a crater. "...oww."

Landing on her knees, Umi looked up at the scene as the dream Ranma approached the real one, sword held up high. Umi put on a burst of speed, impossibly closing the distance in the blink of an eye. Why can't we do this? It's not our fighting skills, she's just copying Ranma. She took a moment to dismiss the momentary uncertainty. No, we can do this, it's just... what are the rules?

Suddenly, she remembered. Saotome Ranma don't lose. It was something Ranma said it a few times. Maki was... "Ranma! Get to the fountain!"

"Wh...Umi, you hit your head or somethin'?"

Umi groaned. "Ranma, you can't beat her as a guy!"

"What the hell are you talking about?!" Ranma forced himself up unsteadily, watching Umi continue to hold off his doppelganger. "Are you crazy, what does it matter?"
"Maki's the one who sets the rules!" Umi shouted. "She won't let you win as a guy!"

Ranma groaned. "I don't get it!"

"Well, we're not making any progress this way!"

Ranma considered that, and ran for the fountain while Umi interposed herself between them.

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The cage seemed to drown out all the sound from the rest of the impossible rooftop, which suited Nozomi just fine under the circumstances. Kasumi's eyes were also closed as her hands flew over the keys of the piano, a brilliant smile on her face. It was an image that Nozomi had seen often, but not on the young woman.

"Kasumi, this isn't you," Nozomi's voice cut through the music. For a time, the length of the stanza, there was no reply, then Kasumi's smile settled into the well-practiced mask that was so familiar around the Tendo home.

The next words chilled Nozomi to her bone. "Of course it's not. But I'd rather keep Maki happy than my family."

Nozomi needed to give that some serious thought, but realized Kasumi was listening rather than go back to her playing. "You've already upset your family, but wouldn't it be so much worse if you didn't come back to them?"

"They deserve it!"

Nozomi choked. This was not the gentle person Ranma had described. "You realize -"

"I know full well what's going on, Miss Toujou," Kasumi cut her off, coldly but politely. "I gave my life to them for ten years, and they turned on me when I asked for a little consideration in return. Do you want to really know what happened to DoCo?" Nozomi nodded, feeling a cold chill creep around her heart. "I wanted to bring everyone together, away from all the fighting and the rivals. I couldn't convince Ranma's friends, but Akane and Shampoo would do it."

Kasumi seemed almost wistful. "I knew Shampoo was only doing it to spend time with Ranma, but that was all right. She kept to the rules, and I hoped we could eventually understand each other. She understood that, during practice, music came first. But then Ukyo arrived. At first, I wanted to add her, but she was only there because of Ranma and wouldn't listen. I sensed she was trying to take advantage, and sent her home.

"So she started trying to ambush us and blame it on Shampoo."

Nozomi swallowed. "But…"

"I don't know this part…" Kasumi said quietly. "I'm not even sure it was Ukyo, but… it didn't matter. I couldn't do anything to stop it while the whole mess spiraled out of control…"

Hesitantly, Nozomi slid up to the bench and put an arm around Kasumi. "You did what you could, but…"

"That's why I took the only chance I was given. I thought, maybe, if Ranma left the situation would fix itself, everyone would realize…" Kasumi began to gently sob. "I ruined them all…everyone's lives, their 'honor'… I couldn't fix it, and I was just making it worse by letting them…"
Nozomi gently squeezed her. "This isn't helping Maki either, though. Whatever is so terrible, she has to face it."

"I know." Kasumi said. "I know what it is she's running from. It all comes back to Ranma, but this time it's so much worse."

"How? And how do you know?" Nozomi asked quickly.

Kasumi blushed, gesturing to her outfit. "Something she said, and... this. It wasn't hard to read between the lines."

During the fighting, Honoka tried to shut out the mortal peril her friends had just hurled themselves into to think. Why is Maki like this?

The problem was the answers just weren't coming to her. This is supposed to be a happy dream, but Maki's not happy! Her eyes looked over the scene again. While the 'extras' were difficult to read, Rin had taken to smiling in a way that, if Honoka had known a bit more, would have told her the poor girl was clearly on something.

"Maki?" Honoka tried again. "What do you do on your time off?"

The younger girl actually glared at Honoka through closed eyelids, as if the very concept were demeaning. "Thousands of lives depend on my every decision, Kousaka. I never have time off."

Honoka felt the sting of the rebuke as if physically slapped. "But...I mean..."

"Shut! Up!" Maki growled.

It was then that Honoka remembered. "The trophies..."

"Huh?" Eri was startled, but quickly caught on. "Awards for her music?" Honoka nodded. "She thinks that her music is in the way of...the hospitals! Her parents must be expecting her to take over!"

Kotori found herself covering her open mouth. "But...Maki...without music?" It was practically unthinkable to any of them.

Nico found herself chuckling helplessly. "This...this is rich...she's got it all...and..." Everyone glared at her. "Uhm...can we talk about that another time?"

Honoka glanced at the fight unwillingly. "So what about..."

Nozomi finally stepped out of the cage, gently supporting Kasumi. The young woman seemed somewhat weakened by her ordeal, taking deep breaths and unable to shout what she wanted to say, but Nozomi picked up the slack with "It's Ranma! Maki likes Ranma!"

That moment, it clicked for Eri. "Hospitals rely a lot on donors. The best ones, well...their leadership needs to be completely respectable."

Honoka nodded. "No wonder..." She knew what to say now. She turned to Maki again...only to suddenly feel silken scarves wrap around her arms and mouth, yanking her back and away from the dais, then up into the air. The guardian had somehow managed to snare her and pull Honoka back into a golden cage hovering in midair, slamming the door shut.

"I'm sorry," Ranma's female voice said to her softly. "I couldn't let you do that."
Honoka blinked, righting herself and staring right into the false Ranma's eyes. "I know. But you know you're not real, right?"

"Does it matter?"

Honoka nodded. "It does….because dreams either come true, or they end. And I don't think you're the right dream for Maki."

"No...but you might be, my pretty dancer." Honoka suddenly felt a pleasant flush while the eyes of the girl in front of her glowed. She could feel her outfit changing, and knew what it meant...but somehow she couldn't really bring herself to stop it as she slipped off to sleep. In the distance, she thought she could hear Umi's voice calling to her, but it seemed so distant, so ... unimportant next to being a dancer in her Sultana's court.

Umi screamed and flew - literally flew, at the sole source of all her outrage. "GIVE HONOKA BACK TO US!" She threw aside her naginata, landing punch after punch on the girl, not caring about the damage she might or might not be doing. "GIVE HER BACK!"

Suddenly, she was being flung away from the red-head by a beam of light that suddenly snaked around her limbs to hold her in place. "I can do that too, you know. This is my mistress’ dream. She'll be the one to decide who wins here." With Umi captured, she turned towards the other girls, slowly walking towards them. "Don't worry...you'll all be very happy here…"

And then Ranma, the real Ranma, was between them, soaking wet but with her trademark smirk. She flipped her pigtail behind her shoulder and threw aside her bracers. "I don't think so. Want to try this again?"

"Sounds interesting."

The pair, now truly evenly matched, didn't bother with circling around each other this time. They each went straight for the amaguriken, no calling of attacks or even fancy flourishes, just straight up meeting each punch with a block and counter. This time, Ranma felt herself fall into the rhythm easily, matching each attempt with one of her own, only to have it pushed aside. She quickly tried to draw on her ki, and this time found the wellspring of energy available to her, pushing even faster.

A punch landed, and then another, before Ranma's clone started to fall back. "I'm...I won't..." the clone said, but Ranma didn't let her finish, landing another punch. This time, one hit her in return, but she wasn't sent flying. The clone sped up again, trying to beat her out on speed just like last time.

Ranma focused her confidence. I am better than this...this fake. Keeping all of herself focused on that thought, she let the doppelganger. force ahead, sliding her fist in...and this time, while the punch hit her hard in the solar plexus, it wasn't enough. She returned the blow with all of her superhuman strength....and then the false Ranma was sent soaring into the heavens, seeming to join the stars in the sky.

"Saotome...Ranma...don't...lose..." Ranma said, before falling to her knees. "But that was a close one."

Eri was by her side a few seconds later, propping her up. "Do you think you can get them down?"

Ranma glanced up, and tried to call upon her ki one more time, but shook her head. "No good. The rules aren't working in my favor, and I just feel all weird..."

Nico suddenly stepped into the cage, seeming to ignore how her clothes also began to change into the costumes that marked someone falling under the spell Maki's dream was weaving. She leaned
close, whispering in Maki's ear, something so quiet none of the others could hear. Finally, she pulled back. "Maki, if you give up this up, I'll track you down and smack you. Wake up!"

For a moment, nothing seemed to happen. Nico didn't fall asleep, but Maki's eyes also stayed closed. Finally, Maki said, quietly, "I won't keep you here if that's what you want, but I can't…"

Hanayo frowned, and turned back to Maki. "Maki, I want to tell you something. You don't have to say anything, you just have to listen to me, all right?" On hearing a slight 'hm' sound, she decided to take that as an agreement. "My mom was an idol. Back in the days before School Idols, I mean. She was the real thing. I still remember her performances back then, on TV and even once in person. I told her becoming an idol was my dream. Do you know what she said?"

Hanayo's voice cracked ever so slightly. "She told me that I was too delicate for it. That I'd never make it as an idol without being broken. She'd let me sing in the shower, or maybe do something for school, but I wasn't allowed to talk to agents or do anything to go in that direction." She caught Nico giving her a look out of the corner of her eye. "Being a School Idol...it's...it's like my dream is starting to come true, and it's the most wonderful feeling.

"Please...don't give up your dreams because of what anyone tells you. Because I want to share this feeling with all of you."

"But...my parents…"

Hanayo smiled. "My mom...when she heard I was becoming a School Idol...she supported me. Despite everything she said, she was happy. I'm sure, if your parents love you, they'll be happy for you too."

Maki's eyes cracked open. "I...I don't know…"

Kotori smiled and put an arm around her. "Then we'll be here for you. We're friends, right? I've followed Honoka on so many crazy ideas, and we've already helped Ranma. We'll help you too."

Maki's eyes opened, and the rooftop vanished around them, leaving all of them sitting at the dinner table where they had fallen asleep. No one dared move, for almost a full minute. Finally, Honoka pinched Umi's cheek. "Ow!"

Eri sighed in relief, letting out the breath she hadn't known she was holding. "It's over."

The door opened, suddenly, and at the front of a rather angry crowd was Maki's mother, holding a rather sheepish Tsubasa by the collar of her uniform. "Daughter, you've got some explaining to do…"

After being pulled aside and into her old bedroom, Maki found herself being hugged tightly. "Oh, Maki, when I heard what happened from Misses Toujou I was so scared! I didn't even dare tell your father! I know this has something to do with Ranma. . ."

"Has papa even met Ranma yet?" Maki asked numbly.

Her mother grimaced. "No. He trusted my judgment, but this is. . ."

The two held each other closely, mother and daughter, for another few minutes while Maki tried to organize her thoughts. "I'm sorry, Mama," she finally said. "I don't remember most of it. I fell asleep, and then. . . my memories just get all scattered, like I was watching everything on a dozen televisions all at once."
"It's all right, my dear," Maki felt her heart get crushed at the disappointment. "But we have to reconsider letting Ranma stay with us. . . "

"Please, don't!" Maki shouted. "She's not the one who did this!"

"I know that, but. . . "

"Mama," Maki pleaded. "If you kick her out now, there's no chance it will stop for her. I couldn't live with myself doing that just because it makes me safe."

"...we'll talk about it. For now, though, I'll be discussing this with that girl and her guardian."

---

Eri leaned against the wall, waiting patiently for Nozomi's parents to finish with their daughter. When the door to the beach house's music room opened, she shook her head at her friend's usual serene smile. "Finally showed them the guessing trick?"

"I was kind of hoping I would never have to." Nozomi admitted. "But I managed to weird them out enough that I'm not in trouble."

"Are they pulling you out of Mu's?"

Nozomi smiled. "I could have gotten away with telling them you're my girlfriend after that. So I did."

"Nozomi!"

Eri suddenly found herself being pulled into Nozomi's arms. "Don't. Maybe it won't last, but after tonight...isn't it better to just enjoy it while it lasts?"

The blonde girl found herself laughing. "Only you, Nozomi..." But, a moment later, they were holding onto each other. Just for a moment, then they let go. "Now what?"

Nozomi sighed. "Unfortunately . . . we wait for the adults."

---

Principal Minami was less than thrilled. Instead of a nice evening at home with her husband, she was suddenly called out to a town an hour outside of Tokyo by train to deal with a problem with her daughter's school club. And now she was confronted with the girl who had threatened violence against her school and the girl's . . . "I'm sorry, how many 'greats' was that?"

Cologne rolled her eyes. "That's not really the issue here, is it?" She sighed. "I can assure you, my great granddaughter will be punished for her role in this catastrophe."

"I telling you, I not do this!" Shampoo shouted defiantly. Cologne's response was to give the girl's head a good whack. Not only did a spice serving jar drop out of her blouse, but so did a single black rose.

Minami bent down to check them, but Cologne interceded. "Stand back. It's probably harmless, but you never know..." The ancient woman bent down and carefully tasted the spice. "Furikake. . . with the distinct bitter taste of apple seeds." Her eyes narrowed. "I'm very disappointed with you, but we can discuss that later."

"So if even you acknowledge Shampoo's guilt, tell me why I shouldn't involve the proper authorities?" Minami asked.

Cologne barked a laugh. "And tell them what?"
"Don't think you can get away with that card this time," Minami pointed out. "This isn't Nerima, and security here is really top notch. I'll bet at least one of the owners of these nice homes had a security camera that saw what happened. . . and will be happy to share."

"Perhaps," Cologne conceded. "But it will be a lot of hassle, during which you will make things for my great granddaughter even more desperate than they already are. You've seen the lengths she will go to unchecked, and the police can't protect your school from her if she takes it into her mind to go behind my back."

"Then what do you propose?" Minami asked, hands on her hips.

Cologne seemed to consider that. "Well, the moxibustion is out. If I used it on Shampoo, I would need to use it on Miss Kuonji and several others as well. Since I can't condone that. . . and I think you can agree that not doing so, which would be tantamount to a death sentence for my granddaughter and Miss Tendo, would be overkill."

"Then what will you do?"

Cologne smiled. "Oh, I have something in mind to keep her out of trouble." She turned to the girl. "Shampoo, it has come to my attention that your grades in Japanese class are atrocious. You will bring home grades that satisfy me that you are making progress in your language training, and until you do you will be sleeping in the cat carrier,"

Shampoo swallowed. "Y-yes Great Grandmother,"

"...is this like Ranna?" Minami asked, feeling slightly faint.

Cologne nodded. "Now, you have a decision to make regarding the future of my son-in-law's club, and I need to discuss things with Shampoo."

Minami bowed and departed.

Once she had left, Cologne smacked the lavender-haired girl with the staff again, much harder. "You idiot! What were you thinking?" she shouted, switching to the dialect from their village.

Shampoo winced, rubbing the slowly growing lump on her skull. "I remembered the story about Happousai's dream incense. I thought, once they were asleep I could kidnap them more easily and enter their dreams."

Cologne stared at her, shocked. "Half of me almost wants to call that progress. It wasn't as half-baked as some of your schemes, you had evidence to plant, and a reasonable end-game."

Shampoo blinked in surprise. "Wait, you mean, I didn't screw up?"

"Of course you screwed up!" Cologne smacked her again, scowling. "So far as I know, Happousai has no such thing. Even if he did once, the fact that you heard he had used it means he likely doesn't have it now. You tried this with no way to execute the last stage of your plans. Furthermore, you delved into magic you didn't research carefully, again. Shampoo, you do not know what you are doing, and that nearly led to disaster. It likely has, because something interceded here."

Shampoo blinked. "What are you talking about? I had no idea this would happen!"

"Exactly!" Cologne snarked back. "Before you use magic to try to solve your problems, you should at least have some idea of what might happen if things get mixed together. You're fortunate to be alive."
Umi had prepared herself to be yelled at, but when her father had stepped through the door, without her mother, it was almost worse. She had been taken, in complete silence, to another bedroom.

"My daughter, do you see now? Why I kept these things from you?"

Umi blinked, but suddenly understood. "Father, is this . . . normal?"

"Well, it qualifies as a very bad night," Sonoda-sensei said carefully. "But yes, this is the sort of thing that one might expect to happen once or twice in a lifetime."

Umi swallowed. "Father. . . I don't want to put my friends in danger, but tonight. . . I know it was just a dream, but I could move and fight like Ranma, and it was. . . "

"Careful, daughter," her father cautioned gently. "What you experienced tonight will take years for you to reach again. You have built a solid foundation, and have talent, but I can only take you so far in the time that you would need such abilities."

"I know. . . but. . . I want to do it."

Mr. Sonoda looked very grave, just for a moment. "Then, my daughter, we begin immediately. Sit with me and I will show you the first meditation. I give you permission to do this, and nothing else, with Ranma's assistance. I will show him how I want it done later. Practice every morning before breakfast, and every evening before you retire. When you can complete the exercise without distraction, we will move on."

Honoka felt herself pinned to the spot by her mother's angry glare. "I don't believe you! I . . . I don't even know where to start! So maybe at the beginning! You know you're not allowed to have boys in your room!"

"That's what you're yelling at me about?" Honoka felt her own temper rising. "Of all the things, you're mad about that?"

"I'm just getting started, young lady!" Kousaka Hotaru rebuked her daughter sternly, pushing her back into the chair. "And not just any boy, but a homeless delinquent? Minami may have taken pity on him in more ways than grains of sand on that beach, but you're my daughter! Your father's only staying at home because we need to have the shop open tomorrow!"

Hotaru snapped back up, starting to pace. "And then there was the so-called 'incident' with Tendo. I don't know WHY Minami didn't tell me about that, but you had to go to the hospital - "

"It was a clinic, and it was just a bump, mom!" Honoka countered. "I was fine! Tofu-sensei made sure I didn't even feel it!"

"I DON'T CARE!" her mother shrieked back. "We'll be taking the security tapes to the police in the morning, and you are coming home tonight!"

Honoka felt an ache in her chest. "..wh..what? But we worked so hard!"

"I'm not letting you out of my sight as long as those maniacs are anywhere near us! And that includes this...this...Saotome!" Hotaru's ranting was interrupted by a knock at the window. When they both turned, there was a strange old man perched on the flowerbed, gently tapping at the glass with his pipe. She was so stunned, she turned to Honoka. "Do you know this. . . man?"
Honoka nodded. "I've never met, but I've seen him." She opened the window. "Grandmaster Happousai?"

"So nice to meet a polite young woman for a change," Happi bounced in through the window. "Now, I couldn't help overhearing you talking about my student's mastery test, and I think you're right. This is getting a little out of hand."

"A...a little?"

Happousai continued as if nothing had been said. "I'm not against a few curve balls, but I can see I'm going to have to lay down some ground rules. I think I can get Cologne to agree, so here's the deal. If anyone else tries to interfere in the test by attacking you girls again, I'll show them their place myself. Normally, the rules of the school would allow them to challenge any of you, but you're not martial artists. So no more fighting, no more poisoning, nothing outside the scope of what you're being tested on?"

"Excuse me," Hotaru felt completely lost. "What test?"

Honoka decided to answer. "If we can get into Love Live and save the school, Ranma can become a Master of his family style."

Hotaru shook her head. "Even so, Honoka. . ."

"Mom, please!" Honoka all but whined. "She's my friend too. I know you can say no, but. . ."

Hotaru sighed. "Fine. But I want to see you, Grandmaster, ship these hooligan girls back to Nerima tonight. If I see them gone on the train or a bus, then you can stay. We'll discuss with your father whether your involvement with this club can continue. You'll get the decision when we get back."

"Yes!"

Hotaru shook her head. "But your solo study sessions with Ranma are over. Your father won't tolerate this now that he knows Ranma is a boy."

"Should I kick Umi and Kotori out too? And Maki?"

Hotaru blinked. "What does that have to...do...with..."

Honoka blinked in surprise as her mother trailed off. "What? Mom? What's wrong?"

Kousaka Hotaru slid to the floor, unconscious. Honoka hung her head. "Uhm, Master Happousai, you wouldn't happen to know any of those pressure points that cou-" she stopped talking as soon as she glanced in the old pervert's direction, only to see he, too, had fallen over. With a slight nosebleed. "Honestly..."

Ranma knew there was absolutely no way his presence could help the situation inside. Even Mrs. Nishikino had asked him to stay away while she talked to Maki. So, he had retreated to the small, fenced-in yard. And, as he usually would when there was nothing else he could do, he ran through a basic, stationary kata.

After the tenth or so iteration, Tsubasa's voice cut in. "Are you really the same as that cute redhead?"

"Uh...yeah," Ranma scratched the back of his head nervously, only to suddenly find a glass of water shoved into his hands. Seeing Tsubasa already had a steaming mug ready, he sighed and upended it
over his head, letting her briefly inspect the change before grabbing the mug in irritation and changing back. "So, what's it to you?"

Tsubasa chuckled. "Well, I am in show business. And it's come to my attention you're as much in charge of this lovable band of lunatics as Honoka, so I thought we could talk while everyone else is busy."

"That's one way to put it," Ranma grumbled, gesturing to a small bench up against the house before taking a seat. "I really screwed up."

"Not my take," Tsubasa replied easily. "You took three girls who were... well, they were talented, sure, but they weren't Love Live material by a long shot. Now it's two months later, and they've managed to get my attention."

"And now it's coming apart," Ranma shrugged. "Easy come, easy go, right? Story of my life." Tsubasa gave up and lightly tapped the back of his head. "Hey, what was that for."

"Have more faith in your girlfriend!"

Ranma grumbled. "Not my girlfriend. I don't know why everyone says that, but I ain't interested and neither is she."

Tsubasa grinned. "Then she won't mind if I kiss you."

"Only in that there's a psycho amazon who'll take your head off in the house," Ranma said, smirking. "And that's not a figure of speech."

Tsubasa's smirk only deepened. "And you won't mind if I kiss her?"

Ranma blinked in obvious confusion. "Uh...okay. Why would that bug me?"

Tsubasa considered this reaction for a moment. "You know what? I'm gonna leave that alone. It's way outside my league." Before Ranma could ask what she meant by that, she suddenly leaned in and gave him a peck on the cheek. "I'm hours overdue to get back to my own training camp, but at this point I'm going to get yelled at either way, so... guess I'll help you guys out one last time. You're on the right track to make it to the festival."

"Huh?"

Tsubasa chuckled. "You've got a ton of awesome music, everyone inside is in great shape. You've got rhythm, and all the talents to knock it out of the park. I'm amazed, actually. Most school idol groups would be lucky to have a songwriter. You've got a girl from the Russian ballet and a budding fashion designer, at a school as small as Otonoki? On top of already being solid at music...As long as you can hold them together, I'll guarantee you we'll be seeing each other again as rivals. And I'm looking forward to it."

"Same here," Ranma found himself grinning right back. "Heh. It's good to have one."

"No kidding," Tsubasa's grin got wider. "Last chance, Saotome. If you have any questions for your sempai, ask before I walk out of here."

Ranma just grinned. "How do we deal with being as famous as A-RISE?"

"That..." Tsubasa was taken aback for a moment, but then giggled. "Well, I'm sure you'll figure it out. If you're still having trouble when it happens? There, I think I can offer you some help even if
It was nearly dawn when Mu's was gathered into the main room of the Nishikino's vacation home. They knelt on the futons, heads slightly bowed, in front of a simple breakfast of leftover rice. At the head of what would be the table if there was one, Principal Minami sat next to Mrs. Nishikino, the other parents having taken the same bus back to the city as the Nerima girls as part of reassuring everyone they were truly separated this time. Everyone slowly ate in silence, and once the basic rice bowls were consumed, the principal coughed gently. "If I may have your attention..." Everyone stopped to look up. "In light of the agreement that has been reached with Grandmaster Happousai and Matriarch Khu Lon... I am only putting the School Idol Club on notice. Your budget is being penalized to pay for the damages to the Nishikino's property, in particular the penalties for violating the noise ordinance." Everyone winced - the budget wasn't exactly in great shape already, given the late formation of the club, but on the whole it was better than they'd expected. "However, I'm establishing some ground rules to prevent another disaster. If you see any of those three - " Ranma quietly raised his hand. "Mister Saotome?"

Ranma sighed. "I'll try to find photos of everyone to look out for. It's not just gonna be those girls, if things don't change after tonight."

"That will do," Principal Minami nodded. "As I was saying - if you see any of those Ranma will attempt to point out at any time, you are not to approach unless Ranma is present. I've been assured Ranma can handle them in a physical sense. There are to be no more secrets. I realize this was not the fault of any of you gir...er, kids, but if you had fully informed us of the risks we could have taken better precautions."

Mrs. Nishikino spoke. "Now that official punishment from the school has been taken care of... I just want to say that you're all still welcome on our property." Jaws dropped all around. "My concerns were for your safety. A beach house can be replaced, but your lives can't be. That said, next time you need a training retreat we have much better options. I think somewhere far from the nearest neighbors might be better..."

Ranma nodded. "All right, so we're still on?" When the adults nodded, he stood up. "All right. We've got a shoot to get to, and I don't know about you guys but I'm wide awake."

Rin blinked. "Well, nyow that you mention it..." she said, wincing as she realized she'd just put a feline inflection in her voice. "Sorry."

Nozomi nodded. "I feel wide awake too."

"I wonder if it was because we were 'dreaming' all night," Eri wondered out loud.

Honoka grinned. "Well, who cares? Let's get over to the stage and get to recording."

Ranma chuckled. "Right. You girls jog over there for warmup, I'll gather up the gear," As the girls cleared out, Ranma went over to the boxes to unpack. Once the doors had closed, he stood up and faced Mrs. Nishikino nervously.

The woman was tapping her foot. "Better. Ranma, I just wanted to say I'm... disappointed. I realize we aren't home much, but that doesn't give you free license to keep secrets from us. This was important. So before we talk about finding you somewhere else to live, I want to ask a question, and I need you to be honest. Why did you keep this aspect of your home life a secret?"

"It wasn't a secret," Ranma said nervously. "It just... ain't a big deal. At least, it ain't to me. I just
didn't think."

There was a long pause. "I don't suppose you're willing to talk to a psychiatrist."

"I ain't crazy!"

Mrs. Nishikino frowned. "There are more reasons to see a psychiatrist than because of crippling issues. However, you aren't our child. I could make it a condition of your staying with us, but I suspect you would just try to live on the streets again. So long as you understand one thing." Ranma gulped, but what the woman said was "I know that, in your life, adults have been largely useless. This . . . arrangement with your Grandmaster is the first time you've seen an adult try to help you without the appearance of an ulterior motive, and I realize you're probably questioning your good fortune. But I really, truly do want to help you. For my daughter's sake, if nothing else."

"Uhh….you do realize I ain't marrying her or nothing, right?" Ranma asked.

Mrs. Nishikino laughed. "If she wanted to. . . well, I wouldn't say no, but you'd have to ask her father. But no, Ranma," she explained patiently. "But you have to understand, Maki has been. . . well, withdrawn, for some time. You and your friends brought her out of her shell. She's honestly happier than I've seen her in years with your club. So, if it helps to think of it that way, my husband and I do owe you an incredible debt that we'll never truly be able to repay. So, for that, I really do want to help you."

Ranma nodded. "I can see that. And. . . well, I guess what you're doin' ain't much for you. No offense, but you got money comin' out the wazoo, and it ain't like the Kunos."

Mrs. Nishikino laughed. "Quite. Now, get your stuff and get going. You've got a P.V. to film."

__________________________________________

Everyone but Nico stared at the single duffel bag Ranma had just thrown down - most of Kotori's costumes would need a full suitcase for enough for all of them, so how could this possibly be everything? "Okay, I know Nico's been kinda secretive about this, but we gotta get into costume now." Nico gulped at the glares, which only got worse when she walked over and pulled out a small, filmy little thing and a skirt that was definitely too short for a toddler.

Predictably, the girls, even Ranma, erupted all at once. Even though Nico couldn't make out any of the specific comments, the overall mood was completely clear and she'd obviously missed the mark in not explaining things. She winced as the noise settled down into a very uncomfortable silence before she finally managed to find her voice "Look, this isn't all of Maki's costume. I picked stuff to go with your swimsuits from my closet. It was stuff from the old Idol Research Club, but . . ."

Ranma raised an eyebrow. "Why didn't ya say so?"

"Because the way everyone was yelling at me I thought you'd just...." Nico winced. "Uhm...do we have a backup?"

Kotori looked nervous. "Uhm...not as such...I could get something from another number, but you said you had this one."

Maki rolled her eyes. "Okay, fine, I'm up for it."

Umi's jaw dropped. "You mean dancing in our swimsuits?! I mean, Kotori, no offense but your costumes are bad enough! I absolutely won't -"

"I'm with Umi," Eri said. "I'm not sure this is going to be appropriate."
Nico winced. "Okay, look, you guys say I'm in charge of the 'idol business' stuff. Numbers and who's watching us and how to improve our popularity, right?" Seeing everyone nod, she sighed. "So far we've been doing good with the girls, but guys aren't paying as much attention. They're not usually School Idols, but they're important. Their numbers count just as much in Love Live as the girls do, after all."

"I don't care! I just don't want them looking at me!" Umi shrieked.

Hanayo was blushing. "I don't know. Nico's probably kinda right, but this is too much…"

Ranma held up a hand for silence. "Look, another costume...well, it's not an option. This is our big follow-up to the opening ceremony, everything's gotta be perfect. This time we've got a week, so how about if we run through it all four or five times today, dress rehearsal instead of tech, and we can watch all the still camera angles. If we go with it, this might still give us some useful footage. If we don't, at least we'll get a tech out of the deal. Put your stuff on and let's get started."

Surprisingly, the week proceeded with no further incidents. Everyone would wake up early, get to the stage they had rented to film, and run through the performance as many times as they could manage. With more time, Ranma insisted on really running them through the paces, and between takes he and Maki would listen to the music, or Eri would be consulted on the dance performance, until everyone was thoroughly sick of the song. Afternoons would be dedicated to watching the edited footage in the house, and then in the evenings they would go out for the portions of the song intended for nighttime. Finally, on the second-to-last night, they lucked out during the night shoot and got several takes in front of a fireworks show for a local festival, and the whole thing started to come together. The last day was dedicated entirely to getting takes for the rest, to ensure they would have something ready to promote their next concert.

As the sun set on the last day of filming, Ranma found himself leaning back in the beach chair hastily borrowed from the resort as the last few takes played. "All right, I think we got at least one good shot for everything. We'll pick up training tomorrow morning, and take the afternoon off," he announced to general cheers. "After that..." he continued once everyone had calmed down a bit, his voice dropping into a low tone of menace. "You are mine. That was way too many breaks! You've got to have the endurance to sing and dance for five songs straight when you anchor a set! Utterly disgraceful, that some of you still need three whole minutes between takes on this!" He held up his hand. "Hanayo and Nico, you don't have to feel bad, since you ain't been training quite as long. But you still got a long way to go! So tonight, get a good meal, and get some rest.

"Tomorrow, we set course for Akihabara!"

All nine girls let out one last cheer, then turned around to clean up their things. He sent the raw footage to Eri's email, the only one of them with the software to do the editing job, before snapping the laptop shut and sliding it into a backpack. He was about to pick up the chair to return it to the beach when Umi stepped up behind him. "Don't look now," she said. "But Maki looks like she wants to talk to you."

"Huh?"

Umi sighed. "Ranma, I swore I wouldn't talk about it, but please, don't hurt her over what I think she's going to say, all right? This is going to be hard enough on her without you making it worse."

And with that, suddenly he was face to face with the girl who had opened her house to him, looking up at him with all the usual coolness and sarcasm gone. Twirling her hair nervously, she asked with an uncharacteristically quiet voice "Ranma. . . can we get some cold water and go for a walk?"
Uh...why do I hafta be a girl?' Ranma almost asked, before Umi's words came back to him. Instead, he just reached for the last water bottle in the cooler and upended it over his head. Silently, they walked along the access road, past the amusement park, and onto a long pier. This far out, the lights of Tokyo seemed to form a second sun below the horizon to the north, and the resort only barely washed out the stars above. It was just like all those times Akane had expected her to say something. . . so why was Maki just standing there?

It took the younger of the two redheads nearly ten minutes before she could say anything. "L..look at me. I ask you all the way out here, and then I can't spit it out. Story of your life, huh?" Ranma tried to say something, but Maki turned around and put a finger on her lip. "No, Ranma. This...this is hard enough. I couldn't say this to you as a guy, because that's not who I see you as. I know it's wrong, but to me, this is the truth. This is the strongest, most wonderful girl I've ever met. Even if Honoka's a close second. But...I don't know what to say, now that I've finally got you here."

Ranma glanced around. The girls from Nerima were long gone, back to the city across the bay. It was unlikely they could get here in time. She looked back to the end of the pier, but there was no one in range of her ki-senses. Water could sometimes mess that sense up, but the old pervert was the only one who might interrupt, and he'd sworn not to. "We're alone," she finally confirmed. "If that changes, I'll let you know."

"Thanks." Still, it was another minute, before Maki finally worked up the nerve to begin. When she did, it wasn't words, but the beginnings of a song, one Ranma hadn't heard. Without the recorded background, it was fairly simple, a soft melody that seemed to cut through the night, mixing with the ocean waves and the twinkling of the stars.

If people did not rely on each other / Working hard would become a habit, right?
But just for a bit, I stop to a halt / I feel like it wouldn't be so bad
I close my eyes and see a floating face
Because it can't be me, you know
During the times we aren't together, I am also thinking about you
I want to embrace you tightly

"...Maki?" Ranma barely whispered, her emotions seemingly bypassed as the composer smiled, her voice becoming stronger.

A long time ago, "I like you and yet..." / I said that, but now, I still feel the same way
I never ask why it is like this / I want to convey this sweetness from my heart
Silent tonight...for you.

"Ranma...I love you." Maki said. "Just like this."

Ranma swallowed down. "As a girl?"

"Especially as a girl," Maki said. "I know it's just a curse to you, but to me. . . look at me, I'm babbling." She brushed at her eye. "I wasn't going to say anything at all, not with the test and your life and living together, but Umi was going to tell you at the end of the week anyway, and with that stupid apple everyone else figured it out anyway. . ."
Ranma sat down on the edge of the pier. "Maki, this is... well, it's weird to me, is what it is. Do ya really like me... as a girl? I mean, how does that even work?"

Maki laughed softly, with only a soft catch in her voice betraying the underlying tension. "I don't know. It just does. Besides, we have the internet, we can figure it out, right?"

"I guess..." Ranma sighed, her shoulders slumping. "I... I dunno, Maki."

"Hush," Maki said again. "I said what needed saying. You know. You need to know, with your fiance business. But I can wait."

"It ain't just that, Maki." Ranma pointed out. "Your parents agreed 'cuz they didn't think you were in love with me. If that's not true, honor demands that..."

"No..." Maki said, suddenly paling. "Please, don't make me tell them! They won't understand."

That caught Ranma off guard, but she shook her head. "Then I gotta look for somewhere else to live."

"But... but there is no one else." Maki pointed out.

Ranma sighed again. "All right. I'll stick around until we figure something else out, but until then..."

"Look, Ranma, this doesn't actually change anything," Maki tried to point out. "Yes, fine, so I want to do... certain things with you. Like kissing. But I won't. She laughed. "Isn't it funny. Usually isn't it supposed to be the boy saying this stuff?"

Ranma chuckled too. "Aincha turnin' that on its' head anyway?"

Maki blushed. "I... guess you're right."

Ranma turned around. "Maki... I can't answer ya right now," she finally said, quietly. "I know it ain't what ya wanted ta hear, but..."

"I'll wait, Ranma," the other girl repeated. "I don't want to be... them."

Ranma had no answer for that and, for once, decided not to have the last word. As she went back to the beach house, Maki reflected the night seemed a little darker for her absence.

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"It's fine," Honoka said. "I thought you might want some tea, or just some quiet company."

"Ya knew?"

"I guessed," Honoka admitted. "I wasn't sure..."

The pig-tailed girl quietly started pulling off her shirt, then blushed as she considered things. "Uh... are you?"

Honoka laughed. "Does it matter? It's me."
Ranma thought about it for a moment, then re-did the snap ties on her Chinese clothing pointedly. Honoka chuckled at that. "Okay. Yes, I like girls too."

"How did you... I mean, ain't it weird?" Ranma asked, obviously having some trouble grasping the very concept.

"How could you not know, with that curse?" Honoka asked.

Ranma just shrugged. "Well, there was this one time with Tsubasa," she caught Honoka's wince and elaborated. "Kurenai Tsubasa. Different person." Ranma took a moment to reorient. "He dressed up like a girl, but I thought he was just being weird and going after my girl side. The name doesn't help,"

Honoka sighed. "Right. As for the rest, well, father, mother, idiots." Ranma looked tempted to argue, but let Honoka explain. "I haven't looked into everything about it. I mean, I like guys too. Umi would probably yell at me for not thinking about it. But... yes, girls like Maki exist, and yes, they usually still get married to guys."

Ranma scrunched her nose up in disgust, although Honoka ignored it since she realized it was really only the inherent dishonesty that was bothering her gender-confused friend. "I think, for Maki, you'd be a godsend. After all, you're half-boy, and -"

"Wait, wait, wait..." Ranma held up her hands. "How the heck does this even work?"

"...eheheheh..." Honoka scratched the back of her head in a nervous gesture. "I haven't actually had a girlfriend before..."

Ranma laughed. "Maki didn't get it either."

Honoka shrugged. "Well, get out your computer and let's get on the wifi."

It was Nozomi and Eri's turn to take care of dinner, so they were busy chopping vegetables when the scream echoed through the house. It was a sound of primal terror, as though the one doing the screaming had just had just come face to face with That Which Should Not Be. Eri nearly dropped her own knife to run, but Nozomi held up a hand. "I think Ranma just got a bit of education on the ways of the world. She'll be fine in a few... well, decades, but there's no immediate threat."

"What could possibly make Ranma scream like that?" Eri asked, astonished.

But already, Honoka was staggering down the stairs, looking pale and shaken herself. "I'm gonna need some smelling salts...and Nozomi, can you make me forget the last four minutes of my life?"

"Sorry, doesn't work that way," Nozomi said, smiling mysteriously. "Besides, it can't possibly be that bad."

"We asked Google to explain how two girls can...can..." Honoka gulped. "It was... enlightening."

Nozomi did her best imitation of a martial arts master, lowering her voice to be comically deep and even. "Then meditate on what you have learned."

Eri sighed and went back to cutting vegetables.

The sun was now well below the horizon, and the moon already above, just the barest crescent
moon. Maki was sitting on the pier, her feet trailing in the water, fish gently swimming in the faint light of the city and the stars around them. Her stomach grumbled audibly, but she didn't head in. It didn't seem worth it.

"She doesn't like me."

Umi took a seat next to her, nearly startling her into the water. "When did you get here?"

"I've been waiting for you to notice me for ten minutes." Umi said softly, gently wrapping an arm around the first year's shoulder. "You don't need me to tell you what you already knew."

"Why did you make me do it?" Maki's voice was nearly cracking, but she just leaned in. "I could have just gone on pretending it wouldn't matter." Maki found herself being gently cradled. "My parents. What are they going to say? What are they going to do? I can't just... not tell them."

The answer was quiet. "I don't know. Maki, I don't know. But I do know you weren't being fair. Not to Ranma, not to us."

"I know... I'm so sorry, Umi." Maki's voice was quiet.

Umi smiled. "You don't have to be... look, if you're that scared of your parents, you and Ranma can camp out in the dojo."

"...is that a joke?" Maki's voice had a little of her usual self back.

Umi chuckled. "No. We do have some room, and father rather likes Ranma. It won't be what you're used to, but I think we can manage."

"Th...thank you for lying," Maki said, her voice a bit shaky. "But I'll keep it in mind anyway."

Umi laughed softly. "I wouldn't lie. Not about this."

With dinner so late, Hanayo retreated from the living room to a small office. She ignored the medical texts and turned the computer on. She was gratified to see the guest account had been enabled and quickly went to the Love Live web site. She started browsing for Mu's standing, but the front page caught her eye.

_Retro Idols Rock the Tokyo Stage_, the headline proudly proclaimed. Hanayo continued to browse while she waited for the video to queue, almost out of habit _The Love Live charts have been dominated in recent months by high-production-value groups like A-RISE. Laser lights, polished music, professional costuming, and fancy camera work dazzle audiences. The relative merits of the performers is hidden behind glitz and glamour more suited to professional groups. This gives magnet and private schools like UTX and Otonokizaka Academy with the budget to devote to club activities an undeniable edge. Until now, this has edged out deserving groups from less advantaged schools._

_Until now._

Hanayo felt her stomach sink as she read the next line. _Furinkan High School, a famous experiment in 'social education' providing disadvantaged children a chance to continue their schooling, has fielded their first School Idol group to vie for the Love Live festival next spring. DoCo, with a style inspired by decades past, has vowed to 'show them that a good song can outshine any amount of glitz.' While others have made such bold claims before, their first single and PV may give that boast some teeth._
Her stomach went from merely sinking to dropping like a stone as the video started. There, indeed, were the two Tendo girls, plus the Chinese and the chef Rin had gotten into that stupid volleyball match with earlier in the week. Their costumes were simple, consisting of colored leather jackets over last year's fashions. There was no dancing, no lights, just an empty school stage. As she listened, she realized that the article wasn't an empty boast – the girls in Ranma's life were good. But that wasn't what made her start to feel vaguely ill.

"Stop being so nice to me! It's a lie, it's all a lie…"

It was one of her songs. Well, technically the group's songs, but there was no mistaking it. *Unbalanced Love* was coming from the tinny, inadequate speakers.

"WE HAVE A PROBLEM!"
"Hey, sis!" Nabiki smirked as Akane opened up the door to her room, closing the beat up laptop. "Good job. Where'd you find those songs, anyway?"

Akane was practically beaming at her older sister. "Believe it or not, someone was selling them on a forum. And you told me those sites other than Love Live were a waste of time."

"Way to prove me wrong, sis." Akane ignored the slight trace of sarcasm in her sister's voice. "Go ahead and keep tabs, just remember the polls there don't count. We only win according to the official numbers."

Akane nodded. "Right. Anyway, thanks for loaning me the money. We've got all the songs registered, right?"

"Did it the second you handed them to me," Nabiki confirmed. "And forget about paying me back. I just checked the numbers and we're so in the running now. I'd have paid the money myself if I'd known we'd get this kind of publicity."

Akane felt as though the world had been rocked around her. After making sure it wasn't an earthquake, she tilted her head. "Nabiki, are you feeling all right?"

"Sis, it's called an 'investment,'" Nabiki explained patiently. "If we win, a few ten thousand yen won't make a difference in the long run. We'll all make a profit."

Akane hmphed. "We don't all care about the money, you know."

"I know, but it'd look bad if we don't split it. Image is everything in this biz," Nabiki explained. "Now, don't you have some training to get to?"

"Uhh...I kinda spent all my money on the songs," Akane blushed.

Nabiki groaned, and reached into her desk to pull out a couple of rolls of ten yen coins. Tossing them to Akane, she just said "This, you do owe me back when you get allowance next. No interest, though. You are family"

"Thanks, Nabiki," Akane said with only a little exasperation as she turned to head down the stairs to her early morning training against the machine.

Nabiki opened her laptop with a smile, checking over the private messages to her account from the simple forum. She emailed on a few extra music files and quietly deposited the payments into her. "So much more convenient than envelopes in a back alley," she practically purred to herself. "I really must thank 'Ucchan' for the idea." She switched over to her word processor. "Now, what next..." She smiled as she noticed a ping that a new PV had been published. The smile grew wider as she watched Mu's latest recorded performance. "Oh, Ranma, you're making this too easy...."

Maki was feverishly working the music software while Eri scanned in every scrap of sheet music and notes Maki had brought with her. Meanwhile, Ranma was pacing back and forth while Hanayo used a tablet to browse the web site. Nico, seated in a corner, had her phone out and had both earbuds cupped to one ear so she could hear the rest of the conversation. Umi was in a corner with Ranma's laptop, scrolling through the Love Live database.
"Come on, girls, what's the damage?" Ranma's voice was clipped, trying very hard to keep her voice from escalating into a shout. "How much did they get?"

Umi shook her head. "It's not good. Does everyone understand how the song registration works?"

Eri's head shook. "I'm afraid I didn't pay much attention."

"Right," Umi glanced at the dense legalese to make sure she had it right and that it lined up with the simplified explanations they obviously expected the students to use. "Okay, Love Live basically claims publishing rights for any original songs we want to use in the contest. That's not actually a bad thing, first, they handle all the paperwork to register the copyright. Then, they license back to us the right to use the club's budget to put out CDs and PVs to be sold in the stores that have a deal with the company. The big mobile companies get to serve up downloads too, from a special section of the store. Then, we get a portion of the profits given to the school. In theory, that goes straight back into our club's budget, but Kotori's mom has the final say since she's the principal.

"The downside..." Umi continued "...is that they have exclusive rights until everyone in the club right now graduates, and even after that all they have to do to keep the right to publish our school albums is pay us royalties that go up every year by a few percentage points." She glanced at Maki. "Is the rights thing why you didn't upload everything right away?"

"...yeah," Maki admitted. "That's ours, after all. I wasn't sure what kind of a deal we were getting."

Ranma sighed. "Okay, I sorta get that. Sure biting us in the ass now. What is the damage?"

Umi swallowed. "It looks like we lost about seven out of ten of our songs. The bulk ended up with DoCo, but it looks like they got about half and spread the other half around Tokyo."

Nico groaned. "Which means we can't absolutely prove it was them with just Maki's notes - those songs could have come from anywhere."

Hanayo. "Uhm...did they maybe get Maki's songs from somewhere else?" Everyone looked at her incredulously. "I know those girls weren't exactly nice, but..."

Umi shook her head. "I think we're better off assuming they did it, the question is WHY."

Eri sighed. "Where's Honoka, anyway?"

"Working with Nozomi on trying to fortunetell our way out of this," Ranma said. "It's a long shot, but she said it's what she can do right now. Probably right..."

They all went back to what they were doing after that. For a few minutes they were working in silence, before Nico finally came to her conclusion. "Well, I had to pay for a download of their album. The production values are awful even for low-end School Idols, but it's an authentic bad." At everyone's puzzled looks, she elaborated. "Old stage microphones, a keyboard that I'm pretty sure is from the 90s, and the person playing it is probably from the school's music program." There were even more quizzical looks. "Maki?" The redhead cupped the earbud to her ear, then nodded agreement. Nico continued with "A lot of other 'retro' groups use webcams and computerized music programs to fake it. I hate to say it, but they're going to an awful lot of trouble to back up their stage persona. It might just work."

Hanayo sighed. "It is working. They made the featured article, and we couldn't do that without Tsubasa's help. The message boards really like them, too. A lot of schools that don't have a real chance at Love Live are backing them right now."
Ranma's fist slammed into her open palm. "Don't worry. We'll think of something."

Hanayo coughed. "It's not all bad news, though. There's also a ton of schools and bloggers saying that they don't really have an idol act yet."

Nico smirked. "See? Persona is important,"

Umi gave her a sly look. "Maybe, but you kind of take it to extremes." Nico's only response was an indignant noise.

For a few minutes, they all went back to their tasks until, suddenly, Eri's palm smacked into her forehead. "We're being idiots. This was blatantly illegal. Why don't we just call the police?"

Maki frowned. "I don't think this would be something they'd really be concerned with. It's more about lawyers, and that would take a long time. We could still complain to the contest board."

"On it." Umi started typing. Work resumed, and it took about another half an hour for her to find the relevant passages in the contest rules. "Uhh, I can't make heads or tails of this part. The bit about the music is pretty clear, but it looks like whatever lawyer wrote this didn't expect it to actually come up."

Eri stopped what she was doing. "Let me," A few minutes of reading and she got the gist. "It's not good. If there's a dispute, whoever registered first is the one who gets to keep it for the contest, unless there's an actual legal ruling. I think. And for that we'd have to get the lawyers involved, and that's expensive."

Ranma sighed. "Umi, can ya print out our new playlist? I think we're going to just write off the stolen songs. Sorry, Maki, Umi, but it's crunch time and if we gotta pick between tryin' to prove the songs are ours and putting on a good concert, we're going to take the high ground." Everyone stared at her for that. "What?"

"I... have to admit that's not something I expected you to say," Eri admitted

"They're MY songs!" Maki shouted. Everyone stared at the outburst in shock, and she coughed. "I'll ask my parents about going the legal route, but we should probably plan on, at best, not letting anyone the use of the songs as originals. Including us."

"Well, better than nothing," Nico grumbled. "That would probably take them right out of the contest."

Umi sighed. "But then we can't use them either..."

"We can use them, we just can't claim them," Hanayo clarified. "A lot of School Idol groups mostly do covers...but that would be a big disadvantage."

"Yeah," Nico turned back to her own work. "We're at a disadvantage either way."

"We'll put that on the back burner," Ranma said, obviously thinking. "We can always do the stolen songs later, if we have to. Or if we want to make a point," She glanced to Maki. "That song out on the pier. Did they get it?"

The young composer started, then looked down at the ground. "I...I think so."

Ranma actually growled, startling everyone. Umi jumped back on seeing the other martial artist suddenly glowing. "I will not let them win."
Nozomi shuffled the deck, only to be surprised when Honoka's hand landed on top of hers. "Stop." It sounded so quiet, defeated, that Nozomi could feel her own stomach and heart drop. "Tell me honestly, Nozomi. Is there any way this will actually help?"

"...it might make you feel better," Nozomi said carefully. "But practically? No. What's done is done. You need a time traveler, not a card reading."

Honoka stood up. "I'm going to take a walk," she said softly. "There's nothing more I can do until I know everything, and even then, this is what Ranma's for."

"Huh?"

Honoka smiled sadly. "Eri's a dancer. She leads when it's time to dance. Maki's a musician. She leads when there's music to be played or singing to do. Umi's... well, amazing, but when it comes to poetry there's no one better, so she leads when it comes to what we sing about. Ranma? She's a fighter. Those... girls want to make this a fight? Then he can lead for awhile."

Nozomi swallowed. "What does any of that have to do with you taking a walk?"

"I love the sea. It reminds me of my best friend." Honoka's voice was barely audible now. "Since Umi's busy... I'll go be with the next best thing."

"Now I see why she wanted me to keep an eye on you," Nozomi said easily. "The moon's full tonight. Do you want to throw on our swimsuits and go moonbathe?"

"...is that a thing?"

Nozomi actually giggled. "It is now. Besides, that's not quite the Honoka we all know." A few minutes later, the pair were out on the beach, sitting on top of a heavy blanket. The night air was giving Honoka a bit of a chill even in the early June. The black water of the harbor moving just enough to distort the few stars that could be seen above, with the moon giving the whole landscape a romantic glow. "There, is that better?"

"A bit," Honoka admitted reluctantly. "...I guess this is decision time. Ranma's going to suggest tearing them apart. Umi's going to want to give up, even if she never admits it."

"Is that what she wants, or what you want her to want?" Nozomi replied easily. "Honoka, they're all crazy. No one would blame you for calling it off right now."

"Ranma would."

Nozomi smirked. "No, I don't think so. There's only so much we can do. There would be no shame in simply walking away from this, letting Ranma get back at them the way he does best and forgetting the contest."

"And then the school closes for sure, Ranma can't get out from under the Tendo's thumb, and they win anyway," Honoka said sadly. "I know the stakes, but if we lose, or leave another opening for them to mess with us it's all over anyway!" Honoka turned over and nestled herself up against Nozomi for a bit of additional warmth, pulling the blanket around herself. "I wish Tsubasa were still here."

"So you're holding a bit of a torch for A-RISE's lead singer, hmm? How would Umi feel about that, I wonder," Nozomi teased.
Honoka looked at her in complete bafflement.

Nozomi stared back, slowly realizing that, somehow, Honoka did not get the problem - or even that there might be one. Still, at the moment that was a problem that didn't need to be directly dealt with. "Well, this is a bit of a surprise. I think we'd better keep focused on the contest, though."

"...uh, yeah?" Honoka's bafflement only grew.

Nozomi gently pulled Honoka closer. "You realize there's nothing to this but us staying warm, right?"

Honoka chuckled softly. "At least without Eri knowing about it, right?"

"Something like that."

"It's just nice to know you're not always out to feel up a girl."

Nozomi laughed. "For tonight, I'm just your lovely big sister."

For a long time they sat like that, Honoka taking simple comfort in the older girl's embrace. When they finally broke off, Honoka was smiling again. "I think I know what we're going to do about this now." She paused, looking at Nozomi long and hard. "Tell me, did you suggest 'moonbathing' just to get me out here like this?"

"Well, I'd be lying if I said it wasn't a little game I wanted to play with Eri some time on this trip," Nozomi said, a hint of her usual mischievousness returning. "Shall I broach the idea of a threesome with her?"

Honoka blushed heavily. "You mean you've already done . . . that?"

"Nope!" Nozomi said simply. "Just wanted to see you blush about it."

"Gyah!" Honoka didn't pull away but she gave the older girl a dirty look. "You're - " she spluttered, trying to think of a word before reaching for one Umi might use. "You're incorrigible."

"That's what Eri says. Must be a good thing if two amazing people agree!"

"Nozomi!"

Kotori sat at the sewing machine, the room it was in on the second floor. With everybody else in a panic, it felt like the only thing she could do was stay out of the way. So instead she worked on the new costumes. It was a particularly good one, with the double-skirts where the under-skirt had to be completely invisible...but all she could think about was Honoka, out on the beach alone. Except for Nozomi, of course.

She looked down at the first attempt, and sighed. There was only one way to know if it worked, and Ranma's... whatever seemed to be contagious. No help for it, though. She pulled off her nightgown.

The door opened.

Rin stopped, and rubbed her eyes. "Oh, costume." she said, as if it took her a moment to figure out why Kotori was suddenly in her underwear. "...wait, what are you doing?"

"What I can right now," Kotori explained. "Mu's is still going to need costumes. This is about so
much more than just the school." She quickly finished pulling on the skirt and top. "The only way out is through."

"Huh?" Rin said as intelligently as she could.

Kotori shrugged. "Honoka's never led us in the wrong direction before, but...well, when we were little, there was one time she wanted to climb a tree. It was so high, even now...but she led us right up to the top, the highest branches that would take our weight and then some...the branch cracked, and broke. Me and Umi nearly died."

"Wh..what happened?" Rin asked, sounding almost afraid of the answer.

The ash-blond girl smiled warmly. "The most beautiful sunset I've ever seen." She stood up and put a hand on Rin's shoulder. "If you want to leave, no one would blame you, but I want to see where Honoka's leading us now."

"Right." Rin turned around. "I guess I'll make everyone some tea."

Just as Ranma was opening the office door to go retrieve everybody, Honoka came in through the front. "Ranma!"

"Honoka, I..." Ranma started at the same time, then smiled. "You first."

Honoka smiled weakly. "I know you're probably going to want to fight to get the songs back, but..."

"Won't lie and say I didn't think about it," Ranma's response surprised her. "But it won't do any good. This ain't the Art, right?" Honoka blinked in astonishment. "If the contest guys won't accept a duel as a resolution, and they won't, well..."

"So..." Honoka swallowed. "What did you decide to do?" Ranma silently passed her the new playlist. "That's...thin."

Hanayo peered over Ranma's shoulder. "Well, it's not more than a lot of groups have, and Maki can do more, right?"

"Right." Ranma half-turned around to look at the girl who was now sulking at the computer. "We're counting on ya." Maki smiled weakly in response, and Ranma looked back at Honoka. "See, nothing to worry about."

"Right." Suddenly, Honoka covered her mouth to hide a monstrous yawn. "Wow, it's really late. We should have been in bed hours ago."

Ranma smirked. "Not letting ya out of training in the morning."

"Nuts."

Akane screamed at the infernal 'Wack-a-Ranma' machine as, for what seemed like the millionth time, she made a mistake at the 250,000 point mark. "How many months of this and I'm nowhere close!"

She felt a tap on the back of her skull that threatened to send her tumbling to the ground despite the lack of pain. She turned around, then looked down to see Happousai standing there. "What do you want?"
"Just checking in to see how you're doing." The old man tapped out his pipe as he contemplated. "The game was brilliant, actually. If it was Ranma having this problem."

"What-" Akane spluttered. "I can do this too."

Happousai's voice rose in a mockery of the girl's. "How many months of this and I'm nowhere close!" It returned to normal as he explained "It's only been a few weeks, by the way." His eyes narrowed. "Have you made any progress?"

"Why do you even care, you old letch?"

Happousai seemed to go quiet for a little bit, before he said "Making up for a century of lost time, I guess?" He seemed to shrug. "Anyway, if you can't make any progress on this, you'll have to try something else."

"I did want to try something else!" Akane screeched in protest. "I wanted to do the Heaven Blast training!"

"And again you're trying to train like Ranma!" Happousai snapped at her. "When it is perfectly clear to anyone looking at you that you are very much not Ranma. Or Shampoo. Or Ukyo. Or even Sonoda!"

"Oh, don't you dare compare me to that little...little...flooz."

Happousai actually laughed out loud at that. "Would it surprise you to know they're all virgins? Every last one?" Akane tried to babble out another protest, but Happousai's pipe was suddenly at her throat and her vocal chords wouldn't work. "Don't try to contradict me on that one, missy."

He hopped around the video game machine a few times, seeming to contemplate it while Akane fumed at him. "Seems almost a shame." Then, he pulled out a small explosive, about the size of a cherry bomb, and tossed it into one of the concealing holes. Akane's silenced cry of alarm and protest went unheeded as the loud crack went off, followed by smoke pouring out of the game's mechanisms. "Right. You wanted the Heaven Blast, you've got it. I'll go smack some sense into your father, and you go see Cologne and explain it to her."

He bounced off, leaving Akane still fuming. At least give me my voice back.

"Come on, what's wrong!?!" Ranma barked at the girls, who were flagging behind her slow (well, for her) jogging pace. "You're not going to let them beat you, are ya?" They barely managed to keep up, and Ranma was grinning madly. "You know what comes next." Slowly, the Muses got down and started their pushups, situps, and other exercises. The martial artist took advantage to set down the cooler and grab a drink, as she'd been up much earlier, to watch. But something wasn't right.

Nozomi seemed to be more easily distracted than her usual. Rin was carefully matching Hanayo's pace while whispering encouragement to her friend, rather than going all out as was her usual custom. Honoka was doing her best to smile through things, but it was obvious her heart wasn't in it. Kotori wasn't even trying, looking extremely pensive. Even Eri and Umi seemed to be lackluster in their usual zeal for the more physical aspects of training. And Maki…

Maki was the only one keeping to the usual pace, but her expression was curled up into an angry snarl as she pushed her fists into the sand. Her purple eyes were glittering with something that Ranma had only seen in Ryouga at his absolute worst, and the lost boy frequently tried to kill her.

Ranma swallowed nervously, just glad the girl's ire wasn't directed at her but quietly made a discreet
gesture to Umi and Eri. The two came over, still panting from the exercise they were getting, with questioning looks, which she only answered by quietly jerking her head at Maki. "What do you think?"

"I think this isn't the best day," Umi said simply. "Why don't we take a day off?"

Eri looked like she was thinking for a second, then nodded. "It's not like I want to waste the day playing on the beach after all that's happened…"

"Agreed," Umi's reply was tinged with resignation. "But I don't think everyone's up to this today."

Ranma seemed torn, but watching Honoka's smile falter in the middle of a crunch finally won her over. She nodded, then turned to the group. "Okay, everyone. That's it. Get a drink." There was a general din of confusion. "We ain't getting anywhere," he explained. "We could finish up exercises, but everyone's exhausted. So...yeah. Day off while I pack us up."

Honoka pouted. "Pack up? We've still got another four days!"

Eri gave the pair a long look. "Should we really end the trip early like this?"

Ranma shrugged. "We ain't. We'll relax, take a day off, spend the night chilling, then call it early. Besides, we need to get on this, and that means we need two concert venues."

Maki forced herself to her feet. "Right. I'll get to trying to write some new songs. We don't have quite enough for two concerts that close together."

Honoka grinned, and then suddenly grabbed Maki. "Oh no you don't! Last time we took a day off to play you spent it under the umbrella. We're getting you out for a proper swim!" Maki was about to protest when Rin took her hands. "Right! Let's go!"

The three ran off to the water while Nozomi shook her head. "So what's the plan, chief?"

Ranma frowned. "I've got a list of places Tsubasa apparently told Honoka to try. I was gonna call'em."

Eri glanced at the boy meaningfully. "You'd better not change back, then. They'll be expecting a girl calling."

"Yeah, yeah…" Ranma groused, but she couldn't find any argument.

Maki felt herself being dragged through the surf, stumbling around while the more athletic Rin and . . . enthusiastic Honoka dragged her forward. She was about to protest when someone else - Kotori judging by the sound, plowed into her from behind. "Guys, stop!" Everyone stared at her as she felt her fist curl up. "I don't even have my swimsuit, and anyway . . . this isn't really my thing. I love you guys, really, but . . . "

Rin pouted as she spun around on one foot, seeming almost crazily off-balance before she righted herself. "Maki, you spend all your time holed up in the music room and not talking. Now we're finally ready to have fun - "

"This isn't 'fun.'" Maki cut her off. "I mean…"

Honoka pouted at her, leaning down to make sure they were eye-to-eye. "Okay, what is fun, then?"

"Writing music," the redhead replied evenly.
Honoka frowned. "What else? I mean, I want to have fun with you. I love the beach, but there's no point if you're not enjoying it…"

Kotori seemed equally puzzled. "Plus we probably shouldn't be doing idol stuff today. That's the whole point, isn't it? Try to relax?"

Maki just sighed. "I know, I know, but…"

Honoka smiled broadly. "Well, if you just want to hang out quietly, maybe we could go see a movie."

Maki thought the suggestion over for a moment. "Well, we could do that anytime, or anywhere, right?"

"Yeah, and it's not anytime, or anywhere." Rin pouted. "This is our vacation, and even if we're cutting it short we should make it special."

Honoka seemed to think. "There's probably an arcade around here…"

"Akiba," Maki countered. "If I liked arcades I could go anytime."

Kotori pouted. "There's everything in Tokyo, though. Except a beach, and that's…"

"Yeah, nothing like what Maki would like," Honoka said sadly.

Maki grinned weakly and looked out over the water. "Guys, I appreciate this." Everyone seemed startled. "Really, no. It's great. But I think I just need to - "

Honoka shook her head. "No. You've had a hell of a week, but I don't think you should just close off." She held up her hands to wave off the incoming protest. "Really, there has to be something we can do that you'd enjoy together." She seemed to think for a second. "Wait, what about that time you went to the amusement park?"

Maki blushed. "Well, I was just...you know, bored."

"You were hoping we'd invite Ranma too," Honoka replied in a slight deadpan.

Maki groaned. "Well, yes, but I wanted to go as a group then. But today I'm just... not up to it." She sighed. "I don't get it. You guys just spending all this time together, all the time…"

"Right. Then we'll watch a movie." Honoka grinned. "As long as you're buying?"

"Don't push it."

Honoka chuckled weakly. "Right, right. I'll go get…" she slowly trailed off, seeing Maki's slight smile turn a little more brittle. "Would you rather not bring everyone?"

Kotori smiled and gently took Rin's hand. "Come on, let's go tell the others. They'll worry."

Rin blinked at the sudden change in mood. "Uhh...okay."

Honoka's grin turned even brighter as the very confused first-year was dragged away. "Uhh…okay."

"Uhh…" Maki tried to sort out what had just happened. "Shouldn't we get dressed first? We're still in our workout clothes."
Oh, right.

Umi watched as the groups split off, and Honoka and Maki slowly went off to the beach house while Kotori and Rin went off to play in the surf. She started to approach the pair of redheads headed towards her, but something about the look in Honoka's eye told her that, for once, intrusion wouldn't be appreciated. So instead she tried to chase down Kotori.

This wasn't as easy as it sounded. Her other best friend was once the quiet one, too out of shape to evade her for long, but training under Ranma had done a lot to even the playing field. Umi was still far stronger, but Kotori was agile enough to duck around her, and...

"Tag! You're it!" And she wasn't paying attention. Instead, on managing to slap Umi on the back she turned and ran off into the ocean, not caring that her workout clothes were getting soaked in the seawater.

Umi tried to follow her, but the surf had covered up some seaweed and she slipped and fell onto her back. Groaning, she forced herself to her feet. "Kotori!"

Rin giggled and pointed at her. "Look, it's a horrible sea monster!"

"That's terrible!" Kotori giggled at her. "Even if it is true."

Umi got up. "That's it!" She started to run at them, but the seaweed shifted and she slipped on it a second time. The low waves of the surf flowed over her, hiding her from view for a few moments, setting the other two off in a peal of giggles.

Then she rose from the waves. Were Ranma present, he'd have noticed the black battle aura of humiliated rage, but instead all the other two saw was Umi, now draped in the wayward ocean plant, growling at them with eyes that seemed to almost faintly glow in the mid-morning light.

They glanced to each other, coming to the same thought at once. They screamed and ran, Umi in hot pursuit.

Nico had just finished pulling the remaining food for tonight's big feast together when Honoka went practically skipping through the kitchen. "Oh, hey, Nico. Can you do me a huge favor?"

"Uhh...yeah, sure?" The third year asked, suddenly confused by the other girl's boundless energy.

Honoka stopped to lean on the counter, so she could look up into Nico's eyes. "Could you try to figure out what Maki likes for dinner? She's really stressed out."

Nico blinked. "Well, when she did the shopping she picked up a lot of tomatoes, way more than we could use if I was just cooking normally."

"What can you do with that?" Honoka asked, suddenly serious. "Really think."

Nico frowned. "I'd have to look some stuff up, but I think we've got enough flour to maybe do pizza if I started now..."

"Wow, you can even do fancy stuff like that?" Honoka asked, shocked.

Nico smirked. "Who do you think you're talking to? If it's for our songwriter, don't worry."

"Good." Honoka grinned. "If you have to, grab Umi when she comes in. She said something about
wanting to try western cooking some time, maybe she could help."

Nico nodded. "Right...so where you off to?"

"Date with Maki!" Nico chuckled at Honoka's answer, then watched her skip off before pulling out her phone to start looking up recipes for all the tomatoes. She had just found the yeast that Kasumi had left them with for the dough when Eri came in.

"Nico? Have you seen Honoka around?" Eri asked slowly.

The girl turned and gave her classmate a long look. "Yes, actually. She pushed off all this extra work in the kitchen on me because Maki can't handle things."

Eri ignored the huffiness in her tone to press onward. "Was she acting at all weird?"

"Yeah, she said she was taking Maki on a date."

The pair both suddenly seemed to realize what Nico had just said at the same time. "Please, please tell me you didn't just say..."

Nico swallowed, looking down at the ingredients around her. "Is it really our business?"

"...maybe not...uhm...look, you just keep doing what you're doing. I think I know what Honoka asked, and that's probably not a bad idea." Eri glanced towards the stairs. "I'll go get Nozomi and see what she thinks about this."

"Y-yeah, you do that."

Maki had only barely gotten dressed in her gray jacket and shorts over a thin black blouse when Honoka came knocking at the door. She felt her throat dry a little at the layered orange summer dress the other girl had chosen to wear. "Wh-what's with the outfit?"

Honoka just smiled. "You always wear really fashionable stuff, so I thought I should dress up a little bit too."

Maki shook her head. "That's nice, but you really didn't have to do that...it's just a movie. And anyway, isn't it a little early?"

"I thought we could walk around a little, maybe get an early lunch first." Honoka explained.

Maki's eyes narrowed. "Are you just trying to get snacks out of me?"

In response, Honoka just held up her phone. "No, I'm buying. I'm the one taking you out, remember?" She stuck her tongue out. "Just don't expect fancy restaurants or anything."

"You don't have to go that - " she felt herself being dragged out of the bedroom. "Faaaar!"

Eri found Nozomi fiddling around with Maki's computer, of all things. It wasn't the first time Nozomi's apparent reactions to problems had made no sense to her, so she just sat down at the desk next to her. "Cards. Now."

Nozomi stopped what she was doing to hand over the tarot deck. "Uhm....what's the question?"

"I don't know..."
Nozomi frowned. "Eri, I can't make a very good prediction with nothing. You know that."

"I just...I don't know how to put this. Honoka's taking Maki on a date."

Eri immediately regretted teaching Nozomi limited Russian. She might not have much vocabulary, but she had evidently went out of her way to pick up some of the more colorful phrases and had been reserving them for just such a situation. "Honoka? And Maki? That's even worse than you probably realize. I don't need the cards, we need to stop them!"

"Uh...what?"

Nozomi strained her ears, trying to listen for anyone leaving the house while she spoke quietly. "I think Honoka's bi..."

"...why is that a.." Eri tried to ask, but was swiftly cut off.

"Think, Eri!" Nozomi exclaimed. "This isn't me. Honoka genuinely loves everyone. I don't think she understands that Maki's not going to be like that."

No one had ever accused Ayase Eri of being stupid. While this was not a state of affairs she was familiar with, the idea was processed quickly. "You're right. At the very least Maki needs to be informed."

The sound of the door slamming was quickly followed by a bus passing in front of the house.

Eri started to curse, only for Nozomi to gently admonish her with a quiet "Language" and a smile, before turning serious and picking up her cell phone. "...not answering."

Maki watched the scene on the beach from the bus stop in amusement. "Well, they look like they're having fun," she said, her voice heavily tinged with sarcasm while Umi continued to chase her new prey. Kotori stopped momentarily to wave at them, only to have to duck a wild grab from the kelp-covered horror that was her childhood friend.

Honoka nodded enthusiastically. "See, everyone's fine, so why don't we just relax today?"

"I was kidding," Maki pointed out. "But if you don't think they're in any danger from Umi..."

Honoka shook her head, just as enthusiastically. "They'll be fine." She glanced down at her phone, thumbing the call off button as she noticed it coming up. "When is that bus going to get here?"

"We could walk. It's not that far."

Honoka gave it a moment's thought. "Yeah, that seems best. Lead on..."

Maki pulled out her own phone to check the map. "Huh? Looks like Eri's calling."

"Don't answer," Honoka said firmly. Maki looked at her skeptically. "I'm sure it's just Love Live stuff. We're not thinking about that today."

Reluctantly, Maki refused the call and led Honoka down a side street. "If you say so. Movie theater's this way. There's a nice cafe on the way, if you like..."

"Uhm...how nice?" Honoka said, thinking about her allowance account and how much it was going to suffer for this.
Maki rolled her eyes. "Fine, fine, I'll get it."

"No!" That was even worse. "I'll pay for it!"

"...are you all right?"

Honoka swallowed. "It's fine, it's fine. I'm good." Even if I have to ask for a forward on my allowance for one date with a girl the week after I came out to my mom. I'm just lucky she didn't freak out more.

"...if you say so…"

---

Kotori was sure she was about to die. She had tripped again, and now Umi was hovering over her like a demonic titan, ready to administer the death blow. Rin had, probably sensibly, abandoned her to her fate and now Umi was set to deliver. "Please, have mercy!"

"Plead to the heavens!" Umi cried out, although inwardly she was only half serious by this point. She was about to dunk Kotori into the water when suddenly she was being pulled back by two sets of strong arms. "Hey!"

"Umi, Kotori!" Eri shouted at the sharply. "Stop messing around and listen. Where's Honoka?"

"Uhhh…." Both second-years stared at them in sheer confusion. "Why is it so important?"

Kotori frowned with thought. "Well, I did see them at the bus stop."

All eyes turned in that direction. There was no one there, and the bus was just driving off into the distance. "Oh no." Nozomi groaned. "Too late."

"Too late for what?" Umi felt dread starting to overtake her.

Eri's next words didn't help much. "To stop Honoka from trying to take Maki on a date."

Umi shook her head. "We might still be able to stop them if it really is a date, but don't you think we should ask first?"

Nozomi sighed. "Honoka's not answering her phone, and she must've convinced Maki to do the same."

Umi felt her stomach drop out. "Or there's something more going on."

Eri was already on her phone. "Okay, I know where the bus is going. It looks like the only thing in that direction for a date is a movie theater."

Rin shrugged. "I don't see why it's a big deal. It's just a movie…"

Kotori blinked. "Or maybe...they're trying some other stupid trick?"

Umi quickly nodded. "That's what really worries me. If they're not answering their phones...we know mind controlling drugs are real thanks to Ranma. Could there be other tricks?"

Nozomi frowned. "Yes, but nothing in play here, I don't think. I'll see if the local shrine and temple have anything to say."

Kotori nodded. "I'll ask Ranma to help Nico check for anything that might have been left in the
Rin grinned. "And I guess that just leaves us three to go see the movies."

Umi stared at her. "Which one?"

"All of them! It's the only way to be sure-nya!"

A few minutes later, Ranma was quietly going through the spice racks in the kitchen. Nico shook her head. "It never ends, does it?"

Ranma shrugged. "It ain't a dull life, that's for sure," She pulled out a small pepper canister. "Was this here before?"

Nico shrugged. "I think so. Check the date?" Ranma quickly did so, then put it back on the shelf. "Good?"

"Best as I can figure. We'll have to throw it all out when we leave, just to be sure." The redhead replied. While moving on to the next spice, she asked "I don't get what the big deal is. Honoka can handle this."

"For someone who turns into a girl you sure don't know a lot about us," Nico said slyly. "But yeah, this is just overkill." She looked at the yeast suspiciously for a moment, but then nodded. "Yeah, I think Tendo bought that too. I mean, you can't just get weird, supernatural spices at the grocery store yet, right?"

Ranma laughed. "Nah, you gotta at least go to a market. Usually out in the boondocks, and even then you need to get lucky to run into something like that. Most of the time it's bull. Personally, I don't mess with it but you never know."

"Such a waste," Nico sighed. "One little incident and we're throwing out all this perfectly good food just to be sure some loony didn't contaminate it."

"Yeah. I agree the odds are pretty low but after last weekend we can't take the chance."

The pair continued to go through the kitchen, looking for anything that didn't belong until, Finally, Ranma decided to continue the conversation. "Look, Honoka likes Maki. I'm fine with that."

"Surprising absolutely everyone," Nico smirked. "But does Maki like Honoka? Like that?"

Ranma blinked, surprised. "Why would she go out on a date if she wasn't at least thinking it?"

"Ranma, do you seriously wonder if there's any other reason a girl might say 'yes' to something like that?"

Ranma sighed. "I guess I was kinda hopin' the girls back home were just weird about it."

Nico snickered. "Well, they're crazy, but it's not . . . well, anyway, everyone's just worried Maki might get hurt. Again."

Ranma nodded. "Okay, okay." He checked another canister, looking at everything about it. "Got a funny feeling about this one."

"Toss it here," Nico easily caught the kombu container, opening it up to give it a sniff before looking inside. "You're right. Been opened but I can't tell if any was used." She quickly threw it in the trash.
"Hang around in case that was enough to do something?"

"Sure thing. I ain't got anything better to do until we get back to Tokyo." Ranma shrugged, leaning against the wall.

Nico's eye twitched. " Aren't you supposed to be calling places for us to do our first real concert at?"

Ranma's eyes darkened. "Already half down the list, no takers. I'll get to the rest this afternoon."

The Tendo dojo had been cleared of the remains of the "cursed" arcade machine. Akane had found the memory-metal harness and, after some work, managed to strap herself into it. The steel cables leading to plates that protected many of her vital points as much as it would restrain her, over the traditional gi, was slightly ridiculous but she'd try anything. She had even laid out a rope on the ground in a spiral pattern. I'm finally going to do it! Ranma will have to take me seriously if I can master the Heaven Blast.

Cologne bounced into the dojo. "Ah, well, I see you're all set up for the advanced training." Akane beamed, but the wizened old woman settled on the ground in front of her. "First, though, let's do a little refresher on the theoreticals. As you're aware, ki is the energy that flows through all living things. There is ki even in the rocks of the planet, but that's a different technique and one you're not able to handle in your condition, so let's leave it at that, hm?"

"Of course," Akane said formally. The Bauksai Ten-Ketsu didn't interest her as much at the moment, anyway.

Cologne nodded. "Good start, good start. Now, I half-skipped this for Ranma, but you're not under the same kinds of time constraints since we memorized the chart. There's no danger of the counter being lost now. So, tell me Akane." Her eyes narrowed. "What is the prerequisite technique for the Heaven Blast?"

"Huh?"

Cologne shook her head. "You should be able to work this out. Think back. I know you're a smart girl."

"A...prerequisite technique?" Akane frowned, trying to remember the three days of Ranma's go at the Heaven Blast. "The...the Soul of Ice?"

"Precisely." Cologne showed the barest hint of approval with a nod. "If you are unable to work out how to separate your ki from your emotions, you will never truly master the Heaven Blast of the Dragon."

"But...but that was the easy part!" Akane protested before she could think.

Cologne lightly rapped her head with her long staff in reply. "Girl, that's the hardest part." After making sure she wouldn't be interrupted again, she continued. "I knew Ranma was capable of it because I'd trained him before and knew he'd completed essential steps. You, on the other hand, are a half-trained whelp with more raw talent than actual knowledge."

"Hey!"

Again, Akane got a light smack for her trouble. "Do you want my help or not?" Getting no further protest, Cologne continued. "Your father may have given you enough training to begin awakening your ki, but he never showed you how to harness it properly. It flares with your emotions, like an out
of control beast. That's why your strength, even under the Weakness Moxibustion, ebbs and flows without your control. As long as you're not trying to tap into your *ki*, you have the strength of an unusually athletic but otherwise normal teenager. It's only when you let your emotions run wild that you truly become weak."

"But….but…"

Cologne shrugged. "That's your situation, Akane. Since your father won't do it and you won't listen to Happousai, it falls to me to finish your training. Lucky you, the arts of the Amazons and Happi's 'Anything Goes' aren't that far apart. I think I can muddle through." Her voice became serious. "Seiza, now!" She barked, and Akane hastened into the full formal sitting position. "We're going to begin with some advanced meditation exercises I'm sure you learned once. The goal is to separate yourself from your emotions. Distance yourself, and then. . . well, that's the step you'll have to take on your own." She took a deep breath. "Now….begin."

The stone-paved sidewalks leading all along the town's streets, along with the fencing to protect the walkers from traffic, provided an attractive thoroughfare along the street. The area Maki had brought the pair to was lined with small shops, with not a chain store to be seen the whole way. Restaurants of every possible persuasion sat there, mostly closed up as lunch was a distant thought for most people at this hour. Honoka frowned a bit at the lack of apparent options. "Are you sure about this?"

"Well, we're not in Tokyo," Maki pointed out brusquely. "If you want anything other than pastries we have to wait an hour."

Honoka nodded. "Right, right, it's fine."

"This was a bad idea," Maki suddenly decided. "I don't know why I'm even out here."

Honoka winced at this. "Maki, we're out here because you didn't want to hang out with the others, remember?"

"I didn't want to hang out with *you* either," Maki snarked back. "You're the one who insisted."

Honoka winced at the accusation, but didn't back down. "Maki, I don't think being completely by yourself is a good idea…"

"How do you know what I want better than I do?"

Honoka took a deep breath. "It's not *just* that. I don't think anyone should be alone for a bit. Just until things cool down. There's less likely to be another incident if we're together. If something happens to one of us, the other can just call Ranma on a cell phone."

Maki blinked, feeling the rage go out of her at that argument. "Okay, fine. Guess I'm stuck with *someone* until we get back to Tokyo," she agreed, with obvious ill grace. "But why you, and why away from all the others?"

Honoka notably fidgeted. "Well, you kinda wanted to be alone, and we never get to just hang out, you know," she said nervously. "I thought maybe a movie would do better than trying to force a conversation or something so but I'm just babbling…"

Maki suddenly smiled. "You are, but you don't need to worry about me that much. I'll...okay, there's still the other problem." They finally reached the cafe. "Let me guess. Something really sweet for you, right?" Honoka made to protest, but she held up her hand. "Look, you have a good point about needing to stick together, but I can't let you cover everything. I'll let you get the movie."
Honoka slowly nodded. "I guess that makes sense. Just as long as you let me be your secretary, today, right?"

"Huh?"

Honoka grinned. "I'll take the calls and decide what's worth bothering you with, right?"

Maki returned the grin with one of her own. "This might not be so bad. Do you want to take my cell?"

Honoka actually considered it for a moment, then shook her head. "Just in case, I guess you need to hang onto it."

"What do you mean, we can't buy tickets for all the movies?" Rin shouted at the poor attendant in front of the multiplex.

"Miss, even if you had enough, which you don't for everyone, my boss won't let you hop between theaters even if you do have tickets for everything." The poor attendant was looking flustered, surrounded by cute girls with deadly-serious expressions. The only exception seemed to be the ash-blondie standing behind them, almost as bewildered as she was. "Will you please just pick one?"

Nozomi turned around, gathering all of the girls into a close huddle. "This is bad. There's only five of us, and at least seven movies playing. What would Honoka take a girl to on a date?"

"How would I know?" Umi asked, exasperated. "She's never shown any interest before now."

"Did you ever try asking her out?" Nozomi shot back bluntly. "Honoka's... different."

Kotori blushed. "What are you saying?"

Nozomi sighed. "Look, Honoka confessed to me the other night... well, confessed would be the word if she realized anything was wrong. I don't think she understands that love doesn't work for everyone else the same way."

Umi blushed beet red. "Wait, so..."

Eri groaned, smacking her forehead into her hand. "We don't have time for this now. Can we please psychoanalyze our lovable lunatic later, and focus on finding her?"


Eri looked at her. "You realize the first showing is subtitled, right?"

Nozomi chuckled at the athletic girl's disappointment. "That's not really what we're here for. It's on the list, right?" After getting some nods, she shrugged. "Well, why don't I take that one? If they don't show up I kinda wanted to work on my English anyway."

Umi nodded. "I'll take this one, then. A period movie isn't likely but at least I know Honoka will watch them if Maki likes them."
Eri shrugged. "Which just leaves the comedy, right?" At Umi's nod, she grinned. "Okay, Rin can take that one, or I will if she wants to go with Nozomi still."

Rin blinked at the pair of them, then sighed. "Okay, fine…"

"Just remember why we're here," Umi pointed out, grabbing Kotori by the shoulder. "Kotori, come on."

"But-I don't-Umiiii!" Kotori cried out as she was dragged along to the ticket counter.

Hanayo came down the stairs from the study. "Hey, does anyone know what happened to the computer? There's a whole bunch of English and weird stuff on the screen and I don't wanna . . . uh. . . " she felt her voice die as she walked into the kitchen, to see the worst thing imaginable.

The table was covered by several large salad bowls, already filled with vegetables of course. That was to be expected, really - the 'meal plans' were pretty strict. What wasn't so welcome was the rest of the scene. The main counter had been dusted in flour, and a large number of vegetables and meats already chopped up and deposited into rice bowls around the thing. Nico was standing there, intensely studying a tablet while she kneaded a large ball of dough out. Two more were already set aside. Nico herself was covered in flour, and a yeasty smell already filled the warm kitchen. But not even the fact that Nico was doing all this while balancing on one leg was what's horrifying.

"Nico? Where's the rice?"

Nico glanced up at her, somewhat annoyed. "There isn't any tonight. You've had your rice all week, and this was a special request for Maki, so. . . "

"...but…" Hanayo sighed. "I guess I don't like it, but fine. Still, shouldn't we order out if we're doing pizza?"

Nico shrugged. "I thought about that right after I used up the yeast. It's Plan B, I guess. I've never made this before."

"Oh." That was all Hanayo could say about that. "Ranma making you stand on one leg?"

Nico nodded. "For one hour each today, he said"

Another, male, voice came from behind her. "Balance training. Nico's actually almost caught up on conditioning, but you could still use some extra," Ranma said to her. "So...well, I'm guessin' you want to talk to me anyway, so let's go for a run. If you can keep up with me and talk, ask away."

Nico winced. "You're a monster, Saoto...Ranma."

"Hey, if it was Pops she'd have ta ask while swimming away from sharks or somethin'." Ranma said, prompting horrified looks from the two girls. "I think she's getting off lightly. You up for the job, Hanayo?"

"...er...yes?"

"Great. C'mon!" Ranma grabbed her by the hand and dragged her outside. A quick change of shoes later, and they were running along the beach. Hanayo found, to her shock, that as long as she stayed focused running at the pace her trainer was setting it was actually pretty easy. The problem was that he was pushing her just fast enough to make actually getting any words out difficult. Not impossible, just difficult.
Somewhere around the first kilometer of the jog she finally caught her breath enough to easily say "I know Rin was really bad about it, but would you mind telling me what the deal is with cats?"

"Yes." Ranma's response was unusually curt, and a little angry. Hanayo's wince nearly took her out of her stride, causing the boy to soften a bit. "Look, it ain't something I want to think about, okay?"

"Right," Hanayo gulped. "Uhm...okay, sorry. But how do you stand all of it?"

Ranma shrugged. "You just do. Or don't. A lotta people don't stick around once they see what my life's like."

It wasn't really the answer she wanted to hear. But...it did make sense. "Ranma...what if I want to stop?"

"Then stop," It was delivered in the same matter-of-fact tone as the last one, but then Ranma seemed to consider for a bit and turned to her. "Look, I do get it. This isn't what you signed on for. Hell, it isn't what any of us really wanted. I kinda hoped Akane would get it, but I never got a chance to explain before she got all mad, and, well, I guess she wanted things to change after Phoenix Mountain."

"What happened at that place?"

Ranma's countenance turned dark. "Koizumi..."

"Okay, okay..." Hanayo winced again, coming to a stop. "Ranma, I'm really sorry..."

"No, it's..." Ranma forced a smile onto his face that was so obviously fake he was speaking through clenched teeth. "...you're probably right, I should tell someone, but..."

"We're not friends, I get it."

Ranma shook his head. "That ain't it. There's some stuff I don't even talk with friends about much."

"...even Honoka?"

Ranma nodded.

Hanayo smiled back. "Maybe you should. With Honoka."

"Maybe..." Ranma thought about it for a second. "So, what do you want to do?"

Hanayo took a deep breath, looking out to the sea. "Can you keep us safe?"

"...That's a hard one," Ranma admitted. "It's always worked out before, with Akane, but can't say there haven't been some real close calls. With eight of ya..." He seemed to be lost in thought.

"...you can't promise, can you?"

Ranma sighed. "No. I can do my best, but 'safe' means I gotta be in eight places at once, or never let any of ya out of my sight for a second. But...if I go down the list, you ain't nearly at the top. There's Honoka first, then Umi and Kotori and Maki, then maybe Nozomi before Rin, and then they'll go after everyone left." He seemed to think for a bit. "Right, tomorrow's dance lessons may be a bit different, but I got an idea that'll help. Maybe."

"Care to let me in?"
"Not yet," Ranma said. "Best if it's a surprise."

Hanayo chuckled. "Okay, okay. So, where are we doing the concert?"

"Dunno yet," Ranma shrugged, putting on a bit more speed and ending the conversation.

Despite her efforts to reassure Honoka that everything was fine at the cafe, Maki was not at all feeling fine as they made their way towards the movie theater. She couldn't wait to get back home and to her own room, with space and a keyboard (the piano was on the first floor adjacent to the dining room - way too much foot traffic) and absolutely no interruptions for the rest of their vacation.

Which almost certainly wasn't going to happen - they had way too much work to do for that before school started back up. But hopefully she'd be afforded a few days, and maybe they could take a second trip somewhere to make up for the need to cut this one so short once everyone was calmed down.

Yeah, a nice trip to an onsen resort somewhere far from Tokyo sounded like just what they needed. Look up some mountain town where the weather wouldn't be so nasty to enjoy it as close to properly as possible. Unlike just grabbing the beach house it wouldn't be cheap but if everyone pitched in what they could she was sure her parents would cover the rest just for the peace of mind of the extra distance from the action. Sure, it wasn't exactly the season for it, but the right spring might just be what she - what everyone needed.

Leaving Maki alone with her thoughts, Honoka approached the ticket kiosk, only to find herself confronted with the movies and the realization she hadn't actually picked anything out. There was also the angry glare of the girl behind the counter. "Your friends are looking for you," the girl said bluntly.

Uh oh, Honoka scratched the back of her head to try to hide just how nervous she was. "Uhm...look, I'm trying to show my friend a good day. She's feeling a little stressed out, so…"

"Well, it's none of my business," the girl seemed to decide. "What movie did you want to see?"

Honoka looked over the list..."Uhm...whichever one my friends didn't get,"

"Seriously?"

Honoka nodded, lowering her voice to make sure Maki didn't overhear. "Look, my friends are worried about nothing important, but she's really freaking out today. Can you recommend something? Please?"

"You really care about her, don't you?" The attendant leaned forward. "Little sister or something?"

Honoka blushed. "Just a friend, really."

Two tickets were slid across the counter. "Two adults,"

"Uhh…"

"Two adults," The attendant repeated, a little more insistently. "I can't sell student tickets for this one, but you're obviously ready, so…” A wink. "Have fun with your girlfriend."

"Uhhh…” Honoka blushed, but didn't deny it as she turned back around, to see Maki had taken a seat on a nearby park bench, silently thumbing at her phone. That wasn't good - if Maki was online,
she was probably looking at Love Live. She needed to be distracted, and Honoka knew just the thing, something she'd been curious about anyway. She walked up behind her, putting a hand on the younger girl's shoulder to interrupt her train of thought. "Hey, Maki? I was just wondering, what are your plans for after Otonoki?"

Maki glanced at her fellow redhead, only to see her eyes shining at her in a way that was almost disturbing in its' earnestness. "What brought this on all of a sudden?"

"Well, it's just, I just realized we don't know that much about you. Your family's rich and owns a lot of hospitals, but you're going to be a famous musician, so - "

"That's not it at all," Maki stopped her. "I'm going into medicine like my parents."

Honoka blinked. "Wait, what?"

"I know for a fact you don't have a hearing problem," Maki snapped back at her, before covering her mouth. "Sorry, I guess I'm still a little irritable."

"Maki not playing music is like Ranma not practicing martial arts," Honoka said, seemingly to herself before turning her full attention back to the younger girl. "Do you remember the day we met?"

"I was practicing in the music room…" Maki said, a sly smirk suddenly appearing on her lips. 
"...when I looked up and saw a weird girl clapping at my messing around on the school piano."

Honoka returned the smile with an almost identical one that seemed a little unusual. "That's not what I remember seeing. Have you ever seen yourself play, Maki?" When the younger girl blinked in surprise, Honoka's smile widened. "When you play, I mean really play, you... you're practically sparkling."

Maki blushed beet red. "Honoka, I do not."

"You do!" Maki felt herself shrinking down even more. "That was when I knew I had to - "

Maki felt herself on slightly more even footing. "Get me to join up? Well, it worked, eventually. Even if Ranma was the one to bring us together." She took a deep breath. "Honoka, please, I know you mean well, but you don't have to justify things to me. I'm glad I made friends with you guys, and I wouldn't change that for anything just because sometimes I need some time alone."

"That wasn't what I was going to say," Honoka whispered. "I was going to say, that's when I knew I wanted to get to know you."

Maki felt her blush deepen even more. "Honoka, what are you saying?"

"No-nothing!" Honoka quickly backed off. "Sorry, sorry, that was probably too much...uhm, anyway, let me get the tickets." She went up to the kiosk with her phone out, Maki pacing back and forth, eyes instinctively going to every alleyway just in case.

Her thoughts once again turned to the idea of a follow-up trip. Somewhere nice and safe and relaxing and not at all populated by weirdo martial artists aside from the one she wanted. Well, two she wanted with her, Umi was all right.

It was funny, but a few days ago she'd have been a lot more reluctant about the idea of having all these people with her on such a retreat at all. But now it seemed...natural enough, even if Ranma wouldn't be able to enjoy it with her...
And then her train of thought was being interrupted again by Honoka grabbing her by the wrist. "C'mon, let's go."

"Which movie?"

"It's a surprise!" Honoka led her past the popcorn and candies, since they'd just eaten and Ranma would probably have a conniption if Honoka had any of that stuff so soon after a 'breakfast' of sweets. She took Maki's hand to go up to the back row, only to be pulled towards the middle seats. "Uhh...didn't you want things to be quiet?"

Maki stared at her. "Well, yes, but we're here, and if I'm going to watch a movie I want to watch the movie."

That wasn't what Honoka had in mind at all, although if you had asked her in that moment she probably couldn't have told you what she did have in mind. "Uhh...what kind of crowd can we expect?"

"Honestly?" Maki shrugged. "Not knowing what movie it is I couldn't even guess, but there's not a lot of kids living around here full time. It's mostly a resort town, and everyone is here for the beach. They can see movies on their own time, so even summer vacation this place should be pretty empty in the middle of the day."

"Okay." Honoka shrugged. "Wherever. I guess it's a private screening."

"...heh." Maki smiled at her, and they made their way to the middle seats. "Hey, Honoka?" she asked. "I'm just curious, do you like girls?"

"Well, yeah," Honoka seemed to shrug. "I was a little nervous telling my parents, but it's not that big a secret. It just never came up."

Maki laughed. "Okay, that explains you and Tsubasa," Which got a blush from the ginger sitting next to her. "As long as you're not hiding out in a change room with her at a big concert when we need you on stage or something, go nuts."

"Uhh...yeah." Honoka couldn't quite believe she had heard that right, but the room darkened and the screen turned blood red, a deep bass chord filling the theater as the movie began….

"ENOUGH!" Akane heard the word, but elected to ignore it as she continued to focus on her meditation exercises. In all truth, it had been years since she'd done them seriously, and she was surprised by how easily she was able to fall back into the old habits, clearing her mind of all -

*THWACK!*

"What was that for?!" The girl shouted at her instructor. "I was doing everything right!"

"You were emptying your mind of emotion! This is excellent training for resisting the Shishi Houkodan or Mouko Takabisha, but it is not your current goal." Cologne shouted at her. "To harness their inverse, the emotion must continue to be present."

Akane rubbed her head. "But when I tried to focus on how I was feeling you hit me! Again!"

Cologne shook her head. "Girl, mastering the seeming paradox is the goal of the exercise. Further, I will only tolerate so much disrespect, even for the sake of a favor. But this was better, I only wanted your attention and you deigned to ignore me." The old Amazon matriarch sighed. "Keep going, I'll
go get us some tea and we'll take a break soon. Kasumi should have it ready…" She wandered off down the hallway.

Akane closed her eyes again and tried to do as Cologne had bade her. *Okay...so I need to still have emotion but not feel it. Okay.* She found herself murmuring to herself. "Kousaka…" *How do I feel about her...* There was a flare up of anger, and of jealousy, which she ruthlessly quashed. *There's no good reason to be jealous of Kousaka.* An image of Ranma, as a girl, being hugged by the blue-haired girl, Sonoda. *No, I'm not jealous of them!* Because being jealous of them would mean there was something to be jealous of.

Then it was Toujou. *That...that...* Akane quickly squelched it. *Why am I so mad at her?* Well, aside from flouting her assets, flirting constantly with everyone, and *definitely* being a pervert. *Grr...*

"Hey, what's up Tomboy?" A voice said, cutting into her meditations. Akane was so focused on what she was doing it took her a moment to even realize someone was trying to talk to her, and even when she did it took another to realize who it sounded like. Something was subtly off about the person's voice, but she still felt a tightening in her chest and realized she didn't dare open her eyes. "Ranma?" she asked, quietly, not daring to hope.

"Yeah, you flat-chested gorilla?"

Akane shrieked in rage, not bothering to look around. "WHAT?! You run off for months and then *that's* how you talk to me when you get home?!" She pulled a staff off the wall, forgetting her weakness again as she ran at….Ukyo, with a cell phone up to her ear and a large speaker. "What the...why you?!"

"It's for your training! *Training*, Akane!" Ukyo screeched, backing away. "You have to stay focused no matter what insults, right?"

"What, but I...I..." Akane felt tears welling up. "I thought...I thought..."

*THWACK!*

Ukyo was suddenly lying face-down on the ground, Cologne perched on her back with the tea set. "Miss Kuonji, I will decide when my student is ready for such interruptions. Akane, why don't you take this to the dining room?" When there was no response, Cologne poked at the chef with the staff she had in her other hand. "Hmm...out cold." She handed the tray over to the rather startled young girl even as she continued. "I need to instruct Miss Kuonji on the dangers of interrupting serious training, since it looks like she never did any with a teacher before."

Ukyo groaned as she came to, realizing she was in the Tendo dojo, tied upside down to a training dummy. "Kuonji, what were you *thinking*?" Cologne was peering into her face, seeming a mix of annoyed and honestly confused. "Akane is attempting to learn the art of chilling her *ki*. It's not just useful for the Heaven Blast, you know. With the instability of her *ki* flows, she might have accidentally frozen you solid, and then where would your 'prank' have gotten you, eh?"

"Yeah, right," Ukyo said dismissively. "Akane - "

"Is still the daughter of one of Happousai's disciples," Cologne cut her off with a poke into her throat. "Even if her training's been a disaster, she *could* have been Ranma's equal, or even better than my wayward son-in-law. You would do well to never, *ever* forget that, Miss Kuonji." She turned away dismissively. "Why don't you hang out for awhile while I have tea with my student?"
Ukyo blinked. "Was that a joke?" But Cologne had already left the room, leaving her upside down, in the dark, as the door closed behind her.

Eri sighed, more in frustration than any particular involvement in the on-screen shenanigans. Seated way in the back of the theater, there was essentially no chance she had missed anyone coming in. Especially not a couple of redheads - those two should really have stood out. Which meant either the pair were in another theater, or they had changed their plans.

Or Honoka had never really been planning on a date at all, but that was not something she wanted to even remotely think about. Surely even the people who had once surrounded Ranma realized they had, for the moment, been beaten on that front. They were directing their efforts to the competition in some insane alternate bid, but that was a good thing because it meant they weren't coming after them with drugs and weapons again, right?

_Okay..._ Eri decided to try thinking about things from the perspective of a jealous girlfriend. It proved more difficult than she had imagined - Nozomi had always been such a flirt that she didn't expect things would change that much right away. _Right, right, that's not gonna work._ She tried to imagine someone flirting heavily with Nozomi. _...okay, that works._ Eri quickly retuned things. _Nozomi's decided to back this...hypothetical girlfriend in a competition...so..._

She hit her forehead into her palm, getting some dirty looks. _Are they really that dumb?_ That they think Ranma's going to abandon this test because...no, that can't be quite right. They think he'll turn on us if they manipulate the contest so they're winning, but they also each have to believe that they'll see her as...as the 'center' as Nico puts it.

_Then what's the older sister's angle?_ Eri sighed - quietly - as she realized she didn't have a clue. _Ranma might know, but right now that's not the problem._ _They're not going to try something like the other night again as long as they're holding out hope of seducing him through music..._

Movie theaters were heavily soundproofed. They simply had to be - the monstrous sound systems could literally shake the buildings apart if not well-constructed, and that kind of bleed-over would ruin the viewing experience for everybody.

Nonetheless, Eri found her train of thought being interrupted by two screams of terror coming from what sounded like several theaters over. She bolted to her feet, stumbling out into the hallway, only to see the others coming out of their own theaters, looking around in shock. "What happened?"

"That one!" Umi pointed, leading the charge through the door, only to see an empty theater. The others piled up behind her, while Umi scanned the room and noticed a side exit door swinging closed. "Follow -urk!"

Behind them was a tall, serious-looking man in a suit. "No theater hopping, ladies. I'll have to ask you to leave." There was a moment of protest, but somehow, the five girls were pushed out the exit. Taking a moment to collect themselves, they looked at each other. Umi was the first to collect herself. "Okay, so they went to the horror movie for some reason. That's not normal..."

Eri sighed. "Well, now what?"

Umi considered the problem. "Let's assume that at this point any 'date' on Honoka's part is officially a disaster. Then if that's not what this is and there's something else going on, they'll no doubt go..._Wait, in what universe does this make sense?_ She took a deep breath. Ayase Eri, _you're supposed to be the calm, level-headed one. What good are you if you don't think about this stuff?_"
wherever they're supposed to to run into...whoever's doing it. Probably somewhere public, lots of people so they won't draw too much attention."

"Right. I'll check the restaurant row again," Eri said.

Nozomi nodded as well. "The east park, I think."

Rin grinned. "There's an aquarium in town, they might have gone there. I'm fastest and it's furthest away."

Umi nodded. "Then I'll take the western side of the park. We'll meet back at the house." She grabbed Kotori by the arm. "C'mon you…."  

Just outside a karaoke, Maki and Honoka had come to a staggering halt, breathing heavily. The younger girl glared. "Honoka, what's...what's the big idea...?"

"I...the girl...counter...ahh..." Honoka gasped for more breath. "Maki, I'm so sorry…"

The young musician turned away, stalking off down the street. "Honestly, you couldn't be bothered to check what movie it was you were being sold? That was the scariest thing I've seen in my life!"

Honoka followed, stumbling. "But...but...I didn't mean to…"

"Whatever," Maki sighed out. "I'm headed back to the beach house."

Honoka winced. "Maki, please…"

Something about the pain in Honoka's voice made Maki pause. "...I don't know what else to do, Honoka. I can't take much more of this."

Honoka quickly racked her brain. "How about if we go to the park? You don't have to say anything else about today, I won't say a word, but. . ."

Maki felt a sinking feeling in her stomach as everything clicked. "Honoka?" The words came out slowly. "Please, Honoka, be honest with me. Why is this so important to you? What aren't you telling me?" Honoka was paralyzed with indecision. "I'm not an idiot, Honoka. Do you want to come clean, or do you want me to guess? Because if it's what I think it is…" Maki's voice steadily slid from pained quiet into a snarl. At Honoka's continued silence, Maki felt something snap. "I'm interested in Ranma, Honoka. I haven't given up yet, so even if you're interested in girls too, what made you think this was even remotely appropriate?"

"...I...I didn't think you were this much the jealous type," Honoka replied, tears forming in her eyes. "I...I just don't get it…"

"Wha...What the Hell!?" Maki suddenly slapped the other girl, getting a gasp but not much more. "Are you really that dense? What about the fiancées? You didn't notice that either?"

"They're crazy!" Honoka pointed out. "I don't get them either, but they're completely unhinged and even you have to agree with it!"

"What about TV? Movies? Books?! Shouldn't you have picked up on it from that!??"

Honoka blinked. "I…"

Maki stared back at her, completely uncomprehending….before she laughed. It wasn't a laugh of
good humor, but rather one of utter hysteria, the sort of laugh that usually presaged screams or sobbing...before Honoka put two arms around her shoulders. "Maki..." Honoka's reply was soft. "If you don't want to be my girlfriend, that's okay, but I do like you. Seeing you hurt like this...please, tell me what I can do to make it better?"

"Don't...please, just..." Maki swallowed. "I'm sorry if I hurt you, but...I'm dealing with so much already. Trying to fit you into this...it's too much."

"Then don't," Honoka replied firmly. "I'll figure out where I fit on my own, and right now that's wherever you want me."

Maki shook her head. "No, that's just it...I want us to be friends."

"...then let's do something friends do," Honoka pulled away from her slowly.

Maki smiled. "...thanks...but now I'm just feeling tired. Can we please go back?"

"Okay."

Cologne took a seat across from Akane, carefully sipping at Kasumi's tea. "Ah, delicious."

Akane was sitting sullenly, staring down into the bowl herself without drinking. "I don't get it," she said, opening the discussion. "Ranma does all this stuff so easily. You said awhile ago I could be just as good as he is, so why am I having so much trouble? Even when I really try, it's just..."

Cologne sighed. "Akane, you misunderstood. I said you had the same potential. Not that you're as good as Ranma, or even that you can be now. That path is within your grasp, but let me spell out for you what it would take."

"Please!" Akane found herself pleading. "I want to know."

Cologne smiled. "Pack up your bags, quit school, say farewell to your friends and family, and go out into the world. Seek out the dojo with the best reputation and learn everything you can. Find those long-forgotten monasteries where the ancient techniques of your warriors remain stored, and study their scrolls and training manuals. Be willing to reach into a roaring fire in utmost confidence you won't be burned. Maybe throw yourself into a pit of starving cats a few times, though I wouldn't suggest that as a long-term solution."

"What? You're saying there's no other - "

Cologne cut her off. "There is a much faster solution. Spend every day in prayer and sacrifice everything. If you attract the attention of a friendly kami, you may gain what you seek before you starve."

"How long would the training trip take?" Akane asked after a moment.

Cologne actually seemed to need to think about that. "Well, you're not starting from nothing, but at the same time you have some bad habits to break. If you really dedicate yourself to it, I'd call it seven years to reach the point Ranma's at now, and maybe twenty more thereafter if he continues slacking off to the degree he is now if you want to definitively, beyond any doubt pass him." At Akane's indignant noise, Cologne snorted. "What, did you expect Ranma to stand still while you try to catch up? That's not the Way."

Akane shook her head. "I...after I graduate, maybe. I don't want to just quit school, but right now I
Cologne elected to ignore the insult to Amazon tradition, sipping her tea. "What if I told you there was another way? You wouldn't need to pass Happousai's test, no more having your strength drain away to nothing at inconvenient moments. You could even practice the Art, after a fashion."

"Wait, what?!" Akane was astonished. "How? Why would - "

Cologne smiled. "First, a question. The technique is called the 'Ultimate Weakness Moxibustion' but this implies a number of things it isn't. Why is the name a misnomer?"

Akane blinked. "Well, it doesn't make me weak all the time. I realized it after the volleyball match. It was stupid, I wasn't really trying…"

"Very good," Cologne nodded. "Now, what would happen if I used it on Kasumi?"

"Uh...she wouldn't be able to move?" Akane dismissed the notion that Cologne might actually do that. "She wouldn't have the strength I do…"

"Actually, if I used it on Kasumi, it is very likely that all that would happen would be she might develop a nasty temper overnight." Cologne said, half-musing. "The girl does have the talent, for all that she doesn't seem to use it. It might do something to her emotional balance. Still, that's not relevant. What is relevant is that Kasumi would suffer no physical problems." The old woman took another sip of tea to let that news settle. "Why?"

Akane blinked, then realized. "It doesn't 'weaken' you at all, it just disrupts your ki…"

"Precisely." Cologne smiled. "That tea you're drinking will diminish your ki flows to those of a normal person for the rest of your life. No more weakness, you can go back to practicing the Art like a normal girl, normal friends, normal life." Suddenly, the old woman was wearing the tea on her sleeve, having just brought it up in time to block the spitting out. "What, isn't that what you wanted?"

"No!" Akane shrieked, trying to reach across the table to grab the old woman by her robe. "How could you?! You poisoned me!"

"Oh, calm down." Cologne rapped her lightly on the head with her staff. "I didn't actually do it. Using that stuff on someone without their consent would be a heinous crime, even among the Amazons. Even tricking an outsider into drinking it would get me and Shampoo put to death except in the most dire of circumstances." Cologne narrowed her eyes. "But I do have a bowl of it, if you prefer. You'd likely have to give up your claims on Ranma and your school, but it's a way out…"

"But…but…"

Cologne just shrugged. "If none of that appeals to you, I suggest you keep to your meditations. You're closer than you probably think." She stood up. "Thank Kasumi for the tea. I suggest using the garden for your next round of meditation. Miss Kuonji is still occupied."

Ukyo tried, once again, to wiggle even an inch. But it was no good, Cologne had bound her too tightly to the pole, and all the blood rushing to her head was making it hard to think. She tried, desperately, to get the spatula she habitually kept up her sleeve into her fingers so she could cut her way out, only to realize it had been replaced with a common plastic one.

"I'll get you for this," she said, or at least tried to. She found her voice wasn't coming out. Oh no, the old woman didn't! How am I supposed to run my restaurant! I'm going to miss the dinner rush!
"We're back," Honoka called out weakly as she opened the door to Maki's vacation home, hunched over so the smaller girl could lean across her back a bit. It seemed a little overly dramatic, but for some reason the other redhead was just as physically as mentally exhausted after that long day.

Ranma was already leaning against the wall, her pigtail a bit limp from sweat. "What happened to you two, and does it need pounding?"

Maki chuckled weakly. "If only all our problems could be solved with your fists. No, no, I just need a long bath and a quiet corner to curl up in."

Ranma nodded. "Somethin' told me you might. Water's drawn, or if ya prefer I think there's a bathhouse open around here."

Maki seemed to consider it for just a moment, then nodded. Honoka grinned and gratefully transferred the girl to Ranma's shoulder, getting a blush from the both of them. "You're shorter, so it's easier for you. Plus you could probably support an oni that needed to take a load off."

Ranma smirked. "We ain't tracking one down to find out." She nodded towards a small basket on the stairs. "Soap's in there."

Kotori was left panting as Umi dragged her from the park back to the bus stop, where Nozomi was already waiting for them. "Guys, I really don't think this is a good idea!" she shouted at the pair of them.

Umi shook her head. "Honoka's really getting weird. I don't like this….

Kotori just glared at her best friend, before turning her attention to Nozomi. Both of the other girls took a step back from the fire that seemed to be glowing behind Kotori's eyes. "Cards. Now." The sudden intensity from the normally indecisive girl caused Nozomi to quickly pull out the deck. "Are Honoka and Maki in danger?" The cards were quickly exchanged, and Kotori gave them a quick shuffle before handing them back.

Nozomi frowned, glancing up at the clock over the bus stop. "We have time. I'm going to try a full reading. Celtic Cross," she said as she flipped over the first card. That card showed a woman, seated on a throne and bearing a staff. "The Queen of Wands. Traditionally, a sign of enthusiasm and warmth. I bring that up because lately I've been seeing this card come up whenever Honoka is the subject." When both girls gave a nod of understanding, Nozomi couldn't resist a smile. "The Ace of Cups. Honoka's own capacity for love and compassion are in opposition to herself."

"This isn't telling us anything we don't know," Umi pointed out. "Honoka may have the ability to love more than one person, but Maki doesn't and Honoka can't comprehend that. So far, everything's fitting your speculations."

"Patience," Nozomi said. "Your question's open-ended, so we may not be seeing everything. The next card reveals the origin of any danger that may face Honoka…" The face of the next card held four swords in a cross, placed upside down above the first two. "Restlessness, or a lack of progress. I hesitate to assume…" Before the others could protest, she flipped the next card. "The Moon, reversed. Confusion combined with heightened sensitivity. Since this represents the past, this could be earlier today or what happened last week."

Kotori frowned. "Or it may mean nothing. Come on, we need to see the future…"

Nozomi sighed, but flipped over the next card, and nearly dropped the deck. "The Tower," she
hissed. "Honoka's life is indeed in the balance, if this card is to be trusted."

"Wouldn't that be 'Death'?" Kotori asked, innocently enough.

Nozomi frowned, and shook her head. "The Death card is symbolic - the death of opportunity, or an old life to allow rebirth. The Tower is physical. Now, this future may not come to pass, but Honoka needs to be very careful going forward, moreso than most of us." The seer quickly moved on to the next card - five swords scattered on the ground before a triumphant king. "This card, on the other hand, is what will be...a defeat or a loss. Not necessarily beyond recovery, but it will be life-changing."

As they all went pale, Nozomi flipped the next card. A woman with two blades grasped in hand. "The two of swords. Honoka is ruled by uncertainty and indecision. Too much happening." The card was placed in its' reversed position. The next card got a puzzled look, a man and woman obviously in relations behind a tall tree. "The Lovers...although the cards are all symbolic to an extent. This might mean reliance on friends is a key, in which case the answer is to support Honoka as we have been..." Another card. "The Ace of Swords - victory, even in the face of overwhelming odds. Not surprising, we all want to win Love Live even with our setbacks..." Kotori shifted uncomfortably at that, but Nozomi ignored it. The smiling face of the Reaper stared up at them.

Kotori nearly screamed, but Nozomi was...smiling. "I...I think we're going to be all right. Whatever this is about, there will be a great change. There is enormous danger, but now that we're informed..."

Umi nodded. "We'll be there for her, and we can come up with plans. Honoka has to face this, but she doesn't have to face it alone?" It was definitely a question, one which Nozomi nodded to.

Kotori smiled. "Thank goodness. But since she can't get into that kind of trouble here, can we please stop getting in the way of her date?"

Kotori took a step back. "Kotori, you're...what's wrong with you? All day you've been..."

"What?" Kotori finally snapped. "Why can't we just trust them? What's this really about!!"

It was like suddenly being bitten by an adorable puppy. Umi stepped backwards. "Kotori..."

"I don't want to be like this!" She shouted, suddenly hunching over, with her eyes closed. "This was supposed to be about fun, and music, and the school, and now we're..."

Umi sighed. "I know, I know. But...was it really the wrong thing to do? We know what brought all this out, but Ranma's as much a part of us as anyone..."

Nozomi silently collected the cards from her reading, even as Kotori's first tears fell. The blonde girl glanced over her shoulder. "I know, and I knew it wasn't going to be just fun, but now we're jumping at everything like it's going to try to kill us! I don't want to live like that either, Umi!"

"But..." Nozomi finally put in. "We're not in a position to make everyone happy. Ranma never was, and now her problems are our problems."

"So what do we do?" Kotori shouted. "We can't just let them...control our lives, or they win even if they lose!"

Umi swallowed. "Kotori...maybe you can write a song. Try to figure out what it is about trying to be a School Idol means to you. I think it'll help."

"And...what if I don't like the answer?" Kotori asked helplessly. "I can't just..."
Umi nodded. "You can, and you have to. No one should stay with Mu's if they're not willing to take all of this with it. But I do know one thing. We have a public concert coming up, and that's where we'll win."

Nozomi smiled, pulling out the sun card from a quick shuffle and showing it to them. "I'm sure our Apollo will come through for us."

Kotori sniffed and nodded even as Eri and Rin ran up to them, the bus not far behind…

The bath house was nice, if obviously converted from an older facility back when mixed-gendered baths were the norm. Rather than smash up the nice cobblestone baths to make two separate ones, a bamboo divider wall was placed between the men's and women's areas, flush with the walls to prevent casual crossover but not tall enough to completely divide the room. The old fixtures had also obviously been replaced with more modern showerheads as well. As a side bonus, what was going on on the other side could still clearly be heard if you were close to the wall, which would allow for conversation. Ranma washed off then quickly took a seat in the middle of the wall. On feeling two soft thumps, he grinned. "Honoka, Maki?"

"Yeah," Maki sounded relieved, a sentiment echoed by Honoka a moment later.

Taking that as a good sign, Ranma grinned. "So, how'd the date go?"

"Uhh…" Honoka said, embarrassment echoing along with her voice.

Maki's reply was a little more succinct. "It didn't. I'm fine, though, really. I don't know why I was so . . . I just wish we had a real onsen in town. This is nice, but I could use a stay at a real resort now," Maki sighed wistfully.

Ranma shrugged. "Well, I know a place. Probably wouldn't be a bad idea for everyone to go, after last week, but it can wait. Wanna do something for the last three or four days of the vacation?"

Honoka's reassuring chirp of "Sounds good!" was all he needed to hear.

"Now…" Maki said slowly. "Did we learn something today, Honoka?"

"Not to lie about wanting to go on a date, just do it," The ginger replied contritely. "I really am sorry about this…"

Ranma groaned. "Honoka, you . . . wait, you did tell the others you were okay, right?" he said, hearing the women's door slide open and shut.

His answer came in the form of Umi's screech of "HOONOOOOKAAAAAAA!"

"Uwah! Umi, I can explain!"

Splashing, followed by Kotori shouting "Umi, we need to wash up first!"

"Never mind ME! They should be using a private bath!"

Ranma didn't need to see Honoka to know she was blushing. "Umi! We didn't do anything! Ranma, help us out! You've been listening the whole time!"

Maki was silent, but no doubt as red as a tomato. Instead, Kotori was still shouting. "Umi! I'm sure Maki and Honoka didn't do anything! Come out and wash up!"
Now Maki's voice came back, shouting "I'M NOT LISTENING I'M NOT LISTENING! LALALA!"

The sounds on the other side descended into general bedlam. He was just considering getting up to go help when he felt another thump against the wall. Eri's voice was just barely audible over the chaos. "How did you know?"

"Know what?"

Eri seemed exasperated. "To trust Honoka with this after all?"

Ranma smirked, leaning back against the wall. "I know Honoka. She knows what she's doing with stuff like this. I guess it didn't work out this time, but I knew she wasn't in trouble or she'd call."

Ranma paused. "Everything okay over there?"

"Umi's trying to drown Honoka, Maki and Kotori are trying to stop her, and Nozomi's still washing. I think she's also watching." The last bit was said with a hint of irritation. "Having a girlfriend in a situation like this is tough, isn't it?"

"Wouldn't know, and I want to keep it that way," Ranma pointed out.

Eri laughed softly. "You would. You must be the only teenage boy on the planet with their libido under control, to hear my grandmother tell it."

"Wouldn't surprise me," Ranma snorted. "Don't ask about showers at Furinkan. Good dodging training, lousy perverts..." Eri seemed to go quiet. "Eri?"

"Ranma, if you have any problems with the school, go ahead and come see me, all right?" The girl said, her Russian accent just a little more audible than normal. "That's part of my job, and you're kinda unique."

"Nah, I'll handle it," Ranma said nonchalantly. "Besides, the girls in class don't seem to have a problem with it."

Eri's relief was palpable even through the wall. "That's good to hear. Anyway, I should probably go stop Nozomi from staring at Honoka's butt."

Ranma shook his head. "Good luck."

Things eventually seemed to go quiet over there, and then there was another thump against the wall. This time it was Nozomi's voice, low and conspiratorial. "Ranma, Kotori had me do a reading earlier. I don't want to scare you, but it indicated Honoka's going to be attacked. Soon."

"How soon?"

Nozomi seemed to hesitate. "The foreseeable future. It might not be an attack, but there will be some physical danger to her wellbeing, and..."

"Got it," Ranma said softly. "I'll keep an extra close eye on her."

Nozomi's good humor seemed to return. "Well, the good news is that the only sure thing is the danger. If anyone can prevent it from going beyond possibility, it's you, so we're in the best possible hands."

There was another thump, and then a shriek of "NOZOMI! GET YOUR HANDS OFF THAT!"
from Maki, echoed swiftly by Honoka, and then Eri.

Ranma shook his head and went to go get changed, shouting "See ya back at the beach house."

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After the ruckus settled down, Maki found the only (safe) place left to try to settle down to relax was an arm's length away from Nozomi. Sitting back down, she tried to close her eyes and ignore the third-year student, but it was not to be when she heard the faint whispering of "I'm sorry. I should have trusted you to handle Honoka."

"No one 'handles' Honoka," Maki said sardonically. "You only hope to survive her."

Nozomi chuckled. "You're being a little melodramatic, aren't you?"

Maki finally deigned to open one eye, if only to make sure Nozomi wasn't edging closer. "You think so? She went after me when….ugh, if it was anyone else I'd have slapped them."

"So you're not looking to turn your riches into a harem, then?"

"Nozomi!" Maki hissed with a mix of shock and dread. "How could you even bring that - "

Nozomi smirked. "She was *your* dream girl."

"Important word being 'dream.' I would never!" Maki had to fight to keep her voice down, her face turning scarlet and not from the heat of the baths.

Nozomi grinned, relentless. "So you're saying you'd rather be the harem girl? That implies more than one…"

"Agh!" Maki barely restrained the urge to start the splash fight up again. "You are impossible! I just wanted a quiet day alone!"

"...sorry," Nozomi didn't seem very sorry, but she did tilt her head. "Look, I'm just teasing you but I know you need some time to yourself. Before I jumped the gun, I was trying to set up something on your computer for you. I think I got it working, and I usually use it when I'm in your spot."

"I never figured you for a gamer type," Maki commented, a little calmer.

Nozomi shrugged. "It's not like I play it every day or anything, but it's good for a few hours when there's nothing better to do and I don't feel like bugging Erichi or someone."

Maki raised an eyebrow. "Or someone?"

"Eheheh." Nozomi smiled. "Anyway, how do you feel about westerns?"

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As soon as Ranma reached the beach house, he realized something else was wrong. Nico was standing there, obviously waiting for him but unable to meet his eyes. It only took a moment for his patience to run out before he said "All right, what's wrong now?"

"I...think I miscalculated," Nico said, handing out her phone. As soon as Ranma gook it, he noticed it was the comments on the new PV on the Love Live web site, including one particular gem that stood out. *Can't believe they did this in those swimsuits. They're shameless!*

He looked down a few more. Most were positive, but regularly there was another one in that vein. "Okay. Some people don't like the vid. Is there more to it?"
"Maybe," Nico was looking pensive. "There's been some references to off-site blogs. Usually those aren't as popular as the stuff on Love Live but…"

"That's not what I meant," Ranma said. "You can't make everyone happy all the time, Nico. Are you getting cold feet over a few insults, or is this really hitting us where it hurts?"

Nico blinked. "Uh...I thought so, but you mean 'check the numbers'?!" When Ranma nodded, she took back her phone and actually did bring up the relevant charts. "It's too early to tell for sure, obviously, but...yeah." She showed Ranma the phone again. "If we compare this to the first two, Eri's and then the Love Live announcement, we've lost maybe a tenth of the girls who were following us. We've made that up with about half as many boys, who usually buy more stuff from what I've heard on the message boards, so we're not out any money from Love Live, but…"

Ranma winced. "Money don't get votes or ratings for the contest."

"Exactly," Nico tapped away a bit more. "Yeah, we've...hey, wait." She frowned. "When the video came out, we went up a bit. That's normal, you get some people just looking at whatever's new. Then we went up a lot like it was gonna be another hit, but then things stabilized and started to drop."

"Okay, what's that mean?"

Nico practically growled. "I mentioned there was something going on off the Love Live site. But for that there's got to be a lot of negative reviews out there to counteract the effects of the positive ones on Love Live. Even Tsubasa personally praised it, and A-RISE's opinion is worth a lot these days!"

Ranma's eyes went dark. "Nabiki."

"Again." Nico's expression was equally dark. "The blogger who put up that first post on DoCo has been kicked off Love Live after starting the flame war. I think maybe there's more to it…"

Ranma shook his head. "Don't go sayin' that to just anyone, Nics. Nabs usually has a backup plan."

"We have to find some way to get out ahead of her," Nico countered. "Some move, or preferably a bunch of moves, that'll put us so far out in front she can't smear campaign like this and keep us out of the running."

"Got any ideas?"

"How about you?" Nico asked. "We have a concert venue yet?"

Ranma winced. "No. No one in Akiba wanted us…"

"...this was probably why," Nico said slowly. "Afraid we were gonna show up in our swimsuits or do something equally . . . ."

Ranma just smirked. "You would."

"Only if it would help!"

"Okay, fair enough," Ranma conceded. "No sense of feminine modesty."

"Takes one to know one!"

Ranma laughed. "I ain't got no feminine to be modest about."
Nico suddenly smiled deviously. "Are you so sure? I could go get some cold water…" Ranma glared at her. "...and we could go scheme some shopkeeper out of snacks…"

Ranma blinked, thought about it, then remembered Honoka's rebuke the other day. "...okay, point taken I guess."

"Right." Nico smiled. "...just so we're clear, you're not up for that, right?"

"Not that I couldn't use the ice cream, but…"

Nico laughed. "By the way, tell Honoka she owes me a favor."

Nozomi closed the door on the computer room with a relieved sigh. "It's like herding cats."

Eri's lips quirked. "That's rich, considering you started this mess."

Nozomi had the good grace to sheepishly scratch the back of her head. "Well, it's not like Honoka isn't looking a bit down. I think maybe I wasn't as far off as I thought." On seeing Eri's expression, she coughed. "Anyway, that's one songwriter about to destress, at least a little. One day won't fix this, but at least she's not going to burn people in effigy."

This was, rather unfortunately, punctuated by the sound of an explosion.

"Ah, good, she found the dynamite." Nozomi grinned. "And that sound system... Ah well," She caught Eri's suddenly horrified expression. "What? They're not real." Maki's uncharacteristically maniacal laughter and the sounds of gunfire didn't seem to be at all reassuring, so Nozomi shrugged. "I... may have pasted together some modifications for the game to help give her something to focus on."

"What modifications?"

Nozomi blushed. "Uh...with some help? I found a way to make some of the bad guys in the first area look a bit like a certain group of martial artists we know…"

Eri considered that for a moment, and decided she didn't want to know how Nozomi had found something like that so quickly. Instead she commented on the other thing. "I didn't know you were that into those kinds of games."

Nozomi shrugged. "Honestly, I'm not, but I was looking for a better way to work on my English than repeating lines. It turns out Maki's pretty good at English too, so we lucked out there."

"GET BACK HERE AND TAKE YOUR BEATING!"

Eri's eyebrow twitched. "Are you sure about this?"

"Well, there's nothing she can actually hurt..." Nozomi shrugged. "It's probably best to just leave her to it."

Eri nodded reluctantly. "You warned Ranma, right?"

Both of them stared at each other, then ran downstairs and right into the martial artist, who was in her feminine aspect and cursing into the landline. "Jerk," she muttered, before finally hanging up the phone and looking up, abruptly going quiet and nervous. "Uh...hey girls. Just...working on getting us that place to play…"
Eri groaned. "Not going well?"

"That was the last place on the list Tsubasa recommended. 'All booked up.' I even checked and most of them don't have anything goin' on." She muttered darkly. "I got half a mind ta…"

"You only have half a mind, if you sincerely think that would help," Eri managed to restrain herself from snapping it, but her disapproval was pretty obvious.

To her credit, Ranma just sighed. "I know, I know. I'm just not used ta problems a good beating won't solve. If you've got one, believe me, I could use it."

There was another explosion, and another round of diabolical laughter.

Ranma just twitched. "She's been holdin' that in way too long."

"And another thing!" Umi was in rare form. "You know what's going on! You can't just decide to turn off your cell phone and not reply to texts!" They had long since left the bathhouse and were in the dining room waiting for dinner, and apparently any good will from being safe had worn off, because once the plates had been set down Umi had torn into her with all the fury of her namesake.

Honoka held up her finger weakly. "But how can I text if I have my phone o-"

"You know what I mean!" Umi snapped nastily. "I really thought that Chinese weirdo had gotten to you this time! Don't you get it?! She kills people!"

Honoka couldn't quite meet Umi's eyes through most of the tirade, but that really got her attention. "I know she's dangerous to Maki, but I really don't think she'd hurt me."

"Unless she had to to get to -"

Honoka shook her head. "Not even then. I know it doesn't make sense, but you haven't seen her. There's something weird going on in her head, I won't try to argue with you on that, but. . . ."

"She tried to poison you!"

Honoka held up her hand. "No, she tried to poison me and Ranma. That's an important difference. She wouldn't do anything to really hurt Ranma, so. . . ."

"Yeah, but with a two-part poison," Umi pointed out. "She could have been hoping to -"

"She fed us all the second part, though." Honoka smiled. "I was the only one who was guaranteed to eat both parts, but Ranma was a pretty good bet since we haven't made any secret of the study sessions since the incident. It was just her bad luck someone special got both parts and set that whole thing off."

Umi blinked. "Wait, what?"

"What, you didn't figure that out?" Honoka blinked. "I thought you'd be on top of it. Cologne told Tsubasa that there had to be something else at work, and there was that little girl."

Nozomi chose that moment to walk in. "Maybe I can explain that part. I think that might have been the kami that lives at Kanda shrine. We practice in front of her all the time, right? Maybe we attracted her favor…"

Umi blinked. "That's...disturbingly plausible, but why did she look like Maki out of all of us?"
There was another explosion. Nozomi just smiled, a little weakly. "I could really use a sound system that good when I play."

"Please tell me that she won't be doing that all night. Dinner's going to be soon and Nico will be pissed if Maki misses it." Umi moaned out.

Nozomi shrugged. "She'll run out of targets before then, at the rate she's going. I think she has to be out of dynamite by now, but she might have found some I never did. She really likes dynamite." The older girl coughed. "Anyway, as for your question, you'd have to ask Maki. She must have made quite a sacrifice or something. She might not even remember it. Or maybe not. Kami are frustratingly unpredictable, even to the best of us."

Honoka shook her head. "Does it matter? We have a god on our side! How can we lose?"

"By taking that attitude, for one!" Nozomi snapped, startling the both of them. "Seriously, don't take this gift for granted. But it does mean we'll need to arrange some time later this summer to figure out what happened. Don't worry, I'll take care of it, or maybe ask Ranma to. This is right up his alley."

Everyone else had already gathered around the table, except Nico who was still in the kitchen, when Maki finally made her way down to join them. "Whew...that was a nice change of pace..." She looked up to see everyone's nervous expressions. "Uh....what happened?"

Hanayo gulped. "You're...sure you're feeling better?"

Maki gave a shrug in response and took her seat. "What's for dinner? Smells good."

Nico, quite likely waiting for that exact moment, opened the door to set a big bowl of pasta covered in a tomato sauce on the table, smiling. "Well, this was fun. No idea how good it is, but I've never made it before. Pizza will be out in a sec."

Maki blinked, looking stunned. "Uhh..."

Honoka smiled. "Well, what's wrong? Dig in!"

Maki shook her head. "Not 'till Nico sits down." At that moment Ranma brought out several bowls of bread, hastily slathered with garlic and butter, along with a large salad laden rather heavily with fresh tomatoes. "Uhhh..."

Nico was right behind with the promised pizzas. "Don't look too stunned. I had to send Ranma out for pre-made noodles and stuff. I only tried to figure out how to do the pizzas today from scratch."

Maki looked at Honoka in disbelief. "You remembered one little - "

"Actually, I'm the one who noticed," Nico smiled. "You're welcome, but if you wanted Italian you could have asked me instead of dropping a hint."

"When we started this trip we didn't even know you could cook." Maki said back easily, finally spooning some pasta onto her plate. "But seriously, thanks." She took a bite. "Hey, it's pretty good." With that pronouncement, everyone began to eat dinner.

It was an unconventional ending, but then, it had been a rather unconventional club vacation.
Mid-morning on the slow train back to Tokyo, Mu's practically had the train car to themselves. Honoka grinned and started to make her way to where Nozomi was already turning some seats around. Then she felt Ranma's hand on her shoulder, guiding her to one of the back seats in the car. "Uhh...Ranma?"

"Hey, we haven't had a chance to chat much. Maybe a bit away from the others?" Honoka glanced at the others, but one look down at the girl's pensive expression persuaded her. She glanced at Umi. With exchanged nods, Honoka felt herself slide into the somewhat isolated seats.

For several minutes, they stayed rather quiet. Finally Honoka managed to break the silence. "What is it?"

"I was chattin' with Hanayo the other day, and I just realized that I never told ya about a few things..." Ranma choked on her words, unable to meet Honoka's eyes.

Honoka put a hand on her friend's shoulder and squeezed. "Hey, hey, it's okay…"

"No, it ain't." Ranma laughed nervously. "It's been almost six months. I ain't talked about this with no one..." Honoka paled - it had been awhile since Ranma had slipped back into that rough speech. "Y..you ever heard of 'Phoenix Mountain'?

Honoka swallowed. "You've mentioned it a few times, but you always changed the subject." Ranma went completely quiet again. "Ranma, if you're not ready...

"I...It was that bad." Ranma was almost shrinking back into herself. "I...Even though...look, there was this guy....I guess you would think he's a god or something. Saffron, some kind of phoenix who has a kingdom near Shampoo's tribe. I dunno, I didn't exactly stick around. He was threatening to shut off Jusenkyo... but when we tried ta stop him, for all the obvious reasons, he went after Akane. Turned her into a doll and tried to hold her hostage…"

"Wh..what happened?"

Ranma stayed quiet for a long time. "At first, I thought the thing bothering me was that...that I killed him." Honoka fought down a gasp - she couldn't say she was shocked, but it also wasn't how she'd expected to hear it. "Yeah, if you want me to hop off this train right now I do-"

"Don't you dare, Mr Saotome," Honoka chided. "You're still the same boy who crashed into our rooftop practice three months ago."

Ranma winced, but continued. "But...but what really bothers me is that I used Akane as a shield," That got Honoka's eyes to widen in genuine anger. "It didn't hurt her none," he clarified. "She'd had all the water and most of her ki sucked out, the doll wasn't hurt. But I didn't even think about how she was feeling. It saved both our lives, but…"

Honoka nodded. "If it weren't bothering you I'd be more upset, but you did the right thing. Akane would have every right to be angry, but I don't think it's right to hold onto it."

"I don't think she did actually." Ranma clarified. "She never brought it up or nothing, but…"

"It bothers you."
Ranma nodded. "Yeah."

There was a bit of a silence between them. Honoka smiled. "That's good. It means you're thinking about people."

Ranma snorted. "Almost wish I could stop."

"No you don't."

Ranma gave it a moment's thought. "It does make things harder. The School teaches that the only thing that matters is winnin'."

Honoka smirked. "Is it actually winning if you win on your opponent's terms?" She left him to ponder that for awhile. After the food cart passed, though, she asked "Do you want to talk to me about the cat thing?"

"No."

Honoka shrugged. "Okay, but some day I hope you will."

"Honoka…" Ranma felt a bit of her usual energy returning. "You seem to have forgiven Shampoo for that last fiasco."

Honoka blushed. "Well, I mean, she didn't mean to…"

"...can't argue with that." Ranma felt some of the tension she'd been feeling release. "I wanna be sure you know what you're risking with her, you know?"

Honoka nodded. "I do understand that she's dangerous in general. I also don't think she'd hurt me. I...I can't explain it. Believe me, I wish I could."

Ranma said back skeptically "Are you sure you're usin' enough of your head, thinking that?"

"Maybe not," Honoka admitted. "But my heart's never steered me completely wrong either. I'm sure Shampoo won't hurt me."

"Ya thought that before the trip, too," Ranma pointed out. "Look how that went. She ain't exactly careful." Ranma felt his stomach drop. Something about the discussion finally jarred something loose in his skull. "Wait a sec, you said you don't think she'd hurt you," Honoka gave a quick nod. "Do ya think she'd, y'know, do something to your head without hurting you?"

Honoka gulped. "It's a possibility."

Ranma nodded. "Okay, I think she's got one trick left. I don't know why she didn't use it before, but there's these things, they're called Surikomi Eggs. They look like white chicken eggs, but if she throws one at you and it hits you, it'll make you her slave for the rest of your life."

That...was not a possibility Honoka found she could laugh off. "How do you know she has these things?"

"She tried to use them on me during that whole mess at Phoenix Mountain. I went over the fight in my head, and…" Ranma gulped. "She's got at least two left."

Honoka nodded. "I've got it. Don't let those hit me."

Ranma nodded. "Good. It won't be enough if she really gets that into her head, but..."
"What else can we do?" Honoka smiled. "We can't let them get us down, ever."

Ranma smirked. "I knew there was a reason I liked you."

For awhile longer, they sat there in silence. Finally, Honoka's curiosity got the better of her. "You know, I would have expected you to be more nervous about your mom…"

Ranma laughed. "Uhh…yeah, about that. Remember how Maki's parents got me a new phone because the old one could be tracked?" Honoka nodded slowly. "Well, I had a solar charger in my pack for when I have to hit the road again, and…"

Atop a skyscraper in the Roppongi district that housed several dozen gentleman's clubs, there was a soft beeping noise. Tied to the building's satellite receiver a small solar battery collector was still plugged into an older flip-open cell phone. The phone occasionally announced its' presence with another beep. But no one came up here except to fix problems, and there had been no problems in months.

Honoka tried to resist the urge to laugh. It wasn't funny. Except… "Bwahahaha!"

Ranma grinned. "Well, yeah, I figured with her idea of 'manliness' it was as good a way to convince her everything was fine as any."

"It won't…" she wiped a tear out of her eye. "It won't work forever, you know."

Ranma chuckled herself. "Well, it wasn't meant to. The battery'll die or there'll be too many cloudy days or something sooner or later."

Honoka thought about the situation for a bit, and decided it was time to say something. "Ranma, I love you." She had to suppress a chuckle at the instinctive flinch. "Not like that, silly."

"Good," Ranma laughed. "I was afraid I was gonna have to go lookin' for Shampoo again after all."

Honoka returned the laugh. "But you understand, right?"

"Yeah."

Honoka smiled, and reached around the seat to give the martial artist a hug. "Friends forever?"

Ranma's nod wasn't quite the enthusiastic response she hoped for. But then she started to sing, softly so as not to disturb the other passengers. "Whenever you want to see me, we can be together / You may not be able to find the right words, but as long as we're together, isn't that fine?"

"You remembered?" Honoka was surprised for a moment, then restrained herself from smacking her forehead. "Wait, of course you remembered. You planned our show."

Ranma chuckled. "Look, I ain't dressin' up, but if you wanted me to sing that song with you…"

"We'll see."

The train pulled into the station when Kotori's phone rang. "Hello, mom!" She chirped. "Huh? What do you mean there's a problem with the contest?" The other members of Mu's nearly dropped their luggage at Kotori's dismayed tone. "Okay, okay. You're at school, right? The gate's open?" There was another bit of conversation. "Yes, Mom. We'll all be there except Ranma. She's fine, right?"
Kotori relaxed when she heard her mother's reply. "All right, but everyone's going to need time to drop off their stuff. Three okay?"

With a short exchange of pleasantries, Kotori hung up and turned to the group. "Guys, we forgot to get mom's permission, then ran off to vacation. She wants everyone to meet in her office, today, or we can't join Love Live."

"What?" came the general chorus. Ranma, though, brought up the obvious logic problem. "Why didn't she say somethin' when she was out at the beach house?"

Mrs. Minami, principal of Otonokizaka, simply shrugged. "Girls, you've been having a hard time lately. I didn't want to put too much pressure on you at once, but now that you're back in town this needs to be taken care of." She looked over the pile of paperwork in her hand. "This is the release form for the contest. It's not the same form as for the web site itself. Which, incidentally, you also didn't bother to share with me, but the school budget will hardly complain. I'll let all this go…"

Everyone looked visibly relieved. "But I also can't sign the contest form."

The entire room went into shock.

The woman shook her head. "I'd normally be happy to do something like this, but your grades would all have to be passing. Two of you failed one of your exams before the break, then left without scheduling makeup exams."

Honoka went white as a sheet, and Ranma looked despondent. Minami stared in surprise at them. "What are you two worried about? C's are nothing to be ashamed of, even if you could be doing better."

"Huh?" Ranma couldn't quite believe what she was hearing.

Honoka was also stunned, but she had the wit to admit "I didn't even want to look."

Mrs. Minami smiled. "Well, whatever you're doing, do keep it up. Honoka, I always said you could do this if you tried, and my faith in Saotome was equally good. Without the slightest change in tone, demeanor, or even turning her head towards the door, she added "Hoshizora. Yazawa. Just where do you think you're going?"

The two girls had, in fact, almost made it to the door and were trying to quietly open it to slip out. When they were addressed, both snapped around and Nico giggled. "Uhh...to study for our makeup exam?"

"Nyah!" Rin added as an affirmative.

The Principal smiled knowingly. "It's nice to hear such dedication. I'm afraid your teachers are on holiday, but I've asked them to email me their lesson plans and exams. Given the extraordinary pressure you've been under, an extra week to study should be more than enough, yes?"

"Uh-huh!" They both said, before zooming out of the room.

Eri sighed. "We'd better help them out…"

Ranma nodded. "Honoka? How about we work on getting a place to play in Akiba?"

Nico found herself forced into a chair next to Rin, in her own club room, as six pairs of eyes stared...
down at her. Somehow, being trapped in a dream world with a psychotic dervish paled in comparison to the danger she felt right now. "Wh-what do you want from me? It's not like an idol needs math!"

Eri's lips quirked. "You want to be an idol. To enter the contest, you need to know math. By definition, at least one idol needs to know math."

"What kind of crazy logic is that?" Nico shot back.

Maki sighed, pulling the calculus book out. "The kind of crazy logic where you sit down and get to work?"

"I'm planning on it!" Nico countered. "Look, I didn't know it would turn out this way. Who do you think you're talking to? I've got a week, so I'll get it done."

"Hmph, math's one thing." Rin interjected. "I don't see how I'll use English."

Nozomi smiled in a way that seemed to simultaneously brighten and darken the room. "I suggest everyone work on their English, actually. Right now Maki and I are the only ones who can speak it at all, and the cards say…." The third year found herself cut off by Nico. "It doesn't matter what the cards say, we both know full well you can't predict that well. Even if we're going somewhere, it could be France, or Brazil, or even Okinawa…"

"That's true…." Nozomi conceded.

Maki completed the thought. "But almost anywhere you go someone will speak enough English to get by."

Rin looked to Nico for support, but the older girl shrugged. "She's got you there. My English is…well, okay, it's not good but I'm passing so right now I'm going to worry about math." She lifted the book back up in front of her eyes.

"Then why is the book upside down?" Rin half-meowed the last few syllables.

Nico slammed the book down on the table. "None of your business!"

Suddenly, Rin pointed out the window. "Hey, it's a flying saucer!"

No one moved. "Nyaaahahaha…."

Nico gave her a longer stare than any of them. "Look, we screwed up, it's time for both of us to buckle down." She glanced around, and her eyes fell on the clock. "But, at the same time, I have other commitments…so…SEEYA!" She reached down into her bag and threw a small sack of flour into the air.

Again, no one moved. Eri deadpanned "You're cleaning that up."

"Ehehehehehe…."

Umi shook her head. "I guess you guys have everything under control. I'm gonna go talk to Honoka before she leaves."
Umi barely caught up to them as Ranma came out of the teacher's office space. He had changed back into his natural form. "Aren't you supposed to be a girl at school?"

"It's vacation, and we were leavin' anyway," Ranma shot back, albeit with a good-natured grin. "What's up?"

Umi shook her head. "Last I checked Nico tried a smoke bomb to get away."

Honoka boggled. "A smoke bomb? Where did she get it?"

"She didn't," Umi said dryly. "Stole some flour from Maki's kitchen before we cleaned up and threw it in the air."

Ranma shrugged. "Gotta add gunpowder, or some other actual explosive. And you gotta be careful about the mix or you get a firebomb."

Umi brushed that off. "The point is, we've got some work to do. But I really had to...congratulations, Honoka. I always knew you could do it if you actually tried. But why now?"

Honoka was nonplussed. "Well..."

"I'm right here, ya know," Ranma said with one of his trademark smirks.

Honoka looked even more sheepish. "Well, it's not like you and Kotori ever needed any help, and I've mostly passed before..."

"Mostly," Umi said with emphasis. "But I know you've been struggling with the calculus and physics." She sighed. "Whatever works."

Honoka shrugged. "Anyway, we've got to get going. Ranma, I'll take the second half of the list..." She trailed off as she noticed Ranma and Umi stiffen. "What?"

Umi glared at her. "Don't you remember? Nozomi's reading was pretty specific on that point." She looked to her fellow martial artist. "Ranma, don't let her out of your sight!"

Honoka rolled her eyes when Ranma actually gave a salute to Umi's order. "Umi, if I'm with Ranma how can there be any actual danger?"

"As much as I love hearing how confident you are about me..." Ranma said dryly. "I'm not completely infallible. How did that bit from the math book go? 'A very small number greater than zero is still greater than zero'? Umi's right, you're better off with me than without until there's an incident."

"Fine, fine..." Honoka sighed, defeated. "It'll take twice as long that way though."

Ranma shrugged. "We're on break and, for once, I don't have makeup tests."

"Fine, fine, you win."

Nico sighed, turning around the answer sheet on the practice test. "Can I go now?"

Nozomi suspiciously looked over the answers. "You're still only getting half right. You need to do better than that."
"We've got a week!" Nico shouted. "Look, I have to get going!"

Eri glanced at her. "Care to tell us why?"

"It's none of your business why!" Nico shouted indignantly. "My whole life doesn't revolve around Mu's, you know!"

That got everyone's attention. "I thought the only thing you cared about was idols," Rin said, looking up from her own work.

Maki was about to say something, but then noticed the look in Nico's eyes, something akin to murder blazing in them. "Fine, fine," she said casually. "If she wants to run out, let her. I'll head to her place after dinner to check up."

"Fine, go ahead." Nico shot at her, shoving everything into her book bag before rushing out the door.

Eri glanced at her. "Do you even know where she lives?"

"I'm checking her Facebook now," Maki said, leaning back as she thumbed at her phone, growing more puzzled. "Huh?"

"What?"

Maki raised an eyebrow. "According to this, she's living in the Ginza. Unless her family's making more than my parents…"

Five girls sighed. Hanayo took note of the sound being slightly off, and looked up. "Hey, where's Kotori?"

Stepping out from the Akihabara train station, Honoka couldn't help but smile up at the UTX building. For once, there was no A-RISE video playing on the jumbo-sized screens over the skyscraper's entrance. There was definitely a special reason to be happy at seeing the iconic landmark, one that was only tangentially related to the group. She jauntily waved up at a window, not knowing or even caring if Tsubasa actually saw from whatever high window she was working from.

Ranma caught the gesture. "Little higher up. Right around the twentieth floor."

"Is this another martial arts thing?" Honoka found herself asking. "Super-vision?"

Ranma shrugged. "Not really. You coulda caught that one with a bit of thought. Look up. There's only one person in the windows. If she's supposed to be watching, that's her."

Honoka chuckled. "I don't know if Tsubasa's watching for us," she said, but she waved up at the person anyway. "But…"

"Nah, it's fine," Ranma said, nodding around. "How about right here? It looks good for a concert." He definitely had a point. The buildings surrounding the area outside the station formed a courtyard. Anyone visiting the district's main attractions would have to walk through there. There was also plenty of space for a performance while still letting foot traffic pass. A series of anime-themed cafes along the wall to the right would serve to draw young people to the area.

Honoka frowned. "Only one problem. I'm sure the whole area's owned by UTX."
Ranma hummed with thought. "Send Tsubasa an email?" 

"As long as I'm only asking her how we'd go about getting permission," Honoka warned. "We can't ask for any more favors."

Ranma nodded. "I figured she might know off the top of her head."

Once the email was fired off, they went down the street leading to the Electric Town strip. Checking the map, they started going from store to store. Most weren't suitable at all, with no open spaces to perform in. The pair of them found a modern-looking cafe with a small stage area - barely enough for the nine of them to stand still, never mind dance. "I dunno..." Ranma said.

Honoka frowned. "We could manage something. If we do one set inside, then a half set outside with full performance. Saturday the shop can use the area out front."

Ranma thought about it, then nodded. "That'll work." He walked up to the counter, signaling the attendant. "Excuse me, can we talk to the manager?" he asked.

The girl took one look at Honoka, then bowed in apology. "I'm very sorry, but I'm afraid there's nothing we can do for you."

Ranma grimaced. "Okay, fine. I'll get a coffee, black, to go." Honoka glanced up, surprised. Once they were outside the shop, she gave him a look. Ranma shrugged in response, taking a sip. "It's gonna be a long afternoon."

"It's not that...well, not just that," Honoka said. "I don't remember you being one for coffee."

Ranma gave her a weary shrug. "Nishikinos seem pretty fond of it. And with all the studying I'm doing lately I've put in some late nights and early mornings," he said, taking a sip of the coffee.

Honoka sighed. "Well, take care of yourself. I know we've got to keep your grades up, but..."

"Relax," Ranma smirked again. "I can stay up three days straight if I gotta, just not a lot of fun."

They got back to work. However, Ranma's earlier statement proved to be prophetic. Cafe after restaurant after store all gave them the same response - a heartfelt but final apology, usually only after looking at Honoka's face. Around the twentieth rejection they finally stopped at a small stand selling popsicles.

Ranma grabbed Honoka's cell phone to ensure she hadn't recorded any snacks, much to the girl's chagrin. "All right, all right," he said. "It's been a long day," He gave her an evil smile. "I'll work any extras out of you tomorrow."

Honoka thought about that. "I don't care." Once they had their snacks, they started back towards the train station. "Do you think this is Tendo again?"

Ranma frowned. "I don't know that she'd actually go that far. I think she only had to spread the link around and let everything shake out."

Honoka returned the frown with a deeper one. "I guess the managers all pay more attention to school idols than I thought." She sighed. "I guess we can hold a concert at the school during the break, but that won't be as good."

Suddenly, there was a flash of motion out of the corner of her eye. Ash-blonde hair darting around the corner. "Huh?"
Ranma nodded. "That was Kotori. She was wearin' a maid costume too."

"After her!"

Ranma blinked in confusion as Honoka took off running.

Nico glanced over her shoulder. The grocery store wasn't the best in town, but it met all her requirements. It was on the way home, cheap…and that was about it. The harsh fluorescent lighting made it easy to determine which vegetables and fruits were fresh enough to last longer than a few days. Unfortunately, the sales on those that weren't often meant she didn't have a choice.

She was looking over the radishes when someone pointed out to her "Those ones near the top look good."

"Yeah, but I can't reach," Nico replied, before she realized who had spoken. "Damn your insight, Toujou."

Nozomi smiled and put the radishes into Nico's basket, with a hint of humor. "You know the rules."

"Club rules," Nico replied. "And I'm the president and I didn't agree to this."

"Agree to what?" Nozomi asked, adding some garlic cloves.

Nico snarled. "Letting you follow me home, and what's with picking out my groceries?"

"Is it that you live alone?" Nozomi asked, suddenly serious. "Look, you're not exactly the only one. My parents are out of town so often I have my own apartment closer to school because it's 'easier' for everyone."

"Yeah, and I bet it's filled with all sorts of nice stuff to 'make up' for it," Nozomi almost snapped at Nico, but restrained herself. Instead, she gently corrected her with "No. I suppose they would, but I've only got my bed and computer and some stuff for the kitchen. It's a really nice computer, or at least it was two years ago when I started high school." At Nico's snort of derision, she realized she'd hit some kind of sore spot. "Sorry."

"Don't be," Nico snapped. "Go home and leave me alone for today. I'll be at school or the shrine as early as you want and we'll be on a first-name basis again. But stop trying to follow me home and keep your nose out of my private life."

Nozomi winced. "Nico...I...You were ripped off." she pointed out. "I don't think that's the kind of..."
thing you can learn from an online video course."

"So what do you suggest?" Nico snapped again, turning to pick up a couple of tomatoes. "Saotome?"

"...yes, actually." Nozomi admitted. "It's a skill it feels like she'd pick up."

"No thanks."

Nozomi swallowed. She knew Nico was being contrary now for its' own sake. "If you'll promise to ask her about it, I'll get you those DVDs."

"You can't bribe me, Toujou."

Nozomi winced. "I'll even make it a special edition if you let me come home with you."

That caused Nico to waver, but only for a moment as it occurred to her what the extra incentive would cost. "No deal."

It was Nozomi's turn to wince - this would hurt her pocket book. "Not even if I get you the Blu-Ray with the bonus videos?"

"How do you plan to do that?!" Nico shrieked. "They sold out online two months ago, and it's not even out yet!" Then she realized. "You're going to pay a scalper? Seriously? What kind of allowance do you get?"

Nozomi swallowed, deciding to be honest. "Not enough for that. I'd have to... I don't know, it would probably come out of my food budget."

"You're serious." Nico realized. "You're actually serious?" When Nozomi nodded, she turned to the vegetables so she wouldn't have to look the other girl in the eye. "No. I can't let you do that for me, Nozomi. But...I can't let you see where I live, either. Please."

"No one else has to know," Nozomi pointed out. "Whatever you're trying to hide, no one at school besides Ranma even needs to know the address. And that..." she said, trying to cut off Nico's objection "...is only because, if something happens, he needs to be able to find you in a hurry. I'll ensure he gives his word of honor that he won't tell before letting him know even that much."

Nico winced. "Okay. But I still have some ground rules." At Nozomi's serious nod, she swallowed. "I'll show you where it is, but you still can't come in. She held up a hand. "You don't have to get me anything. But I can't let visitors in. Not unannounced like this." Nozomi gave her another, more hesitant, nod. "You give me a day's warning and I'll at least be able to clean up a bit." She swallowed. "Two, you really, really can't tell anyone but Ranma what you see. Not Eri, not Honoka, especially not Maki."

"Huh?" Nozomi blinked. "Why Maki specifically?"

Nico turned away and went to pick up some rice. Nozomi followed after, but no matter how much further she pestered Nico wouldn't tell her anything else.

"I see why Umi worries about you," Ranma pointed out. They were about three blocks away from the main strip, heading towards the Kanda shrine. "Why the heck are we chasin' down Kotori?"

"Because she's running away!" Honoka shouted. In all truth, she was privately marveling at the
difference. Before things had begun, she wouldn't have been able to run like this. Sure, she had to do a couple of kilometers at school for gym, but right now she felt like she could keep this pace up for hours.

The only thing limiting her was the need to keep from running into anyone. Of course, that applied to Kotori as well, and her long maid dress wasn't proving a decisive disadvantage.

"Last time I checked, that wasn't a crime," Ranma pointed out. "Look, Honoka, we'll see her at practice and we can ask her then? Why isn't that good enough."

Honoka shook her head. "She'll deny everything. And I wanna know."

"Fine." Ranma jumped up onto the brick walls separating the houses from the street, dashing above the crowd at a speed that reminded her that there were heights she'd never reach on her own.

It was still less than a minute later that she caught up to see Ranma loudly arguing with Kotori. The girl was babbling at the latter while keeping her face covered. She was, indeed, wearing a maid costume, but not the sort that had immediately come to mind with Ranma saying it. The dress was a simple brown color. It fell well past her knees, the matching apron completely covering her front so even if the dress showed a bit of cleavage she was covered. The only thing that even hinted at the more scandalous costumes one might see on the street criers was the hat. "Ja ne sai pa comme parley vou Japonaise?" Kotori tried babbling out, although even to Honoka's ears it didn't sound foreign.

Ranma shook his head. "Kotori, you ain't gonna fool me. Not that easy, anyway." The ash-blond haired girl sank against the wall, defeated. "Now, way I see it, there's only two ways this is my business. You wearin' a costume to go singing without the band?" A shake of the head. "And are ya gonna let whatever this is get in the way of any more practices?" Another shake. "Okay, then."

Then Honoka finally caught up, panting but not completely out of breath "No, not 'okay then!'" She spun on Kotori. "What is wrong with you? Why can't you trust me?"

Kotori had tears in her eyes. "Honoka, I…"

"Honoka, that ain't fair!" Ranma slid between them. "Kotori ain't joined to ya at the hip or nothing! If she wants a hobby, well, this is harmless…" He stopped, glancing over his shoulder. "It..is harmless, right?" Kotori's hands on her hips answered that question well enough. "Okay, okay, it's harmless."

"But…" Honoka blinked. She wasn't used to being on the wrong side of this kind of argument with Ranma. "It's…" she tried again. "It kinda hurts that you didn't tell me, that's all."

"Well, it's kind of embarrassing…"

In the Tendo Dojo, Akane sat in silent meditation, the same as the day before. Shampoo looked on for a few moments, then turned away. Cologne was in the garden outside. She seemed content to let Akane be for the moment, which suited Shampoo fine. She went out and sat down near the pond, waiting to be acknowledged. This would be serious, after all.

When Cologne finally nodded at her, she decided to speak quietly, and in Chinese again. "Matriarch, are you certain this course of action is wise?"

"Wise?" Cologne shrugged. "I think not. But it is expedient."

Shampoo came up short. "You're hoping she fails the training."
"It seems likely," Cologne said. "Oh, not the Soul of Ice, I'd wager she has better than fifty-fifty odds of that. But it's akin to handing a child a loaded gun, wouldn't you agree?"

Shampoo considered for a few moments. "I can't say I like this, Great-Grandmother. You're teaching the Tribe's secrets to a total outsider. When it was my husband we were pushing it, but if the other Elders found out about this I don't know what they'd do."

"Nothing, child," Cologne snorted with amusement. "The Soul of Ice is hardly a secret of the tribe on its' own - most styles have something similar in their books. And if Akane works out the Heaven Blast from that and what she's seen of Ranma, well, it's no fault of mine or yours."

"I see..." Shampoo said. "Still...why are we helping her?"

"Do you find it that objectionable?"

Shampoo sighed softly. "Not as much as I would have expected," she admitted reluctantly. "But she's still a rival for my husband, and I'm going to have to kill her sooner or later." She winced from the impact of the staff against her head. "What was that for?"

"Try again."

Shampoo rubbed at the slowly growing lump on the side of her head. "...are you saying Ranma found someone else? Not that Honoka girl!" Cologne stared at her evenly. "One of the other girls, then?"

"Better," Cologne said. "But you know which one." At Shampoo's confused expression, Cologne sighed. "If you're going to indulge an art other than that of the Warrior, please don't insult your family by not doing your best."

Shampoo winced again, but the expected blow didn't come. "Instruct me, then, if you know about it."

"Well, these 'school idols' are new to me..." Cologne reminded her. "But think back to the songs of the valley. Can you not instantly tell if a song is of our tribe, or the Musk, or one of the others, only listening to it?" When Shampoo nodded. "Very well," She pulled out a small music player and let Shampoo listen for a few minutes. It played a quick medley of Mu's songs against the ones they had recorded.

The girl's eyes opened, hard as glittering sapphires. She changed her language back to Japanese forcefully. Thinking through every word before speaking slowly and deliberately, she said "The songs Akane 'bought' were stolen from my husband's new friends."

Cologne nodded. "Very good. Now, what else can you discern?"

Shampoo had to think very hard, slipping back into more broken speech as she realized what she needed to do. "There three kind of songs. Mercenary girl only give us love songs, so person who write songs is one in love with husband."

"Right." Cologne nodded. "Unfortunately, you won't be able to act on this information directly."

Shampoo stood up. "Still need speak to Honoka. Okay leave Akane?"

Cologne smiled. "I think I can watch her for a few hours." She would see what Shampoo did with this new information.
Back at the Idol Research Club's room, Umi finally sighed. "Okay, you've made some progress," she said. Very reluctantly. "Hanayo, take her home. I'm sure Kotori's mom let her parents know already."

Rin gulped. "Uh...I can study some more nyow!" she cried out, quickly opening her book again.

Maki snorted. "Much more eager, I see. But some of us do have family to get home to, if not quite as . . . urgently as Nico."

Eri began packing up the papers she had been working on. "I'm not sure we need to go so far as to assign a chaperone, Umi."

Umi shook her head. "No one goes anywhere alone, especially Rin. I wish Kotori had remembered that."

"You really think..." Eri raised an eyebrow.

Umi shrugged. "If they hear anything about it? You bet." She pulled her things together. "I'll just have to risk it. Maki, can your driver drop Eri off at her place?"

Maki blushed. "What do you mean, my driver?"

"...sorry," Umi said. "Uhm..."

Eri rolled her eyes. "We'll all risk it. I, for one, am not about to start jumping at every shadow and letting them ruin my life."

Umi gave it a moments thought. "Okay, you're right," she said with a tone of defeat. "But Rin and Nico. . . ."

Hanayo nodded softly. "That's a good point. They can't be distracted this week, and. . . ." she gulped, unable to believe what she was about to say. "I'll do it."

Rin blushed. "Kayochi, you don't have to..."

Hanayo smiled. "I want to...besides, I'm not gonna stand up to them or anything, just make sure someone can call for help."

"Thanks."

Nozomi strolled up the main Akiba strip again, heading back to her own apartment and considering Nico's odd requests. After all, she still lived in Tokyo. Maybe it wasn't the nicest apartment in the city, but like she had said to her classmate, it was hardly a dump or anything.

The puzzle had her so lost in thought she didn't notice when she ran chest-to-face with someone with a gentle bump. She stopped for a moment in surprise that the girl in the UTX uniform didn't get out of the way.

They stayed like that for about ten seconds. Nozomi's shock fadded to bemusement, while the girl's face remained completely obscured. Finally, though, Nozomi asked "Enjoying yourself?"

"A bit," Tsubasa admitted. "But that's not why I needed to talk with one of you."

"Wh-why am I buying?" Tsubasa spluttered.

Nozomi smiled. "Services rendered." At Tsubasa's continued incoherent sputtering, she relented. "Okay, okay. What's going on?" Tsubasa at a particularly interesting sign on a nearby bus stop. "What? Was it something I said?"

"I should really tell Honoka..."

Nozomi saw the utterly dejected look on the idol's face. "Is that why you'd risk coming out and about?"

"Not just that," Tsubasa said. "I needed to get out of the school and away from Erena and Anju for awhile," she said, referencing her fellow idols from A-RISE. "I just...I don-" Tsubasa found herself being gathered up into a hug. "T-Toujou?"

"Nozomi," the long-haired girl hushed her. "After the beach house, we are. friends."

"...yeah." Nozomi felt the girl's tension grow. "Nozomi, that's what I wanted to talk to Honoka about-"

"Screw'em," Tsubasa's jaw dropped. "But...well, I found out something about Honoka. I guess she should tell you this herself, but I don't think she realizes there's anything to tell yet, so...yeah, come on."

The cafe was a well-appointed, wood paneled space with comfortable dining chairs, each table and booth spaced to give a sense of privacy while still making the best use of space. Kotori was seated across from Honoka and Ranma, trying hard to die of embarrassment. "So that's how it is..." she finally said.

Ranma was the first to speak. "So you work here? Does your mom know?" Kotori's head shook. "Okay, now we have a problem. Kotori, I know the school rules inside and out." Both girls looked at him in surprise. "Your mom made me memorize the book," he explained. "And you can't have a job..."

"I know," Kotori said, her face in her hands. "But it was...it's so much fun!"

Honoka almost sighed, but then brightened. "Hey, maybe this is the answer to our problem!" Now it was her turn to get weird looks. "The problem is that video, right? Everyone thinks we're..." She blushed heavily. "Well, what if we did the main performance in the costume for the restaurant?"

"...that could work," Ranma admitted. "Kotori, can you come up with something to match the aesthetic we could do a street performance in?" With Kotori's nod, Ranma grinned. "All right, why don't you introduce us to your boss?"

A minute later, they were seated in a small office upstairs from the main restaurant floor. The woman was in her late 20s at most, but with the stress lines forming that were common to business owners in a bad spot. She looked over the trio "Let me get this straight? You're actually one of the girls in that awful video I've been hearing about?"

Kotori nodded.

For a few moments, the manager looked them over. "I have to admit, I can't imagine Kotori doing anything as salacious as I've heard. Do you mind if I pull up the video and actually watch it?" Ranma thought about it for a second. "Oh, and before it slips my mind, Otonoki's an all-girls school. How
can a boy be involved in their school idol club? Doesn't your school have one?"

Ranma swallowed. "I'd rather not say right now, but it's a long story and the short version is that, yes, I'm going to Otonoki."

"I guess I have no choice but to believe that. The school's closing anyway, so I suppose a boy wouldn't make a huge difference," the manager replied while Honoka brought up the actual video.

For exactly five minutes they sat there and watched the video with new eyes. What had, at the time, not seemed to be too bad was rather borderline acceptable. By the end all three of them were completely red in the face. The manager coughed, and finally turned to look at them. "Well, I'll admit it's not as bad as I'd been led to believe. Rumor being what it is, and all. That said, I can't have…that…in this establishment either."

"That ain't what we're asking for," Ranma replied. "We're...well, Mu's will be wearing either the same uniform as the regular staff..." he gestured to Kotori "...or, for the half-set outside, we'll use something that looks like it with a shorter and wider skirt for the dancing part. More like the first two vids."

The manager gave it a thought. "Well, it would be nice. But unfortunately we'll have to set it for the second-to-last Sunday of your vacation." She held up a hand. "Unfortunately, the space out front is booked the rest of the month."

Ranma swallowed, but nodded. "Okay. That gives us enough time to get an album together and promote it...and do some other stuff I gotta set up." Honoka looked at him. "Not quite the time."

The manager shrugged. "Well, that isn't my business. Just remember…"

Honoka grinned. "Trust me, no funny business."

Meanwhile, Tsubasa and Nozomi had retreated to the top floor of a department store, finding a chain cafe. The expression on Tsubasa's face the whole way was something Nozomi could only describe as forlorn. Nozomi came to a quick decision and went to the counter and order the drinks for Tsubasa instead. "Here," she said, sliding a watermelon soda in front of Tsubasa. "Eri usually feels better with something sweet in hand."

"Oh, yeah, thanks…" Tsubasa sighed, taking a sip. "Guess you wanna know why I went looking for Honoka, huh?"

"Well, it's kind of random. How did you know she'd be here today?"

"She emailed me," the idol said. "It's...well, look, it's like this…"

Tsubasa was getting a latte from the school's cafeteria -

"Wait, your school has a cafeteria, and it serves lattes?" Nozomi asked, dumbfounded.

"Well, we've got to pay for it," Tsubasa shrugged. "Or, rather, it's paid for out of boarding fees, which are seriously unreal."

Nozomi shook her head. "Back up. I know UTX is some kind of arts school, but I never paid that much attention when I was researching." At Tsubasa's incredulous look, she shrugged. "For me,
being a School Idol is supposed to be a hobby. I'm doing independent religious study on top of being a shrine maiden."

Tsubasa nodded. "Okay, although it's kind of a shame. You're good. I'm not just saying that either, but that's...okay, right, we're getting way off track here. UTX isn't 'some arts school' it was built as a magnet for the best from all over Japan. Everyone was surprised when Nishikino didn't turn up,"

It was Nozomi's turn to look forlorn. "Yeah...that's still a fizzing time bomb," She held up a hand. "Getting off topic again."

Tsubasa nodded. "Yeah. Most students at UTX go on to some of the best schools in the world. All our students end up in some kind of creative job. Photography, art, acting, dance, cinematography, music...Erena's actually going with the Juilliard trip in November. You may not have heard of it but we've got six accepted to audition to go to college there."

Nozomi chuckled. "I'll assume it's famous," she said with a smile. "Go on."

"Right. Anyway, the point is that we're not just 'some school.' UTX was built to replace six or seven closed schools like it all over the country. Concentrate all the finest minds etcetera," She waved a hand around. "I'm from Tokyo, but everyone's required to stay in the school pretty much all the time. Vacation's the exception, but even then spending too much time off is . . . not encouraged. Since my parents are around here, I still pretty much have to go in every day. I only get to sleep at home and have dinner with them."

Nozomi winced. "I can sympathise, believe me. My parents are out of the country all the time. So I live on my own too."

Tsubasa chuckled. "Right...so, anyway…"

Tsubasa was getting a latte from the school's cafeteria when her phone beeped. She briefly checked the message sender and let out a slightly exasperated sigh. But she was still smiling all the way from the barista counter to the counter overlooking the square.

Reading it, she rolled her eyes. Wondering if you knew how to apply for a permit to perform in the square - H.

She was about to respond pointing out that a search could have handled that when she felt the phone being taken out of her hands. "Hey!"

Toudou Erena, with her tall, thin stature and purple hair was standing over her, looking down with arms crossed. Her expression, while usually a bit cooler and more distant than Tsubasa's, was unusually icy. Her green eyes were glittering with a level of emotion that wasn't reaching her voice. "Tsubasa, we talked about this, didn't we?"

"Oh, come on!" Tsubasa practically whined. "I can't stop her from having my email, and anyway I was about to tell her to handle it herself." She was about to turn around, when she realized someone was behind her. She couldn't see the other girl, but she was sure that Anju was nowhere near as restrained as the taller girl.

Judging by the pain in Anju's voice, though, it was worse than she had expected. "Tsubasa, you've stolen school property, missed practice time. I think you're even letting your grades slip!" She forced Tsubasa to turn around, only to see tears in her amethyst eyes, her brown hair actually less than perfectly done. "This isn't about A-RISE, we're worried!"
Erena picked up the thought as Erena practically embraced her. It was as if she was trying to prevent her from leaving again. "Ditching camp was only the last straw, really. There's nothing in the school's rulebook that says you can't have a girlfriend. But why her? Don't you think there's a conflict of interest here?"

Tsubasa jumped, startled at that line of reasoning. "I don't?"

Erena's eyes narrowed. "You 'borrowed' the school's drones so Mu's could shoot a PV, and they shoot up in the polls like a rocket. Some people decide they don't like the follow-up - also shot on our drones I might add!"

Tsubasa's temper flared. "It wasn't, actually. That was the reason I 'ditched' camp, in all the confusion they'd forgotten to return them so I went to go pick them up. Turned out they'd bought their own because they liked them so much."

Anju shoved back from her lightly. "That's not the point! They get themselves in trouble and you're right there, using A-RISE's reputation to defend them. You realize we've dropped to number two on the contest chart since you said that!"

"Please, give them time!" Tsubasa shot back, not caring that the few students in the cafeteria for a snack were all staring at the three of them. "They're good, I know it!"

"A year ago we wouldn't be having this talk," Erena said smoothly. "But you may have noticed that now it's actually a competition." Tsubasa winced. "So what's the deal?"

Tsubasa sighed again. "Fine, you're right, I guess I'm kinda interested in Honoka. And yeah, I let it get out of control. But there's two things I want to say. Seeing her partners both cross their arms she nearly lost her resolve. Then she remembered charging into that insane 'dream Otonoki and felt her it return. "One, I am cutting them off from help. They want any more help from A-RISE, they go through you two."

Anju took a step back, startled at the sudden anger. "Tsubasa, we're worried, not angry! Your driver told us some crazy things after he dropped you off, you know."

Tsubasa shrugged. "Yeah, that was true. Don't ask me to explain what happened there, but I'd do it again." She pushed past the pair while they were too confused to act. "I'm headed out. Don't follow me."

"I see.…." Nozomi said when the tale was finished.

"I don't," Erena said. "All I know is we weren't done with that conversation, Toujou. But since you're here, can you tell us what drugs you slipped to our Tsubasa?"

Nozomi looked up, her face as serene as ever even as she was confronted by two angry idols. "I didn't, it was a Chinese Amazon, and anyway Tsubasa didn't get the other half."

"...what." Under the circumstances, Nozomi reflected, it was the best response she could have expected.

Tsubasa shook her head. "Long story, and I didn't want you to worry."

"...okay." Anju swallowed, realizing they'd stepped into something weirder than they had planned. "But how did you do it?"
"Magic's real, but I can't do that," Nozomi said. "But I can see you don't believe me, so…" She pulled out her tarot deck. "These are my cards. I use them for fortunetelling….but there's a neat trick I can also do." She placed the cards on the table, stood up, and turned her back. "Go ahead and shuffle them. Each of you draw one."

Erena followed the instructions, skeptical, then pulled her own card. When the others had followed suit, Nozomi spoke up without turning around. "Tsubasa pulled the Three of Swords, Erena the King of swords, and Anju's the Six of Cups, reversed." They all felt their jaws drop. Nozomi glanced over her shoulder. "If you'd like I can do it again. As many times as you want."

Erena nodded. "I'll take you up on that." The cards were shuffled again. This time Nozomi called them out before they had even flipped them over. "...o-okay. I admit it's a cute trick. How are you doing it?"

"Magic."

"O...one more." Erena said slowly, giving Anju a significant look. This time, after dealing the cards, Erena tried to slip hers to Anju, getting the other's card in return.

Nozomi looked over her shoulder with a glare. "First, Tsubasa pulled the Lovers. Erena, your card was the Hermit, reversed, and Anju pulled the High Priestess, also reversed. And I don't appreciate you trying to trick either me or Tsubasa by switching your cards."

Anju turned pale, backing away a step. "N..no way, you couldn't possibly have...there's no mirrors….there's got to be a trick!"

"No trick," Nozomi said, her demeanor returning to its' normal, pleasant smile. "I'll be happy to run a prediction for you too. I'm never wrong, but there's always room to interpret."

Erena calmed herself with a deep breath, giving a nod to Anju. "Okay, once again, it's a very good trick. But even if I accept 'magic' as an explanation for that, you would think if this kind of thing were real it would be common knowledge. You can't replace a beach house with a school - a school that doesn't fit in the lot for the house - and not have it show up on Nico or Youtube!"

Nozomi smiled. "Oh, that's quite a valid point. Did you look for it?"

Erena looked puzzled as she started looking on her phone. A minute later she smiled triumphantly. "Oh, I found your fake all right."

She was about to show comment when Nozomi replied airily "Of course someone declared it a fake." "The internet and the skeptics are helpful that way."

"...what?" Erena was feeling like the rug was being continually pulled from under her. She wasn't much liking the sensation.

"Oh, don't get me wrong, there's actually a lot of fakes out there," Nozomi said. "Hard to know how many. At first I understand a lot of them were made by people trying to obscure the whole thing. Then everyone wanted to get internet-famous and started editing their own fake videos." She shrugged. "We rather like it that way."

Tsubasa blinked. "Wait, you like everyone thinking what you can do isn't real?"

"Of course!" Nozomi's smile was back to her usual, mysterious one. "I don't mind random people showing up asking me to predict the future for them now and again. But I'd be doing nothing else all day if word got out. When would I have time for school?"
"Still, you'd have already been found ou - " Erena tried again, but Nozomi shushed her.

"Of course it's not going to last," Nozomi explained. "But what happens, happens. Oh, Tsubasa?"
The last was delivered almost conversationally.

"Huh?"

Nozomi, not looking at her, said "Duck."

Tsubasa only barely got under Erena's arms, in which she was holding one of the ropes to the cafeteria line. "Wha-what are you doing?!

Erena was staring at her. "Getting you to a clinic or a hospital - "

Nozomi shrugged. "I'm sure the Nishikino's hospital will be happy to verify she hasn't taken anything, aside from some bad apples."

"Don't remind MEEP!" This time Tsubasa, without any advance warning, was grabbed. "Geez, guys! I'm fine!"

Nozomi stood up, her eyes darkening. Her voice was still quiet, but seemed to carry the doom of a thousand angry spirits. "Yuuki Anju. Toudou Erena." The named girls froze in surprise and sudden fear. "I am having a very nice and civil conversation with my friend. I understand she's your colleague, but I am very tired of this discussion. I assure you, in my presence she will not come to any harm if I can prevent it, and you've seen that I have some ability to back that up. In return, I ask that you either join us in the same spirit of conversation, or go back to your tower and wait for us to finish our coffee before you get her back. Understood?"

Two thirds of A-RISE were out of the coffee shop before Tsubasa could take another breath.
"They're not going to like that."

"I know I keep saying it, but Kira Tsubasa?" She blinked in response to Nozomi's sudden change in tone from deadly serious to just serious. "You. Are. Our. Friend. Any time you want to talk to any of us about anything that isn't being a School Idol, you are welcome." She paused. "Although I wouldn't recommend conversation with Nico or Hanayo alone for awhile."

"Okay." Tsubasa sighed. "Right, you wanted to talk to me about Honoka."

Nozomi swallowed. "Uhm...if you're sure."

"I am," Tsubasa said straight back to her. "I'm risking my other friendships in the club for this, so I do need to know."

Nozomi thought about the best way to phrase it. "Well, yes, I'm pretty sure Honoka is interested in you too - " The bright sparkle in Tsubasa's eyes was a hard thing to crush. "She's also interested in Maki, and probably Umi. Maybe Shampoo too, although that's possibly a crush."

By the time Nozomi was done speaking, Tsubasa was looking less elated and more confused. "You mean she's...er..."

Nozomi shrugged. "Honoka seems to love everyone. I suspect that, under better circumstances she might even have a thing for Ranma." Tsubasa's dejected expression seemed to deserve more. "Look, I'm not saying 'don't' but you deserve to know what you're letting yourself in for. I'm trying to think of how to bring this up with her but she doesn't seem to get that there's even a problem..."
Tsubasa shook her head. "Girl's crazy, then?"

"Probably." Nozomi smiled. "But she's worth it. I'd go for her myself if Eri would go for it."

"What do I do?" Tsubasa laid her head on her arms.

Nozomi raised an eyebrow. "Do you want advice or a prediction?"

Tsubasa blinked "Can you do that?"

"Sure!" Nozomi grinned. "As long as you've got something specific to ask, I can come up with an answer. I do need to give you fair warning, though. My magic's always accurate, but it's almost never precise. And that room for interpretation is dangerous in itself." Tsubasa raised an eyebrow in questioning. "The most common reading I do other than the three-card to impress at school is the Celtic Cross. That predicts the asker's future in a very general way. It can give strong hints to future events, but nothing as specific as, say, 'you will find your true love next Tuesday.'" Tsubasa gave another nod. "But if I drew, say, the Lovers, it might mean your love is someone you'll meet soon, or someone you already know."

Tsubasa gave another nod of understanding. "I need to shuffle the cards, right?" She did so, then addressed Nozomi with clear, determined eyes. "Should I give up on Honoka?"

"Wow, you don't mess around," Nozomi grinned at her, but considered. "Since that gets really specific, let's try the Decision spread." Seven cards were dealt out on the table in front of Tsubasa, two in rows with one off to the side. Nozomi addressed this side card. "Okay, this card tells us something about the nature of the decision."

Tsubasa tilted her head at the card. "I'd have expected the Lovers or something," she said dubiously, regarding the Seven of Swords.

Nozomi smiled at her. "Very often, the nature of what we're asking is at odds with what we want. In this case the card you've drawn indicates deception….however, you also drew it reversed. Whether the cards land facing up or down is important, after all. I would say you may be lying to yourself about something." She held up a hand. "That's neither here nor there. You asked about whether you should give up on Honoka. Let's look at the top path first. This shows us the events that will follow from this decision."

Nozomi studied the cards for awhile. "The six of swords, upright. That's easy enough...or, rather, it indicates it won't be easy. You've got it bad, girl." Seeing Tsubasa splutter, Nozomi relented by moving on. "The seven of pentacles. If you can succeed in forgetting about this whole thing, your success in other endeavors - and no, I can't say which ones - is assured a short time thereafter. What I can tell you is that this will be worldly success. Which, yes, means winning Love Live is an option there."

Tsubasa blinked. "Wait, you're specifically telling me how to win Love Live, and it's by taking an action that will hurt your friend? How does that even make sense?"

Nozomi frowned. "You're confusing me with one of those charlatans on television or in a big fancy office. I don't lie, even when my readings aren't in my best interest. It wouldn't be a good idea," She moved on to the card depicting three maidens dancing, cups upraised...upside down. "This may not be the happiest card. It indicates that you may find happiness in pursuing A-RISE for awhile. However, this is fleeting and you'll need to move on to other pursuits and forget the whole thing." Nozomi paused. "Well, maybe not A-RISE, but something important to you. I guess I don't know you well enough to say that for sure."
"Hmm…" Tsubasa frowned thoughtfully. "So, if I don't give up?"

"Well, that's the other path," Nozomi said with a slight shrug. "If you don't give up on Honoka…." She glanced at the card as if seeing it for the first time. "Damn you." she snarled at the image of the Tower. "I ought to throw you out of my deck right now."

Tsubasa tried to edge back from the table at the sudden shift in mood. "I guess that's not a good card."

Nozomi sighed. "That's an understatement. In pursuing Honoka, you will face great trials and potential dangers. I guess that's not a surprise, given how things have been, but I guess someone felt you needed the warning." She took a deep breath and regarded the next card. "...the Sun, on the other hand, indicates ultimate success, in nearly all things, in the medium term. If you can make it through the trial, your life will be much better."

"...I'm almost afraid to ask." Tsubasa said, glancing at the last card which would indicate the far future - the Devil.

Nozomi nodded. "While you will be much happier staying with Honoka for a time, you will still face one final temptation of the heart. This will ultimately come from inside your own self. It will be your deepest desires in conflict with what's best." She sighed. "That concludes this reading," she murmured. "I'm sorry it couldn't be a happier one."

"Oh, no." Tsubasa smiled. "I'm quite happy with this one. I don't know what I'll do, but I know what I'm looking at, at least."

Walking back to Kanda, at Ranma's insistence, was cut short by the sound of a bell. Kotori didn't know what it meant, but Ranma did. A light tap - well, a light tap from Ranma - sent her stumbling forward. She was about to turn around to ask what had gotten into the martial artist, but stopped as she felt a palpable wave of . . . something flow out from him. Honoka had gotten a much lighter shove, just enough to move her so he could stand in front of the ginger.

If Nozomi's card reading weren't fresh in her mind, she might even have been angry. Then a Chinese girl riding a bicycle crashed into Ranma's face from above.

Cries of alarm from herself and Honoka turned to astonishment as Ranma - somehow, stayed standing, hands coming up to grab the bike before setting it on the ground. It was then that they realized the bike had only hit as much as necessary to let Ranma get a grip on it before setting it down.

Shampoo seemed startled that her normal greeting had been intercepted. "Ranma?" she asked.

Ranma snorted. "Whatever it is, no."

"Ranma no talk like that!" Shampoo said. "I come to try to - "

Ranma cut her off again. "Shaddup! I don't know what your scheme is and I don't wanna know. I...Get out of my face before I do something I might actually regret later."

"Ranma, I-"

Honoka tried to step out from behind Ranma, only to get elbowed gently out of the way. The boy glanced at her. "No way, you stay right there. Kotori?" The blonde blinked. "Keep an eye on her back."
"R-right!" Kotori spun around, theatrically looking up at the buildings.

Honoka shook her head. "Ranma, will you relax?"

"Not with that Tower hanging over you." Ranma's reply as short, to the point, and final. "Shampoo, you wanna say anything, you pull out all the weapons and put them on the ground at least ten meters that way."

Shampoo pouted. "Ranma, you be too too silly."

Honoka almost rolled her eyes. Then Shampoo stepped back and pulled out three chui, a jian, and several long throwing daggers. With great reluctance, she set them on the ground. Ranma raised an eyebrow at the Chinese girl and, even more reluctantly, she added a dao as well. That none of these could possibly have fit in the girl's close-fitting clothes didn't even register as she walked back to them. "Now I talk?" Ranma nodded, but inched slightly to make sure Honoka stayed behind him. "Ranma...I really sorry. I not knowing songs stolen."

Ranma raised an eyebrow. "And?"

"...that it. Know Akane buy from interweb," Shampoo tried to explain. "Not know who selling it, but going to try to find out."

Ranma's glare hardened. "...and?"

"...you thinking spatula-girl and Akane believe me with no proof?" Shampoo said, using her favorite sobriquet for Ukyo. "And I no giving up. You see, we better than Honoka, get you Mastery for sure!" She didn't wait for a reply, instead turning around to gather up her weapons.

Honoka shook her head, but waited for Shampoo to depart, sliding her weapons...somewhere they shouldn't fit, before sighing. "Ranma...one, okay, you're kinda right about her. But I can't live like this."

Ranma smirked back. "It ain't forever, just until something happens."

Kotori shook her head. "Ranma, if you're going to be like that, nothing is going to happen."

"It would be the best time for Nozomi to be wrong," Ranma countered. "I know, I know, she's never wrong, but this time...Honoka, can you put up with this until the concert?"

Honoka gave it a bit of thought….then nodded. "That long, yes."

"If everything goes well..." Ranma said. "...I don't think there's much point in threatening us after that."

"Come on, Kayochi!" Rin skipped a few steps ahead of her friend. She then turned around, walking backwards while they crossed the bridge between Akiba and Kanda. The glanced towards the setting sun that was lighting the river a brilliant red. "Don't you think you're taking this a little far?"

Hanayo shook her head. "'A little far' would be your idea of having the drones follow us."

Rin stuck out her tongue. "Just because we don't know how to make them do that..."

"This isn't a joke!" Hanayo shouted, leaning forward with her fists curled up into balls. "Rin, I always wanted this, wanted to be an idol, but not this way! The least you can do is - " she was cut off by her best friend putting a hand on her shoulder.
Rin was smiling. "Hey, don't be like that. What was your time in the last gym practice, huh?" She didn't wait for the answer. "You beat my record at the start of the season. For almost anyone that's amazing, and for you..." She grinned. "We can outrun those bullies fine."

"Bullies?" Hanayo blinked. "Rin, this isn't like when we were kids."

Rin's smile grew even brighter. "Sure it is. Okay, so maybe when we were kids they couldn't punch down a building. We don't have to fight them this time, we just need to run long enough for Ranma to cross a district, right? We can do that, no problem."

"Ye-yeah." Hanayo conceded. "Still, can you at least try to take this seriously?"

Rin chuckled. "If I take it seriously, that's when they win."

"...or when they put you in the hospital," Hanayo tried to point out, but Rin stuck out her tongue. "Nah, they know I'm off limits." When Hanayo only gave her a puzzled look, she shrugged. "It's that martial artist thing. I never studied, so they won't do anything to actually hurt me. Or you."

Hanayo blinked. "You could have brought this up earlier!"

"Everyone knows it, they're just not listening," Rin pointed out with a shrug, resuming her backwards walk. "Heck, after the beach house can't blame'em, but it'll calm down."

Nozomi shut the door to her apartment, sighing. "My deck's going to wear out at this rate," she murmured, referring to the obvious scratches starting to show on her tarot. Disregarding that for the time being, she looked in her fridge only to remember it was empty. "Well, delivery it is."

She was at her computer pulling up a list of places that might deliver food that didn't remind her of the week already eating what felt like more takeout than it actually had been with Nico on the case. She finally settled on an American place. "What the Hell, Ranma's meal plans are a little much sometimes," she smiled, then shook her head. "Nozomi, you're either losing it or you need to have your girlfriend move in with you."

It was at that moment she noticed an incoming video call from Honoka. She opened it up with a small smile. "What's up?"

"Quick, you've gotta do another reading!" Honoka shouted at her. "Ranma's going to drive me completely insane!"

Nozomi blinked. "I...I can't do a reading over the phone..." she protested.

"Why not?! All those phone lines do - " Honoka tried to protest.

Nozomi sighed. "And the phone lines are fakes Honoka. You need to handle the cards."

"I'm coming over!"

Nozomi gave her a patient look. "Honoka, calm down. Tell me what's wrong."

Honoka shook her head. "It's just...everyone's treating me like I'm made of glass thanks to that reading you did for Kotori. I think Yukiho's under orders to call up Ranma if I so much as set foot out to get a drink from the vending machine."

"They're not wrong..." Nozomi tried to answer, but she knew it was weak. "Look, Honoka, I don't
know what to tell you. The Tower is pretty damn clear! There is a physical threat in the future that will need to be overcome, and it does mean real, physical harm."

"But that might mean a papercut!" Honoka complained.

Nozomi gave her a severe look. "Or decapitation, or anything in between. I don't know."

"Then tell everyone you did another reading!" Honoka whined. "Tell everyone there's no threat!"

Honoka immediately realized that was the absolute worst thing she could have said, seeing Nozomi go as white as a sheet. "I-I didn't mean that!"

"Never suggest that again, Honoka," Nozomi's voice was quiet, horrified. "Don't put me in that position."

"Wh...what's so bad about - "

Nozomi shook her head. "Of course you don't know...please, Honoka, magic has a price. It always has a price. Sometimes it's paid up front, sometimes you get stuck with it for your whole life," She shook her head to clear it. "For something like my gift, where I'm sure it was given freely, I need to be very careful not to exploit it unfairly. I won't lie about a genuine reading. I may push it sometimes if it would be funny, but never about anything serious."

"What...what could happen?"

Nozomi sighed. "At best? It would stop working. More likely it would stop working right when we need it."

Honoka gulped as she thought about the implications of that. "Okay, okay, no lies about readings…"

Nozomi smiled. "Good. Also, we can't try to force it, but I guess Ranma's being too strict...I'll think about it and see what I can do."

Umi arrived home, the family 'dojo' less a full traditional complex than having taken over a middle floor of a building and remodeling it to only seem like a traditional construction. However, behind the dojo room itself was a modern, if cozy, household, and where she had intended to go to drop off her luggage when she noticed that the dojo itself was completely empty, save her father and a series of suspended boards.

Guessing that this was intended for her, she bowed and kneeled before her father, not even bothering to change. "A lesson so soon?"

"Ranma informs me that your lessons at the beach house went well, and as you seem under the impression you can't delay, we'll begin." The distaste was clear. "And I'm glad to see you guessed correctly. In the real world, you do not have time to change into your gi, so you will be expected to attend these family lessons in street clothing. When it comes time to practice with footwear, we'll do so on the roof."

Umi nodded. "Yes, father. But…” she looked around at the boards, strung up to the ceiling by the thinnest of thread. "I don't understand. Breaking boards and bricks is a test of focus, of course, but it seems…"

"Ah, true," Sonoda-sensei stood up. "Indeed, to shatter even a suspended board is little more than a test of mundane dexterity and focus. Even little strength is required, although not so little that anyone can do it." He took a moment, then demonstrated with a single powerful chop, splitting the board in
two. As he continued, he set three more boards gently swinging back and forth. "However, as you have guessed, there is more to it than that. The first, and most natural, lesson of your use of ki will be to enhance your body's physical capabilities. It is this energy that empowers the feats you've seen Ranma perform, and now you will learn its first use."

Just as he finished speaking, he turned, seeming to move faster than Umi had imagined a human could until scant months ago, so fast she was sure her father's blow would lack any power...until all three boards exploded into splinters. "You won't be expected to do that right away. For now, focus on making your ki flow through your limbs, the same sense you have been taught at rest. Then strike the board however you feel most comfortable. When you can completely shatter a single board on the first strike, we'll move on to the next lesson."

Umi stood up, standing in front of her chosen target. She meditated, eyes closed. Warmth seemed to seep up through her legs, into her belly, and into her arms, throbbing gently with untapped power. She opened her eyes, went to move...and as she pulled back to strike she seemed to lose it. A moment later, she felt the beginning of a weariness, as if she had run all the way home. She stopped, and took a deep breath, trying to refocus herself, and the feeling subsided.

"Not as easy as it seems." Sonoda-sensei stated with a gentle chiding. "You cannot lose your focus for even a moment."

Umi realized she was already sweating. "How do you and Ranma do this? There's already so much to focus on in a fight!"

"Practice."

Umi felt the temptation to use her head for the next strike. "I should have seen that one coming."

"Yes, my daughter, you should have," Sonoda-sensei smiled. "That does not make it any less true." He reached out to still the board. "Better?"

Umi checked carefully. "Are you doing more than holding it still?"

"I would not condescend to you that much." the man assured her. "Normally the boards would be braced at first, but we're hurrying as much as I deem safe." Umi nodded. She took a deep breath, focused again, and chambered her punch. This time she got as far as actually punching the board before her focus slipped, and her knuckles nearly tore open on the rough surface. A raised eyebrow was her only response. "You need not do this, if you prefer. You would still be my only heir." This time, she wasn't merely exhausted, but feeling as though she had pulled every muscle in her body. The feeling again faded, but not quite as much.

Umi shook her head. "No. I have to see this through." She pulled back, and focused again. This time, Sonoda-sensei's eyebrow raised as Umi hummed under her breath. She let her mind wander back to that first performance on the school's stage. It was a move that would get her clobbered in a real fight. Few people in the audience, but it didn't phase Honoka, and she didn't let it get to her then either. And...she had to admit there had been a joy in it. Abandoning herself to the movements and the sheer fun of expressing herself in a way the traditional arts didn't allow. She continued the song, going from humming to mouthing the words. Her ki flared to life with the pop song's beat, and then she lashed out. The board didn't shatter, but this time it did break.

Sonoda's other eyebrow raised. "You used your music as a focus point. Impressive."

Umi was breathing heavily now. It was only three punches, and yet her whole body was ablaze, protesting under the strain. "I...I didn't know it would work," Umi admitted. "I was actually focusing
on how I feel when we dance together."

"Very impressive," Sonoda said. "Emotional foci are one of the best techniques for amplifying your abilities. It also seems you're already discovering one of the downsides. If your body isn't used to the amount of ki you're using..."

Umi nodded. "I...think I'll take a nap now, with your permission."

"Permission granted." Umi slid bonelessly to the floor.

Kotori stared at the envelope in her hands. "Kotori, you have to do something," her mother said. "I'm sorry all this had to happen today, but..."

Kotori nodded. "I applied months ago, before Mu's, before...everything," she said, mostly to herself. "Don't get me wrong, I still want to be a designer, and if this is what it looks like it's fantastic..."

The older woman sighed. "If you want my honest, objective advice, you should go. The whole thing won't just collapse without you, after all."

"But...Paris." The word was said with all the weight that might be assigned to "Heaven" or "Hell." "It's so far. If it were UTX or even something else in Japan I could still support my friends, but there..."

Mrs. Minami smiled at her daughter. "Well, whatever you decide is fine with me."

For fifteen minutes, they didn't speak a word. Instead, mother busied herself setting the table while daughter stared at the envelope in silence.

The silence was finally broken by the sound of tearing paper. The older woman dropped her spoon in shock. "Kotori!"

"I don't want to know what it says!" she shouted back. "If it says 'yes' I get to go to a famous fashion school, or I have to give it all up to stand by my friends when all this is happening! It's not fair and you know it! I don't want to make that decision, so I don't want to know!"

"Koto -"

Kotori wasn't finished. "Ranma stood by those horrible people when they did the most awful things to him! We barely managed to find a way out of that and now it's all being hinged on Love Live! I don't even care about the school closing, how messed up is that?"

Mrs. Minami tried to speak again, but Kotori wasn't listening. "What kind of friend am I if I skip off to make clothes on the other side of the world?! I couldn't possibly -"

"KOTORI!" She stopped, staring at her mother. "That's all well and good, and if you like I'll take care of your refusal letter. But you do owe them a reply."

Kotori squeaked. "Oh...right..."

Shampoo was on a mission. She was going to get to the bottom of exactly where those songs had come from, come anything the universe might have to throw in her way.

The universe loves a challenge.
Her unprecedented access to the Tendo Dojo for her unwanted bodyguard job was helpful for this. Unfortunately, it also meant she was more immersed in Ranma's life than she had been while he was living in Nerima. One of those ways was prolonged contact with the boy's mother.

That alone was almost enough to make her consider giving up. Almost. The woman was completely insane. Any mention of DoCo, idols, or music caused her eyebrow to twitch. She also glared at Shampoo often, like something on the bottom of a boot. And that was now. Back when Ranma had first left she had been on a hair-trigger.

Fortunately, about a week after things had settled down into the new routine the woman had calmed down. It was still unwise to talk about Love Live in her presence, but she had taken to pulling out her cell phone at all hours and giggling uncontrollably.

So when Shampoo arrived back at the dojo to see the Saotome matriarch glaring at her, she tried to take it in stride. That lasted until the woman pulled her katana from its' tube. "Young lady! Where have you been?"

"Go to see Airen," Shampoo answered back coolly. "It not going well, if that what you asking."

Nodoka gave her a rather stiff look in reply. "I should hope not. Also, while I tolerate you while you do your job, you are shirking your supposed 'duty'..."

Shampoo rolled her eyes. "Great Grandmother let me go while she teach Akane. Is Amazon secrets, much honor."

Nodoka's sniff showed how much she thought of Amazonian 'honor.' "I suppose Ranma is entitled to 'see' you however he likes."

Shampoo felt confusion settle in. "You is too too crazy," she decided, turning away and jogging towards the dojo. Meanwhile the Saotome Matriarch pulled out her phone to check on...whatever it was. But this time there was something odd. Instead of a giggle, the older woman frowned and snapped the phone shut. "Something happen?"

"Nothing you need concern yourself with."

Ranma pulled the last of the bags through the door just as Mrs. Nishikino arrived at the family's first home. "Ah, Ranma. There's something I wanted to talk to you about. It's...sensitive."

Ranma raised an eyebrow. "How 'sensitive' we talking?"

"Sensitive enough that I felt you deserved fair warning and a full explanation, at least," the woman said. "Join me in the living room?" He nodded, and followed her, taking an easy seat across from her. After a bit of silence, she stood up. "One moment. I think this requires tea." A few minutes later, and they were holding their cups and gently blowing on them. "All right, now Ranma, I want you to keep an open mind about what I'm about to say."

Ranma took a deep sip. "I'm kind of a guest. Don't see where any decisions are any of my business."

"Maki's father and I are in agreement that it's time to start looking to arrange engagement meetings for her."

Ranma, contrary to what the laws of the universe would dictate, did not actually do a spit-take. Instead, he nodded, setting his tea aside momentarily with an uncharacteristic dignity. "That is the absolute worst idea I've heard in at least six months," he said, very calmly. "And you know a little bit
about my dad."

Mrs. Nishikino smiled. "You're taking it better than I thought you would."

"Oh, don't get me wrong," Ranma said. "As a guest it ain't my business, but Maki's my friend and that makes it my business."

Mrs. Nishikino nodded. "Well, first, as the only boy she's even made friends with in...well, ever, I want you to know that you're on the short list if you're willing." That resulted in the spit-take she had been expecting. "I didn't expect you to say 'yes' with your situation, but the offer is on the table. You're old enough to make your own decisions."

Ranma blinked. In his experience 'engagement meetings' didn't come with decisions. He quickly thought it over "Okay. You're saying that Maki's got a choice here."

"Within reasonable bounds," the woman explained. "The hospital depends on donations from wealthy businessmen to keep up our research. Also, that money supports some cases we otherwise couldn't take. To that end, Maki needs a good match...erm..politically."

"Sounds downright Tokugawa," Ranma muttered. "I thought that had gone out with the Meiji outside old families."

"And very powerful ones," came the response. "And I can already see your next question. Yes, marrying you instead of someone from a 'good family' would probably strain relationships quite a bit. But Maki's preferences do factor in here."

Ranma took another sip of his tea. "Mrs. Nishikino, I think I get what you're saying. This is still by far the worst idea I've heard in a good long time. Not the worst ever, but you got no idea what you're doing here."

"And you do?"

Ranma swallowed. "On my honor, I can't say more than that. If you want, you can ask Maki, but I don't know if she'll say anything," His eyes narrowed. "That said, if ya push this and she asks, I will have ta do something about it."

"Ranma!" Mrs. Nishikno's voice was like the crack of a whip. "Don't forget you are our guest! There are limits!"

Ranma nodded. "I'm not forgetting, I'm letting you know how serious this is. Maki's done a lot for me, and I know you have too, but if I have to take a side..."

Another nod. "Well, if that's how it has to be, that's how it has to be." She sighed. "Do you at least understand my daughter has options beyond 'pick the one you like, he'll be your new fiance'?"

"Mrs. Nishikino, for the last time, I'm telling you you should drop this whole thing." He held up a hand. "Look, I do get that it's different, and if I didn't know what I know, I'd still be mad but I'd ask more questions. So I'm going to ask you to drop it with me. This ain't gonna work out."

Mrs. Nishikino sighed. "Because of the thing your honor won't let you tell me?" Ranma nodded. "All right. Consider the matter dropped." She paused. "Unless you'd like to reconsider being the lucky boy? You could date a few times, try to..." She saw Ranma's carefully schooled, dead expression. "Geez, you'd think I condemned her to Hell."

Ranma slowly set the tea cup down. "I'm gonna take Maki's stuff up to her room. I need to talk to the
Sonodas anyway."

"Huh?" But Ranma didn't answer, instead pulling out his phone while picking up all three of Maki's suitcases with his other hand.

Eri heard the ringtone with some surprise. "Ranma?"

The boy's voice was a little strained. "Yeah, look, got a problem, ain't sure Honoka's the right one to talk it over with,"

"What about Nozomi or Maki?" Eri said. "Not that I won't. I'm not sure what I can do if it doesn't have to do with school."

Ranma's frustration was clear over the phone. "I know, but, well, I ain't sure I want to lean on Nozomi too much and Maki...no, just no."

Eri tried to sound as sympathetic as she could. "Well, I'm not busy. Mom doesn't know you're a boy, though. Could you...?"

"Sure," Ranma said, but hung up without saying anything else, causing Eri to immediately regret it. So instead she just grabbed a few snacks.

Then she remembered the meals she'd eaten with him over the past week. She scavenged through the kitchen for everything vaguely snack-like she could find. It actually wasn't much, compared to what this seemed to call for, but it would do since she didn't have time to cook.

She turned around and ran into her little sister, Alisa. The resemblance was actually uncanny, the younger girl being all but a younger clone of the older. "Sis! I was saving that!"

Eri gulped. "Uhm...which one? I have a guest coming over, and you should see her eat."

"You're already in trouble over this whole girlfriend thing, you know," Alisa said somewhat tartly. "Mom and dad don't want it getting back to Grandma, so maybe you shouldn't be feeding her half the kitchen,"

"It isn't Nozomi," Eri shot back sourly. "And that isn't any of your business. Ranma's... far as I can tell Ranma isn't interested in anyone."

Arisa blinked. "You have weird friends."

"You have no idea," Eri laughed. "Now, come on, grab whatever you want because if you don't it'll be gone." After letting her sister grab a few sweets, she brought the rest up to her room. It was a rather bare setup, which only contained a bed, some book shelves, and her desk. It was then, less than ten minutes from Ranma hanging up to her being there, run across an entire ward. Her trademark red silk shirt and pigtail still wet from whatever water she had found on the way.

"Okay, pull up a snack and explain," It was the only thing Eri could think to say, and afterwards she was just as confused. "Okay, so Maki and boys, yeah, that's a bad idea, but why couldn't you... I don't know, explain it?"

Ranma sighed. "Because Maki made me promise. Speaking of, does this place got a boiler room or somethin'? I know I can't be on the street or Minami will get upset, but I can manage with quiet and out-of-the-way. I need an address to put on the form."
Eri rolled her eyes. "Ranma, no."

"Roof, then?"

"You are not camping out like a wandering vagrant," Eri said with a hint of exasperation. "Honestly, what is wrong with you?"

Ranma shrugged. "I don't ever remember not being on the road," he explained. "Yeah, the last year actually having tatami to sleep on the whole time was nice but I could go back to hard ground if I had to."

Eri couldn't think of a good response to that, except "That's no way to live…"

"Saw lotsa people who didn't have much more than that in China," Ranma shot back. "Plus you see it in temples. You may be doing it pretty soon yourself, actually."

"Huh?" Eri said, caught off-guard by the sudden turn.

Ranma sighed. "I'll talk to Doc…erm, Tofu. But you gotta understand, what happened out at the beach house….well, big magic like that, especially the first time? We should get everyone checked out. Nozomi and me are fine…"

"Why are you fine?" Eri asked, sighing. She knew she didn't want to know.

Ranma shrugged. "Well, Nozomi's a shrine maiden and we know she's been affected by a spirit. As for me, a lot of old temples with mystic types have old martial arts scrolls in their archives, so I checked out a lot of them growing up. I'm guessin' old man Tendo's got the girls checked out at some point too. It's kind of a rite of passage for martial artists, since we usually end up dealin' with this stuff. Any extra talent's useful."

Eri raised an eyebrow "What does that have to do with sleeping on the ground?"

"Well, mystics and monks don't usually have beds or futons or anything." Ranma pointed out. "So wherever we go…"

Eri nodded. "Fine, for a few days, sure. But the world doesn't have much call for people who actually live that way anymore." Ranma just shrugged. "No, really."

"I had this conversation with Honoka," Ranma finally said. "I'm...I'm workin' on it, but in the meantime…"

"In the meantime you're going to need a place to stay. A real place to stay," Eri said. "It's not like you and Maki are sleeping in the same room."

Ranma shook his head. "It ain't just that. Mrs. Nishikino didn't know about this when she said I could. It ain't a big deal, so…" Ranma shrugged. "It'll take about two minutes to clear out, just need a place to go."

Eri tried to contain her feelings of exasperation, only partially succeeding. "Ranma, Maki's not going to do anything without your say so. You've also got her parents' blessing if you change your mind, so as far as I can tell there's no issue. If there is, I'm not the one you have to deal with about it."

Ranma nodded sagely. "You're right, just thought you've got a better head on your shoulders than I do, at least about some things."
"And don't think you're off the hook about dealing with your future, mister," Eri added. "You don't have that much time. You're in your second year, you need to figure out what universities you want to go to."

"Well, my plan was to teach the Art, I don't nee - "

"Where?" Eri cut him off. "Certainly not the Tendo Dojo. And even if you have some other place lined up, who's going to deal with the money? The business license? Everything else? Not to mention if you found your own school you're going to need to prove it exists, and so on. That's going to need paperwork, and paperwork requires addresses. Face it Saotome, you're stuck with this."

Ranma winced. "Well...uhh..." Ranma frowned. *Come to think of it, wouldn't that tie me down? I wouldn't be able to look into the curse if...* He spoke out loud. "You know, maybe not right away....is there something that could take me to the kind of places where there's lots of magic?"

"Where would that be?"

Ranma needed a moment to think about it. "Usually remote places. Not a lot of internet yet, if there's any. Occasionally you'll find plenty in old, old cities like Kyoto and Shanghai."

Eri shrugged. "Sounds like you want to be an archaeologist or an anthropologist, at least to me,"

"Know how I'd go about doin' that?" Ranma asked.

Eri stared at him levelly. "You get into a good university and study the sciences. Eventually, you write papers on what you find in those places to get more money for that. Nozomi might know a little more, she was thinking about it before she decided to go into theology."

"Anything other than that?" Ranma said, looking as though he'd swallowed a lemon.

Eri shrugged. "I doubt it. I know a lot of people hike around the world before they get serious about college. But if you want to make a career out of going to places like that, I'm pretty sure that's it."

Ranma nodded. "Well, I'll think about it."

"Clock's ticking." Eri grinned. "Anything else?"

"...well, as long as we're here, can you explain the English Rin's studying?"

Maki closed the front door of her home and slumped with relief. Certainly, no news was good news in this case, but that didn't mean she had to enjoy it. "I'm home!"

Her mother leaned out of the living room doorway and smiled at her. "Oh, hello Maki," she said. "Ranma already put your things away, but he said he had to go to the Sonoda's place for something."

Maki shrugged. "Some martial arts thing she needed to help Umi with, I guess." She headed up there and noticed the door to Ranma's room was open. The bed was neatly made. The hiking kit that contained almost all of his worldly possessions placed in the corner. The laptop was charging on the small desk. She sighed and closed it. "You'd think she still thought we might kick her out,"

"Well, he was acting rather suspiciously earlier," the voice of her mother came from behind her. "Maki, is there anything you want to talk to me about?"

Maki laughed nervously. "Eheh....no, what...ever...gave you that...idea?" She laughed again, an eye
twitching as she looked for an escape route. Of course, it was the second floor and she wasn't a martial artist. She definitely wasn't one who could treat low buildings as vaulting horses. So that didn't seem possible.

"Well, Ranma seemed to be under the impression that he had to keep a secret for you. That came out when I broached the idea that you might need to get out more," Mrs. Nishikino said, with a hint more of an edge. "Meet some boys other than the one who has to attend your school with the wrong body parts?"

"Eheheh...." Maki laughed. "Mom, I'm gonna be way too busy this month. I've got to write a whole bunch of songs, and do everything else to get them ready for..."

She found herself being interrupted. "Wait, don't you have enough? I know we're not home much, but I have been keeping an eye on things with your Love Live page."

This put Maki on much safer ground. Her anger welled up, and she snapped. "We think one of those girls stole my songs and put them in the system as hers."

Mrs. Nishikino thought about that for a moment, then nodded. "I assume you still have your copies?" When Maki made an affirmative noise, she continued with "Gather up your stuff, and we'll take it to the lawyer tomorrow," She smiled. "Now, since we'll be getting your songs back and finally have those girls where we want them, you'll be free to go on a date this Saturday, right?"

Maki blanched. "Uhh...yeah...sure Mom...."

"What's wrong?" The older woman asked with exasperation. "I swear, you and Ranma! It's just a date!"

A sudden thought popped into Maki's head. It was desperate. It was insane. But it was the only way she could think of to buy time. "I'm going out with Honoka!" she found herself blurt out before her brain could catch up on all the reasons this was a bad idea.

It was enough to give her mother pause. "Er...aren't you getting a little old for those kinds of games?" she asked slowly.

Maki shook her head. "I don't know, but I know I like Honoka and she's...well, Honoka." They were quiet for a long time, until finally Maki continued. "I don't know, but..."

"If you're that nervous about this..." her mother said. "Well, you're only in your first year. If you want to play around a bit longer, I suppose it's all right." Maki almost breathed a sigh of relief. "But if Kousaka's serious, let me know, okay?"

Maki blushed. "Err...what?"

Her reply was a smile. "Maki, I'd be a terrible doctor if I didn't know homosexuals existed. I've got nothing against it, but there are other concerns she'd need to be aware of."

Maki swallowed and nodded. Then she went into her room to check on Love Live.
The Kanda shrine was as it had always been to Hanayo's eyes, but the knowledge that the kami, or at least one of them, who the shrine honored favored them made it even more important. She took her time with the rituals to thank them for their intervention at the beach house, and was almost surprised to see Kotori at her hip. Other than working on their trio numbers, they didn't talk much. "Good morning."

"Good Morning!" Kotori's voice was a little too chipper. That prompted Hanayo to force herself to take a much closer look. Kotori seemed normal on the surface, but there were dark circles under her eyes that apparently hadn't gone away since they found out about the theft of the songs. While it still upset her, Hanayo herself knew she wasn't suffering the same anymore.

There were other signs too, like the fact that the older girl's hair was mussed up. Kotori never arrived at practice in such a state, even though it meant she'd need to brush it after. Instead of her usual workout clothes, she had just thrown on a dirty blouse and plain sweatpants.

Overall, the picture was worrying enough that Hanayo had to ask. "Did something happen?"

Kotori blinked. "Nothing important," She reached over and tousled the younger girl's hair. "How about you? You're seeming...better."

Hanayo smiled. "Rin said something last night...it's not worth worrying about."

Kotori shrugged. "Maybe for most of us..."

"R-right," Hanayo said, not liking the reminder of an actual prophecy. "D-did you get any work done on that song you were supposed to be working on?"

Kotori shook her head. "I was too tired last night..."

"Oh..."

Kotori thought for a bit. "Hey, Hanayo?" The younger girl jumped. "If you got an offer for an idol contract tomorrow, would you take it?"

She had to take a moment to process the question. "I don't think that could happen. My mom...she doesn't want me to..."

"But..." Kotori prompted. "I mean, with everything going on?"

Hanayo gulped. "I...I don't know."

"I see..." Kotori trailed off again. "I guess we should get started warming up, or Umi will kill us."

It was to their credit that Ranma dropping in - literally, probably from a high jump - didn't even startle them. Nor, in fact, did the fact that he had two large sacks slung over his shoulders. "Actually, you're off the hook with her. Me, though..."

"Huh?" Hanayo slid back slightly. "Wait, why is Umi off the hook today?"

Ranma smirked "She ain't off the hook, but we'll rehearse with her late in the afternoons."

"Huh?" Both girls repeated.
Darkness. Umi was surrounded in the most absolute darkness she had ever experienced, and she welcomed it. A little bit of light had gotten to her eyes some time around what she guessed was sunrise, and it was the most dazzling thing she had ever seen, but also one of the most painful. Feeling around, her fingers found a glass of water that must have been set out, because she never brought them to her bedside. Gratefully, she drank it and slipped back into unconsciousness.

She wasn't sure how many hours ago that was, but the answer was 'not enough.' She was sure she could feel every muscle in her body, every bone and organ and nerve, and every one of them was protesting their ill treatment at once. She would have screamed, but it was too much effort.

So she lay there, for what felt like hours, until suddenly the most horrible noise imaginable filled her world. Slowly, with great deliberateness, she reached out from under her futon to grab at the source of the cacophony. Feeling something hard that vibrated hard enough to hurt her hand, her fingers curled around the object vindictively. Very carefully, so as not to let the slightest sliver of that awful light into her world, she hurled it away from her as hard as she could.

She had already passed out again by the time the sound of plastic and glass shattering reached her ears.

Ranma shrugged. "I've been there. She'll be fine by showtime."

Neither of them knew how to respond to that, so instead they shrugged. Instead, Hanayo glanced over her shoulder. "Is everyone else late, or are we early?"

"You're early," Ranma confirmed. "I got up early enough to avoid Maki because…"

When he trailed off, Kotori sighed. "Please, just don't say something else happened."

"Won't say it, then," Ranma nodded. "Besides, I wanted to get some English in."

Hanayo stared at him. "Wait, you don't have to study."

"No," Ranma confirmed. "But I got an idea..."

Without Umi present, Honoka had expected the workout to be a bit easier than normal, and in some ways she was right. But that was mostly because Ranma had apparently concluded that they wouldn't need any more intense conditioning. Instead, after brief calisthenics they had run to the school, with Ranma bringing up the rear with Hanayo, the sacks over his shoulders. Once they were on the roof, he dropped them and opened them up. "All right, girls, line up. We're gonna be doing Boku no Live again today. It'll be anchoring the dance set, so you've gotta know the steps cold."

Everyone instinctively inched back from the almost sadistic smile he wore. "I thought about doing this traditional, but I can't go around smacking you with a shinai every time you mess up or you might not be up for the concert."

"Then..." Maki was staring at the boy the most warily. "What are you doing?"

Ranma just grinned back at her. "You'll see. Places!" They lined up, and the music began playing. Honoka took a deep breath, and began to sing the first line. The steps were, by now, easy and familiar to her, with Ranma's unsettling gaze as he watched for mistakes being the only thing to really throw her off. Until, that is, she caught a blur of white out of the corner of her eye and Maki exclaimed in shock and pain.
"You're off!" Ranma shouted. He was holding a small toy gun designed to shoot ping-pong balls and had easily aimed it at the redhead.

Maki winced. "I couldn't see Umi for my cue when she's no - YIKE!" Another ball flew past her as she leaped back into position to resume the dance.

And that was how it went. For the remainder of the song, the slightest imperfection was met with a projectile hurled in their direction. Amazed, Honoka quickly realized what was going on. The balls weren't being aimed at them, so much as where they weren't supposed to be, and she quickly started watching to see if the barrel of the gun was being swung around to aim at her.

The distraction was enough to earn her a ball aimed at her face, which she quickly twisted out of the way from. So Ranma's not playing favorites she thought, quickly focusing on the dance steps again…only to get hit straight in the stomach. It wasn't actually painful for more than a moment, she realized, but definitely enough to get her attention. "Sing! Honoka, you're center, you can't slack off!"

"Right!" She called back…nearly swallowing the next shot for her trouble. Getting the message, she picked her place back up in the song.

And then it was over. What could only have been five minutes seemed to have stretched out into twenty, but they had survived. Ranma smirked. "Not bad...if you consider me havin' to reload 'not bad.'" He did so one more time, gesturing around the roof to the dozens of little white balls strewn around. "Pick those up and we'll do it again."

Everyone just stared at him. It was going to be a long, long day.

It only turned out to be a long, but painful, morning. As the mistakes got fewer, the amount of time to try to self-correct shortened, and Maki found her skin covered in red marks that, thankfully, would fade by the next day. She was stretched in ways she hadn't thought she could, trying to keep up with Ranma's idea of rehearsal.

She'd have done it all afternoon rather than have the conversation that was about to happen. "Hey, Honoka?" She asked the second-year. "Uhm....did you talk to Ranma last night?"

"No, actually. It's kinda weird, we usually have a vid call before bed,"

Maki gulped. "Uhm..." Just then her own phone rang. Picking it up, it was even worse, as her mother seemed to want a vid call. "One sec." She picked up, holding up the phone. "Hey, Mom...."

"Are you free yet?" The woman on the other end asked, looking as if she'd aged ten years almost overnight. "Our usual lawyer isn't up on copyright, but he has a recommendation and they've agreed to meet this afternoon."

Maki glanced up at Ranma, who nodded. "Everyone but Rin, you can head out. Nozomi, you've got Nico!"

Ignoring the panicked chase that followed down the stairs, Maki turned her attention back to the phone, but her mother was paying attention to something she couldn't see or hear clearly. "Yes, yes, I trust you've got it," she said to some doctor, before turning her attention back to her daughter. "I'm sorry, this has just been a busy day. Anyway, could you bring your girlfriend along?"

Maki blushed heavily. "Moooooom!"
Mrs. Nishikino rolled her eyes. "You're not twelve, Maki. Anyway, since she's officially the band's leader we'll need her for some of the paperwork."

"...heh..." Maki swallowed, looking at Honoka who had a level stare on her. But, after a moment, the ginger did nod and Maki relayed that.

"All right, then. Meet me at Shinagawa station as soon as you can. Change out of your gym clothes, but no need to dress up"

Maki gulped. "Seeya, mom..." She hung up and looked over.

Honoka's expression was decidedly cool. "...seems like you were worried over nothing."

"Honoka, you've got it wrong!" Maki protested, holding up her hands. "I panicked, all right!"

"Oh, so you just blurted out I'm your girlfriend or something?!" Honoka snapped. "If you don't want to date, that's fine, but don't play with me either!"

Maki winced. "She tried to set me up on a blind date this Saturday! I had to say something!"

Ranma who had been pretending to ignore the conversation and set up for Rin, suddenly snarled. "That wasn't no date, that was an engagement meeting! I don't believe this!"

Seeing the entire situation about to spiral out of control, Eri put her fingers to her lips and blew out a shrill whistle. "Okay, everyone, no jumping to conclusions! Ranma, isn't it possible she actually took your advice to heart?"

"Wait?!" Maki spun on Ranma. "You knew about this!?"

Ranma nodded. "I told her it was a bad idea, but I am your guest, Maki. Only so much I can do, and it was obvious she wanted to spring it on ya so you wouldn't try to get out of it."

Honoka took a deep breath. "Okay, but why me?!" She wasn't that much calmer for it. "Why not just tell her the truth if you were - "

"She thinks we're just 'Class S'. You know, lesbian in school, straight in life?" Maki looked like she'd swallowed a lemon. "I don't know why my parents are pushing this now...."

Everyone looked at Ranma, who just stood silent. Honoka sighed. "Do you actually know?" Ranma nodded. "Are you going to say?" He shook his head. "Do you think there's anything we can do to change her mind?" A pause, then another shake of the head.

Maki just groaned. "I don't know what to do..."

Ranma swallowed. "Maki, I only got one thing for ya. You ain't gonna be able to keep this secret forever."

"I know....but I..."

Honoka sighed. "Maki...this is a terrible, terrible idea." Hearing that, Maki had to restrain herself from running away, to the music room to just play and play until she passed out. "The longer we try to lie, the worse it's going to be when it comes out. And the harder it will be." That was enough to get her to turn, but Honoka was faster, grabbing her wrist. "But...since you can't handle this now, for today, I'll pretend for you."

Honoka felt the air rush from her lungs as Maki was suddenly crushing her ribcage, tears staining her eyes...
Honoka brushed the younger girl's hair from her eyes. "There there….let's get a drink and head down to Shinagawa."

With the pair gone, Eri sighed. "I still say you should have told her everything."

"Probably," Ranma agreed, startling Eri. "But sometimes honor ain't about what you should do."

It was nearly one o'clock when Umi finally managed to crawl out of bed. The light only barely stung her eyes, and instead of being sure that she was experiencing death she just felt a strange tingling through her limbs, like static electricity at the threshold of actual pain. The worst part, though, was a hypersensitivity, as though she could feel each individual fiber under her toes. She tried to pull on her usual clothing, but it felt impossibly rough. Giving up, she settled on her silk yukata, something she normally only wore to festivals.

That was when she discovered the remains of her poor phone.

She wasn't Honoka or Kotori, and she refused to make a single sound of lament, but she did sweep it up into the garbage, saving only the SIM card. She made her way to the kitchen for some breakfast, only to be startled by a Blackberry, similar to Ranma's except in a thick case, laying on the table. She picked up the ugly phone, only to realize what had happened to the old one in a strange rush as her world returned to normal.

Her father chuckled from behind her. "Now you see….and there's no going back. But before training in the Art, Ranma informs me there's training in music to see to. And homework, of course."

Umi winced. "There's no going back," she agreed. "Is that what it's like all the ti - "

"Eventually, daughter," Sonoda-sensei smiled gently at her. "We'll see about a better phone once you have your control back."

Umi looked down at the ugly thing. "Uhh...yeah."

Rin looked around at the roof, where Ranma was laying down sheets of paper with words printed in large print on them, all in English. "Uhh…."

Ranma smirked at her. "I guess you're wondering how this helps you out with English. Well, it's simple." He started taping several more signs to seemingly random spots on the roof. "I looked over your English book last night and whipped this up. Can you guess?" The last bit was a question, which only earned him another baffled stare. "Okay, here's your first hint." He turned on the nearby music player that had recently been used for practice.

"How's dancing going to help?" Rin asked.

Ranma chuckled. "Well, there's something that came up with Eri and Honoka. Honoka asked me how I really understand someone, and usually it was by fightin' them." He realized he'd made a slight mistake when Rin's eyes darted towards the stairs. "Wait, that ain't all. After all, you're no martial artist, so I would need to hold way back and we wouldn't get anything done, but there is a kind of language to it. Block, dodge, punch…." He trailed off, waiting to see if Rin would make the connection.

She stared at him blankly.
"...oookay," Ranma continued. "It's the same with dance. You know a whole bunch of dance moves, but there's a certain way they all fit together. You wouldn't skip moves because you can't, not really."

Rin's confusion wasn't affected in the slightest by the explanation. "Okay, but how does that help with English?"

"Look around," Ranma said. "Recognize those words?"

Rin felt even more baffled "No?"

"You will." He smiled. "Okay, to start, ignore the signs. I need you to keep two dances in mind. We won't be playing music for this, so why don't we use your solo on top of what we did today with Boku no Live? Now, it's pretty simple. Start with your solo...and when I call out a line, you switch to that bit Boku no Live immediately. Then I'll call out one for Koi no Signal and you do the same, got it?"

Rin grinned. "Got it. This should be easy!" She missed Ranma's grin as she took to the center of the roof. She was able to easily step through it - the dance wasn't hard, and it was her strong suit. She only hummed under her breath, since something told her it might not be that simple.

It wasn't. She planted her feet for a few twists of her hips, when Ranma suddenly called out "Adventure!" It took her long enough to remember where in the new song that was that she was completely wrong-footed by the fact that her legs were supposed to be moving and her arms pumping, and she stumbled and nearly fell over.....only to twist her hips again at the word "Ring!" and fall flat on her back. "Hey, what was that for?"

"Making a point," Ranma said.

"But I can't just switch my body around like that!" Ranma stared at her levelly. "What?"

"You got it right," Ranma said. "But why not?"

Rin actually needed a moment to consider. "...because each step in the dance flows into the other, right?"

Ranma nodded, a smile of encouragement on his face. "Right....and I took a good, hard look at your English homework last night....well, our English homework. And it turns out, English is the same thing. You can't use every word together in a random jumble, and you can't skip words and steps the way you sometimes get away with in Japanese."

Rin felt her frustration rise. "Okay, lesson learned, I gotta remember all the words and how they fit together, that's the HARD part!"

Ranma shook his head. "We ain't done, Rin." He offered his hand. "Get up. Now I'm gonna show you something else. Try it again." She glowered at him, but stood in place. This time, he put on the music....and this time, when they quickly faded back and forth, seemingly in rapid succession, she always seemed to be in the right position to switch dances easily. "See now?"

Rin waited to see if he would fill her in, but this time he seemed to want her to figure it out again. She looked down at the ground, trying to recall the English words...and the ones around her.

"...dance steps. You want me to . . . what, make English a dance?"

"Exactly!"
The lobby was nothing like Honoka had expected. Although if you'd asked her, she probably wouldn't have been able to tell you what she did expect from the lobby of a huge office building like this one. Gilded fixtures and soft music, maybe. Instead, it was simple linoleum tiling and a number of elevators.

Maki must have noticed her staring, because she sighed. "Yes, this is the place. The lawyer's offices are probably a few floors up. Mom'll be there."

"Shouldn't I have gone home an--"

Maki shook her head. "Probably, but we didn't have time for that. Come on." She had spotted her mother, who was looking at them sternly. "Uh, hey, Mom."

"Maki, Honoka." The older woman was looking at them fairly sternly. "I don't know whether I should even have to tell you this, but just in case...well, no funny business." When the pair were confused, she sighed. "You're just friends, okay? The sorts of people we're going to be dealing with are...very conservative." At the understanding nod, she continued. "We'll figure out how to handle it better later. Just bear in mind it's fine in videos and public appearances, but when you're off-stage don't get caught."

"Aheh..." Maki swallowed while Honoka just looked puzzled. "Yeah, we'll talk later." She held up the folder. "I've got all my notes, or at least everything I could reconstruct." At her mother's glare, she just shrugged. "Everything like that I noted down. I remember what you said, but this was all loose-leaf."

The opinion of the lawyer, a man in his late twenties by the look of him in a severe business suit, wasn't much better than her mother's. They took several hours of back and forth, describing the whole situation as best as they could, but he finally pinched his nose. "Ms Nishikino, Ms Kousaka, you have to understand. As paper trails go, this could be better. Normally, it might not matter, but the involvement of the Love Live company changes things drastically. You might have been better served working through the contest board first."

Mrs. Nishikino spoke up. "Unfortunately, you have the rules right in front of you. They're not designed for justice or even fairness in cases like this..."

The lawyer held up his hand. "I do understand the situation. But the fact remains that, because you didn't file first, the Love Live corporation asserts ownership of the songs on behalf of DoCo. That means we're going against their lawyers, not whoever DoCo might have on retainer. And before the contest, Love Live sold major controlling interests to Sony, Lantis, King, and even some foreign owned groups."

Everyone was surprised when Honoka was the fastest on the ball. "They turned it into a scouting opportunity."

"Exactly, Miss Kousaka." The lawyer's head shook. "It is in their interests to avoid anything like this being too public. Now, that said, our firm will do everything in our power to assert your rights to your music. But it will take time, and negotiation. A court case isn't out of the question, but right now I'd say it's not likely."

Maki sighed. "What's the best case scenario?"

The lawyer smiled. "Well, there is some good news. In the long run, I am pretty sure that you have a good case. If it went to trial, you'd be due some fairly large awards taken from these girls and from Love Live - "
He was actually interrupted. "I don't care about that. I know you do, Mom," she said, cutting off the objection. "But I want the songs back, as soon as possible."

"Okay, okay," The young man shrugged.

Mrs. Nishikino gave her daughter's shoulder a squeeze. "I'm proud of you taking the high road, but…"

Maki nodded, and glanced at Honoka. The ginger gave it a moment's thought, then shook her head. In response, Maki turned back to the adults. "Right. Get however much you think is good, and cover the fees of course, but the important thing is those girls can't perform my songs."

"...on that front, the news is...less good," The lawyers tone was hesitant at best now. "Ms. Nishikino, it is nearly impossible to actually prevent someone else from performing your works legally, at least as long as they are sure to give you due credit. We might try to bury them in a settlement with enough legal red tape to seriously slow them down, but stopping them will be very difficult."

Maki stiffened. "I...I see. Thank you for your time..." Without warning, she stood up so suddenly she knocked the chair she was sitting in aside and ran out of the office.

Honoka was stunned, but remembering Mrs. Nishikino's warning she held off long enough to bow to the man. "Thank you for your time, sir. I'd better go make sure she's okay."

The young lawyer was so stunned he almost forgot. "Oh, yes, as leader of Mu's you also have a stake in the band's music. I'll need a release form signed..."

Honoka quickly jotted off a signature. "Will that be okay, or do I need to get her back in here?"

"That will be fine for today," The young man nodded and quickly organized the stacks. "We'll let you know through Mrs. Nishikino if there's anything more to be done."

Honoka nodded and chased off after Maki. It turned out, she wasn't able to make it far. The younger girl was just outside the office building, leaning against a short pillar and panting. Honoka quickly put an arm over her shoulder. "Hey...c'mon, let's go get coffee and maybe hit that art museum we passed on the way here."

"You? Art museum?" Maki raised an eyebrow.

Honoka snickered. "I'm your girlfriend today, right?" she said more than asked, lowering her tone conspiratorially. "That means I have to pretend to be interested in stuff you're interested in anyway, so..."

Maki nodded. "Okay." But it was still obvious she was anything but.

Shampoo didn't actually need long to think about things before she realized the obvious solution to her hunt. Peering out into the garden to make sure Akane was still engaged in her meditations, she knocked on the door to Nabiki's room. She gave the older girl approximately three milliseconds before she opened the door.

"Shamps, it's nice that you've mastered the door, but we're going to have to work on privacy." Nabiki said sardonically, closing her laptop. She turned around in her chair, revealing she was only wearing a bathrobe. "Can I help you?"

Shampoo nodded. "Nabiki, where songs Akane get come from?" she asked, keeping her voice
deliberately casual, with just a hint of steel beneath it.

Nabiki rolled her eyes. "Ask Akane, she's the one who found them on some stupid forum. We don't need any more, but if you wanna put your paycheck into it I'll figure out how to use them."

Shampoo nodded solemnly. "Nabiki, where songs Akane get come from?" she asked again, using the exact same tone.

Nabiki looked her over for a moment, and then said, notably coolly. "Shut the door." Shampoo frowned, but really, what was the harm? Nabiki couldn't possibly do anything to her and, if she didn't like the answer badly enough, she was armed and the other girl wasn't even a warrior. "You realize that, if you don't know, you can claim ignorance when your precious Airen finds out, right?"

"Mercenary girl…" Shampoo said warningly.

Nabiki just shrugged. "All right. If you must know, after Kasumi went off with that red-headed bitch to cook them dinner, Ukyo noticed that they'd left the music behind. She took good pictures of all the pages on her smartphone while they were busy making dinner, and no one the wiser 'till we'd transcribed and uploaded them. That's all. No grand conspiracy, no tales of epic battles. She saw an advantage, and knew just who would know how to make the most of it."

Shampoo blinked, needing a moment to process that. "This not right, Nabiki."

"And that's why I'm gonna win in the end," Nabiki smirked. "I don't give a fuck. That prize is worth trampling over a prep-school princess who thinks she can mess with my family without consequence." She laughed. "Oh, and you're not breathing a word of this to Akane. No sense troubling her pretty little head."

Shampoo smirked. "What make you think you stop me?"

"Oh, I don't know," Nabiki smirked. "How about the fact that Ranma's not showing much sympathy these days? And if someone wound up in the hospital...say, someone you've already slipped poison to once, like, I don't know, Kira Tsubasa…"

Shampoo's eyes narrowed. "Maybe I put you in healer's tender care. Doctor Tofu not very much fun last time…"

Nabiki smirked. "Except maybe I set up a little dead man's circuit with my contact there," she said slyly. "If something happens to me, and I don't check in every few days, Tsubasa gets a nasty case of something and you take the blame."

Shampoo growled. "What you wanting, mercenary girl?"

Nabiki laughed. "Really, other than keeping quiet? Just learn your damn lines and your Japanese so your great grandmother doesn't pull you from School Idoling for now. If I need an experienced hunter to set some man-traps, I'll let you know." Nabiki's smile turned cold. "Just be a good little lackey, and I promise you'll get your romantic scene on stage in the end."

The Amazon didn't know what else to do, so she walked out. Nabiki just turned to her laptop to make a quick call to Ukyo. "She's in,"

Ukyo laughed. "I can't believe she bought it! Fine, fine, I'll pay up." After taking a moment to get herself back under control, she thought to ask. "Did she really believe you about the whole thing about holding Kira hostage?"
"I think so." Nabiki admitted. "We'll know in about two minutes if there's a scream of outrage."

Ukyo shook her head. "All I can say is this better work, Nabiki. Ranma's spent way too long in that school with those girls already."

"If I'll work, Kuonji," Nabiki made reassuring noises. "I'll get you out of my hair once there's no more money to be made off you."

Honoka found herself staring at what seemed, to her, like the hundredth photograph. "What's this one?" she asked.

Maki had to twist her own head around. "Oh, the camera's upside down, I think." Honoka nodded while the other girl started to explain something about reality and force perspectives, but quickly lost track of what was being said. She hoped it wouldn't show on her face, but it obviously did, because Maki trailed off with "...and it's obvious you don't understand or care about what I have to say."

Honoka winced, but she couldn't deny it. "Not...really. But it's obviously interesting to you, so I'm trying."

"Don't," Maki said, probably somewhat more shortly than she intended. "You don't have to do this just to fool my mom."

That was the wrong thing to say. "I'm not doing it to fool your mom, Maki. I'm doing it because I am interested in you. Your mom's going to find out sooner or later."

Maki seemed to swallow. "Hey, do you want to go on another vacation?" Honoka's exclamation of surprise at the seeming non-sequitur didn't even slow her down. "Just the two of us somewhere, I mean. It won't be cheap, but I've got enough allowance saved up again for a few days..."

"...Maki, what's wrong?" The words cut straight to the younger girl's heart. "This isn't like you. I mean, really not like you. You're not the type to run away."

Maki shook her head. "I just...I don't know."

Honoka swallowed. This was not going to go over well. "We need to tell them the whole truth. Tomorrow."

All the color fled from Maki's cheeks. "You...you can't...."

"Maki, what's the big deal?"

The words were like a spike of ice. "I don't think I could inherit my parent's practice if they found out." Honoka already knew that, but apparently Maki didn't remember them saying it. So she let the girl explain it herself. "You don't know what it's like. I'm their perfect daughter, their successor. It's like with Ranma, only way worse. Do you know how many lives my parents save every day? It's not just about being a doctor, it's about...it's about getting enough old men and women with money to pay for all the research we do. Next to that, what's a few pop songs?" She cut off, her hand suddenly covering her mouth in both shock and shame at the admission.

Honoka managed to keep her voice quiet. "One girl's happiness,"

Maki blinked, and only barely constrained a laugh. "Wha...when did you get so insightful?"

"When it became a survival trait," Honoka deadpanned. "But that's really what it is. If you can't
become a doctor *and* make music, you won't be Nishikino Maki, right?"

"That's…" Maki winced. "Yes. That's how I feel."

Honoka nodded. "What if you can't become a doctor but you can be a musician?"

Maki couldn't answer that right away.

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Umi had been surprised to find her father had a present, of sorts - one of Ranma's Chinese silk shirts and a pair of silk pants, both neatly cleaned and pressed. It wasn't exactly flattering, but it didn't irritate her skin too much with her newfound sensitivity, so she managed to get to the club room in time to run into Hanayo watching one of the 'library DVDs.' "Where is everyone?"

"Ranma said she'd rehearse with you tonight," Hanayo said, turning around. "Uh...everyone else but Rin's free for the day. Maki and Honoka are taking care of some stuff with you-know-who, and I think Nico's tied up for math lessons."

"Tied up?" Umi raised an eyebrow. "Where's Eri, then?"

"I don't know," Hanayo shrugged. "Kotori's in the fashion clubroom, maybe Eri went with her for some costume stuff."

"Well, that's just great," Umi sighed and tugged on a chair to pull it out and sit down, only to jump when it crashed into the wall and left a mark. Hanayo wasn't expecting that either, because she emitted a sharp 'eep' sound of her own. "Sorry. I...if I get the slightest bit emotional it feels like I'm going to smash everything around me by accident."

"Uhh…." Hanayo edged away from Umi a bit nervously. "Are you?" Umi wordlessly pulled out a small slip of paper from her purse and slid it across the table. "A speeding ticket?"

"I was worried I was going to miss rehearsal," Umi said. "And the cops pulled me over for doing 40 in a 30 zone. On foot."

"...how does Ranma do it?" Hanayo squeaked out.

Umi just sighed. "Father assured me this part only lasts a few days. Maybe a bit longer since I used the wrong focus to get there, but eventually it gets back under control. Like a muscle you just discovered you have. It takes some time, but eventually you don't even need to think about it."

Hanayo nodded. "All the same...uhh…"

Umi grinned. "I'm not taking any chances. Don't worry, you'll be safe sitting over there."

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*This...is bad.* Eri thought to herself, even as she watched the master at work. Kotori was staring at her designs closely, churning out all the outfits they would need for a major concert at the end of the summer. At least, if by 'major concert' you meant an entire day-long performance, with costume changes between every song.

Worse, Kotori was showing no signs of stopping even though the school books with her summer vacation homework hadn't been touched, nor had the lyric sheets for the song she was supposed to be writing. While she had managed to cover it up during the training, by now her makeup was running and the extent to which she hadn't slept was obvious.
"Kotori?"

The blonde girl didn't even look up. "In a minute."

Eri's eyes narrowed. "Kotori?" she tried again.

"Gotta get this done," Finally fed up, Eri waited for the younger girl to finish a stitch, then pulled the plug on the power strip. "Hey!"

"Kotori, talk to me."

The younger girl pushed away from the sewing machine. "There's nothing to talk about."

"Then why do you look like you'd blow over in a stiff breeze right now?"

Kotori blinked, stopping midway through standing. "Is...is it that bad?"

"I'll say," Eri sat down. "What's wrong?"

Kotori sighed, before sitting back down. "I...I miss Honoka and Umi."

Eri blinked. "Harasho..."

"I know that sounds silly," Kotori tried to explain.

Eri nodded. "Not really. Are you jealous?"

Kotori needed to think about that. "No? Maybe? I don't know." She idly reached over to grab a pair of scissors, but Eri had already intercepted her. "Hey!"

"You're deflecting," Eri explained patiently. "Maki tried that, and apparently she wrecked a small American village in a psychotic rampage."

Kotori blinked. "Oh, you mean in that game Nozomi gave her?"

Eri choked. "Okay, I guess when I say it like that it sounds weird. Point is, it doesn't help anything."

Kotori just sighed. "It's...It's Ranma. Ever since he showed up, things have been weird. Honoka used to call us every night, but lately it's just been Ranma and then off to bed. Umi too - she practices with him in the mornings." Eri just went with another prompting look. "It's not...it's not that I don't feel like I'm Ranma's friend, but everything we do is either the club, or somehow related to it. If we're not doing that, those two are off in their own worlds, and he's with them..."

Eri just smiled. "I guess that happens, sometimes. But have you talked with them?"

"No," Kotori admitted. "I was just hoping it would come back together. It..." She looked guiltily at the floor. "You know, I was accepted for a study abroad program."

"What?" Eri blinked. "Hey, that's grea-

Kotori snapped. "There's no way I'm leaving with things like this!" Eri stepped back, looking like she had just been bitten by a particularly adorable puppy. "...but...I was so guilty for wanting to, just for a moment."

Eri tried to think of a response, but the door suddenly blasted off its' hinges, a table flew across the room and landed against a window, and Eri herself was face-first on the floor in the space of a blink.
By the time she had managed to recover her senses, she realized that the whirlwind of long black hair was embracing Kotori, who was literally twitching in pain amidst the long babble of high-speed, barely coherent sounds coming from the girl. "SONODA UMI!"

This accomplished the immediate goal of getting Umi to let go of her friend before Kotori asphyxiated, or just plain broke. But she was so startled she jumped in surprise, her head slamming into the roof tiles. That put her far enough off balance that she slipped and fell on her rear. "Oww…"

Kotori was doing little better, rubbing at her arms. "I...I thought I was gonna die…"

"Oh, Kotori, I'm so sorry!" Umi cried out. "I...I didn't know you felt that way at all!" Kotori took a step back as it looked like Umi might be about to try to hug her again. That prompted Umi to let out a curse. "I'm...I'm really sorry. It's like I lose it for a second and everything cascades out of control!"

Kotori, very hesitantly, put a hand on Umi's shoulder. When she didn't get another crushing bear hug as a reply, she moved to putting her arms around her friend. "Don't...don't worry about it."

Umi let out a sob. "How can I not worry about it! You're feeling abandoned and you're right and I should have seen something and…"

Eri sighed and called up a cab. "We'd better get you to Doctor Tofu."

"What was that?" Nico asked, hearing a loud thump from the floor below. "And if you try to grab my chest I swear I will toss you out the window."

Nozomi shrugged. "You wouldn't. This is the third floor." She did, however, refrain from her usual antics. "But if you're not going to pay attention, let me see how you're doing." Nico passed along the book. "Not bad, I guess."

"Can I go?" Nico asked. "I've gotta get home."

Nozomi shook her head. "It's not bad but there's lots of room for improvement. Take five, let me go print out another couple of sheets."

Nico smacked the table. "We've been at this for three hours! If you wanna meet back here after dinner, sure, but I need a break and I need to make dinner!"

"Why can't we go to your place, then?" Nozomi frowned. In desperation, she shuffled and flipped the top card. "The Ten of Cups reversed?" She looked up. "You're somehow neglecting your family? I can't believe that!"

"I'm telling you you're slipping, Toujou." Nico snapped. "Leave me alone."

Nozomi felt her temper flare, and she was no longer inclined to suppress it. "Nico, you know why I can't do that. Talk to me now or talk to everyone later about why we're out of Love Live."

Nico flinched, but didn't budge. "I'm not gonna stay in the club if it'll drag the rest of you down, Nozomi. It's more than just me now." That was unexpected enough that Nozomi almost missed Nico shoving her work into her bags. "Look, I get what you're saying. I'm not the only one who needs this."

"Then you have to know why I can't just let you go!"

Nico nodded. "Trust me, Nozomi. It's not me I'm protecting, and if Tendo knows what's good for her
she'll keep her nose out of this." Nozomi was taken aback with the viciousness Nico was suddenly showing. "She can try, but if she does I will turn it on her and bury them. Literally, if need be."

Nozomi swallowed. It seemed impossible, but she was sure Nico felt she could follow through on that.

---

*I have got to get on top of this,* Honoka decided. Now back in Kanda and away from the distractions of the art museum, the exhaustion of the last few weeks was even more plain on Maki's face. There was a missing sparkle to her eyes, and she was already starting to slow down. *Still, how can I do that? ...of course.* "Maki...were you serious about taking a vacation?"

"I...I don't know," The younger girl looked unsure. "It was just a thought, you know?"

Honoka smiled. "We don't have to go to Osaka, you know," she pointed out. "I just think maybe it's a good idea to not be right here, right now, where everything's going on."

Maki grew pensive as she really thought about what was being proposed. "We still have to rehearse, and I have to get to cram school, and..."

Honoka nodded. "I was gonna say, maybe we can just stay in a hotel in the city?"

"You need to be an adult for that..." Maki pointed out. "It was a stupid idea anyway."

Honoka nodded. "Right. Pack your bags, we're doing a sleepover at my place!"

"...what."

"I told you," Honoka grinned. "You need to not be here."

Maki rolled her eyes. "Yeah, right. Your parents would throw a fit, remember?"

"Oh, yeah." Honoka blushed in embarrassment. "Geez, it's not like we'd be sleeping together."

"Yes we would." Maki smirked.

Honoka's pout almost seemed to darken the sky. "You know what I mean." Just then, she reached the gate to Maki's home, and nearly had to push Maki to the ground to keep her from turning. Honoka covered the other girl's mouth to stifle the inevitable protest. When Maki finally realized Honoka was serious, they nodded at each other and peered around the corner.

The boy was handsome, Honoka could see that. His hair was cut to absolute neatness, and his school uniform was tailored to absolute perfection. She didn't recognize the school, but it seemed familiar, so she looked to Maki for more. She mouthed 'Kaisei' at her. Honoka hadn't recognized the uniform, but the name was familiar enough. A strange boy, wearing the uniform of the most exclusive all-boys school in Japan - so exclusive that they wouldn't be allowed to date? Only one reason he could be here. They pulled back around the corner to whisper to each other. "I thought your mom had backed off."

"She must not have told Father yet." Maki whimpered. "What am I going to do?"
Maki whimpered. "What am I going to do?"

Honoka put a hand over Maki's mouth again, smiled, and held up her other hand, gesturing for her to follow. What followed was, in Maki's opinion, completely absurd. Honoka walked backwards, keeping one hand covering Maki's lips to prevent her from screaming...no, that wasn't right - to remind her not to scream. The gentle blue eyes leading her backwards, away from the dangers that the boy represented. It was all so sweet that Maki didn't see the telephone pole until Honoka had backed full-speed into it. "Owww..." Suddenly Honoka was covering her own mouth.

Maki giggled. "Okay, I think we're far enough back. Thanks, but this won't hold him off forever."

Honoka nodded. "Okay. My place. Seriously, you need some good sweets in you."

Maki groaned. "Like I need Ranma's torture sessions."

"Well, we'll find something in the kitchen, then," Honoka insisted. "No way I'm -erk!" The Boy, as Honoka had already designated him, was walking towards them with a smile on his face. She felt...something, and grabbed Maki's wrist and was suddenly making a run for it.

Rin was panting a lot harder than usual, but she was forced to admit she was starting to get the hang of this. She didn't know how, but Ranma had set up the whole thing so that if she guessed completely wrong on a word, she would have to twist her body awkwardly enough to know she was screwing up, no matter how she positioned her body. Sure, she usually could point to the wrong thing if she really tried, but it wasn't worth the effort.

"I am not a potato," she repeated slowly after the last set of steps.

Ranma sighed. "That ain't right. But at least you got the words memorized in the right places now. We'll try it again tomorrow."

"Ugh." Rin slid to the ground, only to find a water bottle pressed into her hands. "Thanks...and...I guess you are helping," she admitted grudgingly.

Ranma blinked. "Okay, why wouldn't I?"

Rin snapped. "I don't know! Everyone loves you and I don't know WHY!"

Ranma blinked. Again. "Uhh..."

"You're rude, bossy, obsessed with the contest, an egomaniac, and... ARGH! " Rin threw up her hands. "I don't get it!"

"Hey, hey, I apologized over the tomboy thing, didn't I?" Ranma asked, throwing up his hands in front of him. "What more do you want?!"

"To go back where you came from before someone gets hurt!" Rin screamed.

It hung in the air, echoing off the buildings of the neighboring districts. Ranma sighed. "It ain't that simple, ya know. I wanted it all to work out, but..."

Rin swallowed. "Yeah, sorry. You don't wanna be here any more than I want you here."
Ranma decided to go with that, for the moment. "Anyway, we're done for the day. Why don't you pack up and go chat with Hanayo?"

"Yeah, Kayochi..." Rin shrugged.

Ranma narrowed his eyes. "Why do you call her that, anyway? Pretty demeanin', isn't it?"

"Huh?" It was Rin's turn to blink.

Ranma shrugged. "It's a nickname for a little kid."

"None of your business, Ranma!" Rin shouted, then stormed down the stairs.

Maki was panting heavily. "Honoka, I'm not a machine! Slow down!" Then a black sedan - not a limo, but a very nice car, turned a corner. Honoka nearly felt her arm being ripped out at the shoulder as Maki took off again, picking a narrow alleyway no car could possibly follow them down.

Honoka didn't have the heart to mention it couldn't possibly be The Boy. He wasn't old enough to drive, he didn't know where Honoka lived, and most importantly, they had already ducked down several of these alleyways to try to lose him. The only way he could possibly be keeping up was if he employed ninja.

Then Honoka remembered Ranma's life.

"Okay, okay, let's assume we're being tracked, somehow." Honoka said, purposely slowing down but checking over her shoulder. There was no one behind them, but when she turned around she noted a young girl, about college-age, coming down the street opposite them. There wasn't enough room in the narrow alleyway to completely get out of her way, but brushing past wasn't too uncomfortable. "Right, this is a safe spot, we can see anyone following us coming. How do we lose him?"

Maki glanced back at the young woman, making sure no one was taking advantage of the distraction. "Don't you know? Ranma's your best friend, right?"

Honoka shook her head. "We don't actually share a brain, even if it seems like it sometimes," she said. "Let's think about this..."

"Two redheads," Maki realized. "We stick out like a sore thumb, especially me."

"Not the time," Maki snapped. "Logically, we should split up. Redheads aren't that uncommon."

"Scarlet-haired girls like you are," Honoka said. "If it was me you'd probably have the right idea. We need more."

Maki gulped, realizing how this would have to work. "We need to run for Kanda station." Honoka stared at her - on the train they'd be easy to track. "We're not getting off at Akiba."

Then she twigged to it. "Rush hour. We're gonna try to lose them at Tokyo station."

"No, that's where we split up," Maki said. "I'll lose him in Harajuku and meet back up with you in Shinjuku."

"..." Honoka pulled out her phone. "No good, not leaving you alone. It's an idea, though."
Maki nodded. "We should've thought of that sooner," she agreed. "Get her to change to girlform first, though." Honoka glared. "It's not like that. You said it yourself. Scarlet haired girls are not something you see every day. And Ranma's been careful to stay off the web site. Two of us, especially if I do up my hair and maybe change clothes, if she can swing that…"

Honoka groaned. "If only we had another girl with scarlet hair, or even close, maybe…"

Ranma raced across the rooftops of Kanda towards the station, when she spotted a girl with scarlet red hair below. Maki, what the - but there was no more time.

From high up, she later rationalized, anyone could have made the mistake. The two girls wore their hair the same way, at least currently. This one, though, was almost ten centimeters shorter, with amber eyes much like Kotori's. She was also wearing quite fashionable clothes, at least for the middle school crowd. But Ranma didn't realize any of that until she had landed in front of the poor girl. "Maki, what the HELL are yo - oh, sorry."

"Wait, Maki?" The girl asked. "Nishikino Maki?"

Ranma raised an eyebrow. "You seen her?" she asked. Later, she would reflect that she was way too used to wild, random coincidences.

The girl shook her head. "Sorry, not recently."

Ranma let out a small curse in her exasperation. "Dammit, wasting time, gotta get to Tokyo Station."

The girl watched as the pig-tailed girl bounded straight up the side of the building and off. She stared for another few moments, then took off running afterwards, half-stumbling the whole way to the train station.

Tokyo Station, for those unfamiliar with it, would seem a nightmare at the hour of five in the evening. Every one of the city trains that anybody cared about meets there, ten lines, and that doesn't even account for the inter-city trains, the busses, or the underground shopping arcades that linked it to several nearby stations just to try to manage the foot traffic. And that didn't account for the summer vacation - people needing to enter and leave the city. People pressing in from all sides, so many they needed to be shoved into the trains to ensure that there was enough room on the platforms for the next batch of commuters.

It was certainly no place to try to meet someone spontaneously, which was why Maki was surprised when, as she and Honoka were passing a utility closet, she was paying so much attention to trying to peer in between the crowd for more than two feet that she missed someone reaching out from it and pulling them in. She nearly screamed, but realized Ranma had a firm hand on her mouth. "Oh, can't you just be normal?" she asked. "This is serious."

"That's why I resorted to the lockpicks," Ranma pointed out, her hair already loosened from its' usual pigtail. "It's a good thing your mom gives me an allowance too. There's no way this is gonna work, you know, but I managed to get a copy of your outfit in a little under my size and bind my breasts back enough to pass at a real long distance."

Maki sighed. "I appreciate the honesty, but do you have to be so blunt about it?"

Honoka giggled. "Well, she is a boy, you know." A glance at Ranma let the shortest of them know that this conversation would be continued later. "Okay, what's the plan?"

Ranma shrugged. "Maki comes in, I go out, Maki changes into one of my outfits and walks
home…." He trailed off as they all noticed the problem. "Okay, you both stay here...no, no, if anyone checks the closet you're done for…"

Maki shrugged. "What if we all stay here? There's no one you can't beat up if they try to come through that door."

Ranma smirked. "And then Mu's ends up on the evening news as another scandal."

Honoka frowned. "Not a terrible idea, though. We can't all go now because rush hour. Just barricade the door?"

Ranma thought about it. "Yeah, no one's gonna be cleaning now, that's for sure." She pulled a shelf, full of cleaning supplies, carefully away from the wall and placed it in front of the door. "There. Ain't no one getting in that way."

Maki sighed. "Okay, safe for the moment, but...now what do we do?"

Umi could feel the tensions of the last few hours melting away from just a few pokes. She kept her eyes closed to allow the treatment time to work. "Thanks, Doctor Tofu. I wish I knew what came over me…"

"It's not actually unheard of," the young doctor explained as he prepared a few acupuncture needles with moxa. "With your permission, I'd like to try an experimental treatment based on the same moxibustion point used on Tendo Akane."

Umi lifted her head up questioningly at this. "I wouldn't have thought that thing would have any practical use outside restraining a dangerous lunatic."

Tofu looked decidedly uncomfortable at the accusation. "Miss Sonoda, I agree Miss Tendo had gotten out of control, but she is not a monster. Her issues -"

"Aren't my concern as long as she can't hurt anyone ever again," Umi said with finality. "I'm stepping up my game in case that doesn't turn out right." Her eyes narrowed dangerously. "And I'm not Ranma."

Tofu's discomfort only increased. "Miss Sonoda…"

Umi swallowed. "Sorry, I think I'm still a little off. I only meant that I'm not sure I'll be good enough to stop Tendo from hurting my friends without seriously hurting her, and I can't afford to try."

Tofu sighed. "That's a little better, I guess. Anyway, knowing how the Weakness Moxibustion works, I think I can modify it with a bit of acupuncture to temporarily cut your ki. Unlike what had to be done to Akane, you'll only experience the weakness for a few hours, and then you'll be back to normal for you. Your ki will strengthen back to its' current level over the course of a couple of weeks, giving you a little more time to learn to handle it appropriately."

Umi sighed. "You mean without crushing Kotori like a bug?"

"...yes, that." Tofu coughed. "Anyway, Miss Minami will make a full recovery, so you don't need to worry about that. That said…"

"It's an experiment," Umi said. "Not that I don't trust you, Doctor, but I can't afford to play it safe that way."
Doctor Tofu gave her a quick nod. "Of course. Do you mind if I ask why not?"

"Because Ranma can't be in nine places at once. At least this way it's one less thing for him to worry about when those girls finally do something we'll all regret." Umi was very obviously trying hard to control herself again, but it was easier now, at least. "Thanks, Doctor."

"Umi," The man's tone suddenly changed, and she sat up to see the worry etched on his face. "Are you certain you're not being a little hard on them? I've been treating Akane since she was a little girl, and most of the time she's -"

Umi snapped, interrupting with an actual snarl. "I'm going to stop you right there. I do not care what happened to Tendo or any of the others. I've heard the basics from Ranma anyway. Tendo Akane nearly killed my best friend, I have been poisoned, and Maki's going to pieces over the theft of those songs! Oh, did I mention I've been poisoned over this already? I think that's kind of important! The only reason we're not pressing charges over that is that no one's going to believe we got slipped a bunch of Greek apples and nearly turned the beach into a lesbian harem."

Tofu's eyes widened. "I'm not certain I believe that!"

"Ask Cologne!" Umi shot back. "The point is, they crossed the line first. I believe there's a saying - 'if you can't beat'em, join'em?' 'Sane' won't keep Honoka safe. It won't keep Kotori safe. Yes, my father can help too, but he has to actually run our family dojo. Even if I didn't want to, I wouldn't have much choice."

"If?" Tofu asked mildly. "You always have a choice, Miss Sonoda. It's just a question of whether you see it."

"Well, I've seen where throwing caution to the wind gets you with martial arts now," Umi said. "It's not natural for me…"

Tofu actually gave her a stern glare. "Miss Sonoda, under no circumstances should you compare yourself and your progress to Ranma. That boy is a once in a generation genius, and Hibiki Ryouga being born in the same year is a fluke that I think has not happened in recorded history. You will likely never be his equal."

Umi snapped. "I don't have to be his equal, Doctor. I just have to be Tendo's."

Tofu looked into her eyes, and saw a flame there he had only rarely seen. "...very well. That's at least achievable."

"Do you seriously think that little brat is more skilled than I am?" Umi asked, incredulous. "I saw her fight. Sure, she hits like a truck, but she's got no finesse whatsoever!"

Suddenly Umi found herself on the receiving end of a stare that was so out of place on the young Doctor that, even not knowing him all that well, she found herself frozen to the spot. "Sonoda, listen to me and listen well. There are things here that you do not understand. Until your father teaches you about them, I can't do anything but tell you you are pursuing a dangerous path this way. Do you understand me?"

Umi swallowed. "I...I know that there's danger, but…"

"No." Doctor Tofu said. "You don't." But apparently he wouldn't say any more on the topic. "I'm sorry, but Nerima's not a good place for you right now. If you have any more problems, call and I'll try to come out to see you first."
It turned out that the question of 'now what' wasn't so easy to answer. The closet was apparently surrounded by heavy material that blocked their cell phones, and the power needed to be preserved anyway. With no hope of outside rescue, they had a couple of hours to kill. Ranma, fortunately, had managed to rig up a table with a bucket and a piece of plywood, and he'd happened to have a deck of real cards on him.

"Got any eights?" He asked. Honoka pouted, but handed one card over. He set the pair down. Just then there was a knocking at the door. He held up a hand for quiet, then stuck his head awkwardly against the door.

After almost a minute, Maki whispered "Well, can't you just...sense them?"

Ranma shook his head. "No good. That's only really reliable against other martial artists like me. I might be able to pick up Umi, but I didn't feel anyone coming for you in the crowd." Maki looked like she was about to protest. "I'm just sayin', this guy might not be able to afford the best. Or the second-best, anyway. Konatsu I can usually get when she's actively fighting."

Honoka nodded. "I get it. Not every ninja has ki, right?"

"Pretty much." Ranma acknowledged. "So I got no way of knowing either."

Maki sighed. "Let's just ignore it."

There was much louder knocking. Ranma grimaced. "Don't think we can." He thought a minute. "Okay, you two stay way the heck back. I'm gonna turn the shelf around so they can't get in easy."

Honoka looked around, then picked up a broom and held it tight. Ranma's eyes widened, startled at the perfect sword grip. "Wait, you practice kendo?"

"Not for almost a year," Honoka admitted. "I don't like the kata. I was afraid someone would get hurt."

Ranma nodded. "Yeah, two people with boken going at each other without padding can do that," he explained for Maki's benefit. "You sure you can do it now? This isn't a fencing competition."

Honoka smiled grimly. "To keep Maki safe, I can probably swing hard enough to hold anyone who gets past you off for a couple of seconds and make a loud noise. That's all you need, right?"

The knocking came again, and it was at that moment that the girls all realized there was something wrong with it. If it had been the type of men they would have been expecting, it would have been higher up on the door, and simultaneously softer and deeper, a lighter knock from a bigger hand. This hand was coming from about the height of Ranma's shoulder, and was somewhat desperate. Ranma looked to the other two, and Honoka nodded. Ranma waited for the next knock, which came faster, then flung the door open with lightning speed, pulling the person knocking in and slamming it behind her before anyone outside could possibly have seen what was going on.

Maki was the first to react. "Sakurauchi Riko?! What the hell are you doing mixed up in this?!"

The girl's blue jean vest and knee-length pink dress were both stained with sweat, as though she had run a long way. She was also wearing heels that added a few centimeters to her short height, which spoke to her coordination. But most of all she was looking terrified. "I...when I saw her...I..."

Ranma's eyes narrowed, but Honoka silenced the accusations with a Look before smiling at young Riko. "Okay, how do you know Maki?"

Maki answered. "She got fifth place at the last inter-ward piano competition. Which is really not bad
for a second-year middle schooler."

Riko blushed. "Uh...thanks..."

Maki sighed. "I know now's not the time, but sorry. I was pretty rude to you."

"It's okay!" Riko panted a few more times as she seemed to try to recover from a sudden bout of lightheadedness. "But...but...what's going on?"

Ranma sighed. "How did you find us?"

Riko's words sounded innocent enough, but they sent a chill down Maki's spine. "There's a boy outside across the way staring at the broom closet. I don't think he got a good look at me, though."

Ranma nodded. "Okay, thanks kid. Do I take him out?"

"How far out?" Maki asked.

Ranma smirked. "How many kilometers do you want?"

Honoka barely restrained a shout, but she still harshly whispered "Absolutely not. That'll be trouble."

Maki bit her lip. "I hate to say it, but I agree with Honoka. It'll be better if we can slip by, still."

Riko shook her head. "I don't think you can, unless you can turn invisible..." She blinked when she realized that Ranma was being stared at. "Wait, seriously? I mean, I saw her run up a building, but..."

Ranma thought about it. "Even if I did it, I could only do myself...and there's good reasons I don't do that these days. They're sealed in my head, it would take me time to remember how. Plus it doesn't work on normal people too well. It only really fools martial artists, anyone who relies on their own two eyes can see through it if they're looking at me."

"And he's staring at the door," Honoka said with a hint of exasperation.

Riko swallowed. "Can I help?"

Kasumi's days remained simple. While she had been able to rebel during that fiasco at the beach, at home her life was much more controlled. There were only so many times she could plead 'exhaustion' to get out of cooking dinner, even with Shampoo taking up the slack to prevent Akane from cooking.

...under the cover of the disaster that could happen if Akane's weakness kicked in at the wrong moment around an open flame. Her temper was improving, but no one in the Tendo household wanted to risk the blowback openly mocking her cooking skills the way Ranma did would cause.

Thus, rather than being in her room with her final song, where she wanted to be, she was busy working on a pot of miso soup and rice. She had her tablet open and propped up to one side, browsing for new dishes to try just something different, when it pinged her with a notification. Love Live had apparently implemented a new 'jukebox' feature. She glanced at it, and shrugged. She'd avoided openly listening to DoCo or Mu's songs in the house, but she should probably be listening to other pop songs if she wanted inspiration.

It was midway through chopping vegetables when she realized her error. She heard her sisters' voices cut in...but that rhythm wasn't hers. The notes, the style, none of it. But that wasn't what
chilled her. Kasumi did recognize it. It was one of Maki's songs. She couldn't even remember which one. Just the sound alone was enough. She switched off the tablet.

She added water to the soup and made sure the rice was all right, and then she went off to talk to Nabiki.

She got as far as the door before she realized that was the wrong tack. I should talk to Father. This is serious, and she can ignore me. Father might reign her in.

It sounded completely hollow even in her own head as she played out the conversation…Kasumi, I'm sure it's nothing that serious. Nabiki's working hard to ensure Ranma comes back to us. We should just support her. Stealing the songs was perfectly in line with the tenets of the School after all, for all that Nabiki's studies ended before her mastery. Father wouldn't even care about how illegal it was - with the favors the police force and the rest of the town council owed him, he could probably bury any charges short of something that came to the direct attention of the mainstream press if they had to pass through the bureaucracy of Nerima ward.

...the School. Could I...could I challenge Father myself? She had actually studied. Gone further than Nabiki even. Father had never allowed her to undertake the training to develop her ki for some reason, but she had been listening in on enough of Akane's retraining to know what had to be done.

She gasped in realization at what she was thinking. Defy her father? Take over the school? Even if it were practical, which it wasn't, how could she think it? It would be the end of the household!

"Yen for your thoughts, child?" Cologne asked, suddenly bouncing in. "Your ki is disturbed. Which is very strange, considering its' level of development."

Kasumi shook her head. "It's a family matter, Elder."

Cologne laughed. "When is it not in this town? I'll tell you something, though. If you ever tire of this life of serving the whims of a crazy male, you would likely be welcome in the Village. Although then I suppose you'd be serving at the whim of my crazy colleagues until you developed your talents a little. Either as a warrior or a healer."

"Just...just leave?" Kasumi asked, mortified.

Cologne eyed her. "Well, I don't see armed guards, there's no magic on you compelling your compliance, and really, I don't see where you have any resources that aren't already controlled by the man, and I use the term loosely, in charge. So the only things stopping you are the lack of any place to go...and you." The elder bounced over to the tablet, peering at the text and putting on reading glasses from her sleeve. "Hmm....this should be easy enough."

"Oh, no, I couldn't..." Kasumi tried to protest.

Cologne cackled. "Nonsense, child. Consider it an old Amazon's duty to help out a potential believer."

Kasumi swallowed. "...thank you, Elder."

"Use the time to meditate and decide on your course of action..." Cologne said. "And any debt will be paid in full."

Kondo Akio liked to think of himself as a patient man. The fact that he was barely in high school, and thus only dubiously qualified as a man, didn't bother him. He usually won out in the end,
although in the past that had mostly been through judicious application of his family's fortune. He himself didn't own a great deal of it, but he had control of enough, and had actually made some money through investment.

But the one thing he hadn't managed yet was a girlfriend. This wasn't really his fault - none of his peers had one either. Kaisei Gakuen had very strict rules about outside distractions, and a casual girlfriend definitely counted. But an official engagement, arranged traditionally, well, the school's charter specifically allowed for that, although it was so rarely done these days it hardly seemed a loophole worth considering.

And then the little minx had had the nerve to cancel on him. Well, a little bit of charm wasn't off the table to get her back to the table. Really, though, this degree of hard-to-get seemed excessive. He knew some might argue the use of shinobi to track a girl was also excessive, but he didn't really intend to do anything besides track with them. Well, and maybe get rid of the hangers-on, even if they were all lookers.

Except the little kid. He wasn't a monster.

Akio's thought processes went like this until the door to the closet slammed open and a blur with two streaks of red ran out and bolted through the now-emptying station. He picked up his phone.

"Confirm the target, please?"

"...can't confirm 100%, sir. The one running was definitely the martial artist, and the girl she was carrying was wearing the target's clothes, but they were moving too fast to get a positive ID on the faces."

Akio thought about it for about ten seconds. "Leave one man on the closet. We'll follow the other two at a discrete distance, like before."

The leader of the ninja just acknowledged. He wasn't being paid enough to actually tangle with a Capital Letter Martial Artist, but he was being paid enough to not question his boss' dubious grasp of surveillance techniques. The combination served well to keep him and his men away from any injury worse than a bump on the head, usually.

Riko screamed. Being carried along at speeds that rival roller coasters through a still-crowded train station was not what she'd had in mind by 'Help.' "Are you out of your MIND?! We're going to crash into someone!"

Ranma smirked down at her, incidentally taking her eyes off the corridor and causing Riko to scream again. "Eh, relax, I could do this with my eyes closed."

"You practically are!" Riko curled up tighter to avoid having to see various light fixtures blur past her head when Ranma needed to jump over a food cart.

Ranma seemed to pick up on the problem. "Sorry, can't slow down. These guys are pretty good. Close your eyes." Riko did so. "Okay, so, wanna tell me why you cared enough to get mixed up in this?"

Riko took a deep breath, trying to ignore the whistling of the air in her ears. "It...it was at the piano competition. She looked so sad when she was done with her performance. I tried to say 'hi' but she wasn't interested."

Ranma chuckled. "A few months ago, right? Well, that's good enough for me. Hold on. I'm gonna need to go up the side of the building once we get outside and turn around. Anywhere in particular
you were headed?"

Riko said "It's vacation, so no. I was just going to go buy some blank music sheets."

Ranma glanced around. "Uh, getting a bit late. Maybe I can pick some up in the morning and you can owe me?"

"Sure," Riko said. "Meet you in front of the Sega building outside Akiba station?" It's amazing how much better this feels with my eyes closed she mused to herself.

"Okay," Ranma agreed. "Oh, you can open your eyes now."

Riko did, and immediately regretted it. She screamed her head off until she was completely out of breath, then did so again. On the third breath, she couldn't get another scream going but was still wide-eyed with terror. "We have to be two hundred floors up!" That wasn't the only problem, of course - The main one was that Ranma, still holding her with one arm, was hanging off a narrow ledge with the other.

Ranma chuckled. "Don't be ridiculous, the tallest around here is only about half that, and we're not on it." He turned serious. "Okay, this is a little awkward. I'm about 99% sure I could get you up without you helping, but let's just make that an even hundred, eh? Reach your hand out for the ledge here…" Riko gulped, but with no choice but to trust Ranma, she reached out and got both hands on the ledge. She pushed her up, and Riko realized there was actually about a meter of space on this overhang, which she promptly took advantage of to lay down. "Okay, you good?" Ranma asked the younger girl "I mean, I'm not leaving you up here or nothing, but this was the closest spot those guys can't get us at. If we need to, I can take ya somewhere else."

Riko swallowed. The ledge wasn't unstable, and as long as she couldn't see over it this wasn't too bad. "Do...do you do stuff like this all the time?"

"Yep!"

Riko swallowed. "H-how long are we gonna be stuck up here?"

Ranma shrugged. "Until they spot us or Maki and Honoka call. In the meantime…"

Nozomi sighed as she picked up the phone, walking back to her apartment. "Yes, Ranma?"

"How'd ya guess?" Ranma asked dryly, not bothering to point out you didn't need to be a fortuneteller to give all your friends different ringtones. "Honoka and Maki are trapped in a broom closet." Nozomi snickered. "Not like that….well, maybe like that, not my problem. Point is, they've got a ninja watching to see if they come out. Got any ideas?"

Nozomi thought about that for a moment. "Nekohanten's private number?"

Ranma gave that another thought. "Yeah, that works. Thanks."

Nozomi was about to go back to her homework when the phone rang again.

The man watching the closet door was really looking forward to his upcoming cigarette break. When that would be, it was hard to say under the circumstances, but probably no more than an hour. They were kids, they'd get hungry, and really, no self-respecting ninja these days wore the 'traditional' outfits outside ceremony. No, it was a blue suit for him, just like the thousands of other young ex-college students 'looking for gainful employment.' Blend in with the times, that was the way. He'd
just pretend to play around with his cell phone like he was waiting for someone late and no one would be the wiser.

So he was fairly surprised when a kid in an ill-fitting white Chinese shirt, wearing a pair of glasses so thick they could serve as armor plate, tapped him on the shoulder. "Excuse me, good sir, but I believe you're stalking a young woman."

Well, he was, but that was no reason to admit anything. "Go away, kid. Play somewhere else."

Ten long knives extended from each of the 'boy's' sleeves. "No, I think you are going to play somewhere else."

The young ninja tried another tack "You realize the second I'm out of view, I have to report to my boss I lost eyes on them, right? This doesn't change anything."

"Nonetheless," Mousse said slowly. "I've been promised a favor for this intervention and I mean to collect."

The man turned and left, and Mousse withdrew his blades before anyone in the crowd took too much notice. He spun and opened the door to the closet, only to feel a length of wood impact firmly against his skull. "Ow."

Honoka's eyes widened. "Oh, Kami, I'm so sorry!"

Mousse adjusted his glasses. "I'm sorry too, I should have warned you. Anyway, we don't have a great deal of time."

Maki stepped out. "If we've got a clear window, we can take a cab to my place."

Mousse shook his head. "No, they'll be watching it. And the Nekohanten is a bad idea too. Shampoo has been staying at the Tendo Dojo, but she...has some problems with temptation. I've had some too, if we're being honest."

Maki rolled her eyes. "Okay then, wise guy? Where do we go?"

"Actually," Mousse smiled. "Your friend suggested the Kanda shrine. There's a small hut where the maidens normally change. I have several futons on me."

Maki stared in shock, but Honoka took this assertion in stride. "Sounds good. Let's go."

Riko pulled Maki's ill-fitting clothes closer around her. The sun was going down, and the wind was picking up. And one thing Ranma had apparently forgotten to take into account - the wind was even higher, and colder, higher up. Even with a complete second set of clothes, the summer temperatures were rapidly dropping below her ability to stand it.

She was about to voice her objection, when a red silk shirt landed over her shoulders, leaving Ranma kneeling at the edge and looking down in nothing but her pants. Riko stared in astonishment. "What are you doing?!"

"You're cold, aren't you?" Ranma asked, as if this was the only important thing. "No one to see us up here, at least not that I care about."

"What about people working in the offices?" Riko asked...but she pulled the shirt shut.

Ranma seemed to think about that for a bit, but shrugged. "I'll be okay, not like anyone up here
knows who I am."

"That - that's not the point!" Riko screamed over the sudden sound of a helicopter flying low overhead. "What kind of girl are you?"

Ranma smirked as the sound passed. "A completely practical one."

"Then why aren't you wearing a bra?" Riko snapped back.

Ranma shrugged. "Wasn't planning on going half naked today, and believe me, bra's not an option."

Riko gave Ranma's chest a look of some jealousy. "I think not wearing a bra isn't an option for you..." Another helicopter went by, cutting off conversation again for a few moments. "Oh, and some of those have cameras. You're probably on the evening news."

Ranma frowned. "Are you trying to be freezing cold?"

Riko shook her head. "No, but..." She was suddenly distracted by a small kitten that came around the corner of the building, out of Ranma's view. She smiled. "D'awww...."

Ranma blinked at the seeming non-sequitur....but then her finely honed instincts picked up on the 'problem.' Suddenly Riko found herself being used as cover, Ranma somehow managing to hide behind her from the kitten, which strolled along the rooftop. Riko glanced at Ranma. "Okay, seriously, you can turn invisible for certain values of 'invisible', run a hundred floors up the side of a building, and otherwise treat gravity as optional....and this scares you?"

Ranma shrieked and ran to the corner when the kitten jumped in Riko's lap.

It was then that everything seemed to break into pandemonium. The kitten's hair stood up and her claws sank into Riko's thigh, making her yelp and jump precariously close to the edge. The reason for that followed up a few moments later, as a helicopter descended into view from too high up for the speed it was going. Ranma shielded her and Riko's eyes, although there wasn't much dust with all the wind. When they could see again, Akio was leaning out of the open door. "Ah, Miss Nishikino, you gave us quite a chase," he said, with a smile...one that faded. "Oh...that was clever. Are you her sister?"

"No," Riko said. She was about to follow up, when Ranma managed to intervene, leaping from where she was to the landing rail, incidentally too far for the tiny kitten to leap.

Akio stepped back from the absolutely furious look the topless girl was giving him. "Maki. Doesn't. Want. To. Meet. You." she said

Akio seemed to consider that. But really, it was only seeming to. "Are you quite sure? I think I need to hear that from her. Her father did promise a meeting."

Ranma resisted the temptation to simply remove the boy from his vehicle. "Buster, I don't like repeating myself. Go away and leave us alone!"

The boy shrugged. "Well, since I seem to be unattached, are you interested? Is that your angle, miss?"

Ranma slowly counted to ten. "No. No I'm not. I don't like boys."

Akio raised an eyebrow. "Oh, I see. Well, then, my rival, I shall see you another day."
Ranma blinked. "Huh?" But when the helicopter started to pull away, she realized she had to let the boy go or Riko would be trapped. She retreated, and the helicopter flew out into the night.

The storage room was already pretty cramped, but the floor was clean and there wasn't much dust. Maki was about to pull off her shirt and grab one of the shrine maiden's kimono for a makeshift night robe when she realized Mousse hadn't left yet. "Uhm, thanks for getting us here, but…"

Mousse shook his head. "I understand where you might have gotten the idea that I did this out of the goodness of my heart...and in part I did, but I was promised payment for this."

Honoka tapped her foot. "Uh-huh. And just what did Ranma promise, and what makes you think we're the ones paying?"

Mousse held up a hand. "There wasn't time to consult you, and if you refuse Ranma will owe me another favor. But your talents, in particular, may be what I need, Miss Kousaka." Rather than futons, he reached into his long sleeves and pulled out three lounge chairs, and a full tea service set. "Please, do sit down, this may take awhile."

The two girls looked at each other, but really, if the Chinese boy wanted to do something they couldn't stop him. They sat, tea was poured, and then Mousse began. "By now, you are aware of Shampoo's situation with Ranma, yes?"

Honoka nodded. "Ranma beat her in some kind of duel, so now she has to marry him. That about sum it up?"

"Succinct, but only partially accurate," Mousse explained. "Warriors of the Joketsuzoku are obligated to marry the strongest warrior they can find, and enslave or kill all others. In practice, of course, a woman warrior who can best one of the tribe is too strong to keep enslaved, and is unlikely to marry a man she's defeated, so if she doesn't join the tribe…."

Maki shook her head. "Barbarians…"

"Oh, and you Japanese are better?" Mousse shot back. "After all, in our tribe a woman is only obligated to bear children, and what she does with her bed the rest of the time is no one else's concern." Maki winced. "I see I struck a nerve. I apologize, but the fact remains. Ranma defeated Shampoo, so now they must either be married, or one of them must die."

Honoka sighed. "So where do I come in?"

Mousse smiled. "Here's your challenge, young diplomat. Find another way."

"Huh?"

Mousse facepalmed. "Think about it, Kousaka. With rules like that, we'd have been wiped out if there weren't room to negotiate. So, find me something more valuable than Ranma."

Riko sneezed. She was currently back on the ground, and she had never been happier about that. Ranma handed her a handkerchief. "Thanks," Riko mumbled. "Who the heck was that guy, anyway?"

Ranma sighed. "No idea, except that he was Maki's canceled omiai."

Riko sighed. "I don't know what I'd do if it were me. She's lucky to have a friend like you." The last
was said with a twinge of bitterness.

Ranma picked up on that instantly. "Something wrong?" she asked.

Riko shook her head. "It's nothing."

"It's not nothing," Ranma said. "Spill."

The concert hall was huge. Riko had never seen so many seats in one place before, and she had been told they were all full. She was pacing back and forth backstage, among the bits of scenery for whatever was being done in the evenings.

This continued for several minutes, until the high schooler who was up after her finally snapped out "Will you cut that out?"

"Eh?" Riko looked at her for the first time. The brilliant purple eyes, perfectly styled red hair, long purple dress that was perfectly tailored...Riko felt her nervousness increase about twelvefold.

Ranma facepalmed. "How did I not know about this stuff?" Riko raised an eyebrow. "Never mind. Just thinking there's been a lotta gay girls in my life lately. Go on."

Maki twirled her hair. "We're all nervous, so stop making it worse."

Riko nodded, and then the last girl finished and she headed out to the stage. The song she played was...not fine. Oh, she hit every note perfectly, but it was by rote this time. As the...she couldn't call it playing...as she continued to press the keys it was obvious, to anyone who knew anything about music, that her heart wasn't in it. But why?

She stood, bowed, got the polite applause, and everything seemed normal. She left the stage, passing Maki, who gave her a very odd look. It was, simultaneously, angry and incredibly, incredibly sad. For a moment, they stood there like that, until Maki's name was called a second time. Finally, Maki said "Look, if you're not taking this seriously, why bother showing up and making it worse for the rest of us?"

Riko felt something in her heart shatter.

"...and...and that was it," Riko finished. "The next time I had to get on stage, I...I couldn't play. I didn't know what was wrong with Maki...and now I don't know what's wrong with me."

Ranma was looking ill herself by the end of the story. "Okay, look...it's not really my place to say, and Maki owes you an apology, but...yeah, screw it. That was supposed to be Maki's last performance. Anywhere. Any time."

Riko's eyes widened in realization. "She...she was disappointed I didn't do better?!"

"I don't wanna say for sure, but...yeah, probably." Ranma said. "You can't do your best if there's no one pushing you forward."

Riko slowly nodded. "I see...but...well..."

Ranma sighed. "I'm not a musician. I hope you get better, but nothing I can do to help..."
"It's okay." Riko said. "I'll…"

Ranma nodded. "If ya need anything a crazy martial artist can do, let me know, okay?"

Maki rubbed her forehead. She thought - no, she knew - she was smarter than Honoka, but this whole thing just proved why Honoka was in charge. It turned out the situation in the Jusendo valley was far more complicated than Ranma had understood, with several minor tribes and a number of unaffiliated villages to trade with. Mousse was capable of reciting the relationships, and some of the history, but Honoka usually picked up on how those relationships were relevant before Maki could, and come up with some way putting Tokyo into the mix could give the Amazons the advantage.

But it kept coming down to the same problem.

Honoka was exasperated. "Mousse, if the Chinese government can block everything getting through, there's not a lot we can come up with. Even just electricity needs something to get started. And why haven't they taken over, or offered to get Jusendo with the times?"

Mousse sighed. "Now we're getting to the heart of it. You see, they actually tried a few times. Most recently was during the invasion during the second World War. The Japanese army pushed inland far enough that the scouts actually reached Jusendo. Barely. Now, officially, the story the Amazons tell is that we bravely fought off the invasion by ourselves, keeping them at the pass until the Empire could no longer sustain the expeditionary force with the Pacific front heating up."

Honoka had never heard about this, but then, neither had Maki and she paid more attention in history class. Maki shrugged. "You said that's how the Amazons tell it. What really happened?"

Mousse smirked. "Obviously, I wasn't there. But the Amazon tribe only has ten rifles from the occasion. I am given to understand the Musk have a few as well, but it certainly wasn't a glorious lost history in a forgotten front of the war."

Maki chuckled. "It was one scouting patrol that disappeared, and convinced the Japanese Army there wasn't anything in the Valley worth wasting more lives on, wasn't it?"

Mousse nodded. "Right in one, but it gave the Elders, and many of the others, an . . . inflated opinion of the traditional ways. There are only two passes in and out on foot, neither suited to serious vehicle traffic, and we're honestly pretty poor in anything but iron to trade with the outside. As long as no one wants to know, it's not worth it for the Communists to try to force us to do much of anything."

Honoka nodded. "But they don't want you getting ahold of modern technology, because who knows what you might decide to do with it as long as you don't want to listen to them."

"Exactly," Mousse replied. "Which brings you to where my abilities have failed. Do you see anything I don't?"

Maki was grateful Mousse couldn't read her expression.

Honoka sighed. "Honestly, no. You could try smuggling in some things like Ranma's solar chargers and tablets or something, but I'm guessing you already do that."

Mousse nodded. "It's not something the Elders like, and they stamp it out whenever they find them, because other than Cologne they consider them toys and distractions."

"What does Cologne think?" Maki asked.
Mousse needed to think about that. "Honestly, I think she does see the uses they can be put to. With a tablet and the right software, I can actually read the tribe's scrolls. We could keep better track of our stores, and even have instant access to the knowledge of our library in the field, simply because one tablet stores all the information we have carefully accumulated, once transcribed…"

"...that's probably your best answer," Honoka said, knowing in her heart it wasn't good enough.

Mousse looked down sadly. "I was hoping for more. But I can't fault you for failing to do in a few hours what I've spent months trying." He pulled the promised futons from his robe...somehow. "Do keep it in mind, though."

"I will," Honoka said. "In the meantime, I guess Shampoo will need some convincing to even try this." She looked up. "Oh, hey, I've been meaning to ask one of you guys about something."

Mousse raised an eyebrow. "Yes?"

Honoka bit her lip. "Uhm, Ranma mentioned something about a curse powder for one-time use. Do you have any on you?"

Mousse raised an eyebrow. "What do you need it for? It's not good for much other than pranks."

Honoka shook her head. "No pranks, I'm just...curious."

"5000 yen each. They're hard to make safely," Mousse explained.

Maki looked at Honoka. "Okay, what could you possibly need that for?"

Honoka gulped. "It's a surprise...or it was. I can't blow that much after everything that's happened."

Maki sighed. "Never let it be said I never bought anything for my girlfriend."

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Ranma shouted out a perfunctory 'I'm back' as he walked through the door of the Nishikino's residence, shaking off the last of the hot water from the thermos. If the roof hopping didn't get the last of'em off my back, the sex change probably did. Besides, it ain't like they're after me at this point.

He didn't expect an answer of "Welcome back." Mrs. Nishikino rounded the corner. "Where's Maki? We need to talk."

"Maki ain't comin' home tonight, and I sure aint' tellin' you where I hid her this time 'til we've had a chat," Ranma replied bluntly. "Like what was this about goin' ahead with the Omiai after telling her the meeting was off?"

The older woman's eyes narrowed. "It was off. Are you telling me..."

"Yeah, the creep showed up, sicced a bunch of ninja on her, and then chased me down in a helicopter," Ranma explained. "Ta say nothing about poor Sakurachi getting caught up in it. So, yeah."

"I...see." Mrs Nishikino sighed. "You don't trust me?"

Ranma shrugged. "About as much as I trust anyone, except Honoka."

Mrs. Nishikino shook her head. "I can see we made the right decision." She held out an envelope.

Ranma took it and looked inside. "Air tickets to Osaka, train out to the mountains, and...directions?
For ten?

A nod. "Ostensibly, it's a luxury onsen resort, but there's a temple attached. Normally, even I couldn't get you in, but the Sonodas have some connections. I couldn't pull up much on it, but it's supposed to be good for emotional instability and recovering from sports training."

Ranma whistled. "That's code for 'Martial artists retreat.' But if it's a luxury place...wow. Wonder whose arm Sensei had to break to get us in there."

"Don't you mean 'had to twist'?” Mrs. Nishikino asked.

Ranma smirked. "No, 'break.' Twisting ain't enough."

---

Honoka felt the presence in the room before she fully awoke, her eyes cracking open to see someone laying down alongside her. Which was strange, because she had made sure to turn away from Maki when they laid down to sleep. "...Umi?” she whispered.

"I called Nozomi when you weren't home.” Umi whispered, putting her arms around her best friend. "Why?"

"Why what?"

Umi's eyes were shimmering in the dim light of the hut. "Why do you keep doing this to me? I could have helped!"

"Shhh," Honoka sat up. "Please don't wake Maki."

Umi blinked back the tears, slowly calming herself down. "I'm...I'm sorry, it's just…"

"Shh." Honoka repeated. "I'd do this for any of you, you know. You're all special."

Umi suppressed a laugh, still aware of the younger girl sleeping so close. "Isn't that another way of saying none of us are special?"

"Absolutely not," Honoka's smile grew even larger. "I love all of you, how can that not be special?"

Umi finally failed to suppress a chuckle. "Honoka, you're getting so sappy."

"...stop making fun of me."

Umi shook her head. "I'm not. Not really. But...I think I finally understand you." She was about to go on, but Honoka put a finger on her lips.

"Not tonight, okay? Maki would freak out if she knew anyone else was here. I promise, tomorrow, I'm all yours."

Umi just shook her head. "I'll...I'll hold you to that." She stood up. "Father will be worried. I should get home."

---

The day of the tests came. Nico and Rin were stuck in the same classroom, with Minami presiding. Nico was struggling, but she thought she was doing okay, except for the tap tap tap coming from behind her. "I'm sorry, but can you stop that Rin?"

Minami looked unamused. Which was understandable, because Rin didn't seem to be able to sit still.
Rin shook her head. "I can't help it. It's Ranma's stupid training technique. I can't remember any English unless I'm moving!"

Minami shook her head. "For today, I guess I can let you slip by, but get that under control. I won't let you interrupt your regular classmates."

Nico pouted. "What about me?"

Minami smiled. "You're a third year. You should have thicker skin."

Eventually, both of them turned in their papers, Rin sweating slightly. Nico joined her as the sheets were scored. "Well…"

"Well?" Both asked.

Minami stared at them evenly. "For the moment, you passed, but given you had two extra weeks to study, this is your very last chance, girls. Don't fall behind again."
"Geez, how far out is this place?" Maki asked, not for the first time. "And my mom offered to hire us a bus. I don't see why we've gotta . . . " she trailed off as they turned a blind corner in the forest path, revealing the temple. . . . but also the single-file rope bridge leading to it.

This was not a sturdy-looking bridge, with fresh ropes and solid planks laid side-by-side to allow easy passage. This was more like something that had been erected a century ago. Even in its' day, a single line of warped wooden planks bridging the two cliffs suspended by ropes through the knotholes, and tied to sturdy poles at either side, would not have been reassuring. Now, the ropes were slightly frayed, and the planks were slick with lichen. "Oh."

And it was certainly a place that justified an 'Oh.' While not as impressive as many of the shrines and temples in Tokyo, this particular structure was set into a small valley, across from a gap in the path several meters wide that went down - not "so far you can't see the bottom" down, but still enough 'down' that a normal person wouldn't survive the drop. Taking advantage of the protection from weather, the overhanging structures were covered in gold leaf, and everything was brightly painted. It looked like an ancient Imperial retreat.

Even Ranma was impressed. "How'd your dad get us this place? I've only been to one like it before, and I don't know what Pops did, but he actually behaved himself for once."

Umi shook her head. "I have no idea. What do they do here, anyway?"

Ranma took that as a hint, and slipped into a lecturing tone. "Okay, girls, listen up. I know you've probably stayed in shukubo before. I get that it was kinda fashionable for awhile. That ain't what we're looking at here. This looks like the real deal. I know I don't gotta tell you to be on your best behavior or nothing, but there's two reasons to set up a place like this out in the middle of nowhere."

Eri groaned. "I'm almost scared to ask."

Nozomi chuckled. "Well, it's not that bad. One, it can be a serious retreat for the spiritually minded. I mean, we won't be getting luxury meals or anything, but this is for people like me and Ranma who treat it as Serious Business. It's a real honor to get an invitation in that case. Just do what the monks tell you to do and it'll be fine."

Eri looked to her girlfriend doubfully, then at Ranma. "What's the other reason?"

"They're constantly engaged in some important ritual." Ranma said. "In that case, it's even more important that we don't disturb them. No telling what you might let loose. The good news is that usually this kind of place has people who know their magic and mysticism from the new age bullshit. Umi's pop even said that they've set aside an old traveler's hut for us to work on the concert stuff. So….leave your bags here, I'll jump'em - "

"Why're all of you back there?!" Honoka called back from the other side of the bridge. The very creaky, swaying rope bridge with barely enough foot room to walk over it single-file. With her bag.

No one was ever quite sure who was the first to mutter "It's going to be an interesting week." After a few minutes of watching Ranma ferry the luggage across, they ran into another problem.

"I'm not going!" That was Hanayo, staring at the swaying bits of string that were masquerading as a bridge that suggested she didn't trust that the disguise would hold, even though both Eri and Nozomi, who were heavier than her by sheer dint of being taller, had both already made it successfully.
Ranma sighed, looking at the structure carefully for a bit. "Okay, guys, can you start getting your stuff in the gates? I'll deal with this."

Rin sighed. "You've got some kind of super martial artist thing to help, don't you? Fine, fine." She turned and called back across the bridge. "You can do it, Kayochi!"

Ranma gave Rin a funny look, before he pulled out his water bottle and dumped it over her head. Then, slowly, she started walking across in an exaggerated fashion, until she was at the other side. "Okay, Hanayo? You're absolutely gonna be fine." Hanayo's eyes were wide and staring even harder at the bridge, as though it was only an act of will that was preventing it from collapsing under Ranma's weight. "Hanayo, do you trust me?" The girl nodded. "Okay. Don't tell anyone this, but I think the bridge is a test of spirit. It's a lot safer than it looks. You have to tell yourself that you're not scared. Can you do that?"

"But...but...I haven't done your balance training yet." Hanayo said, petrified.

Ranma nodded. "We'll take care of that while we're here. It's my fault that you can't physically do it, so we're gonna cheat a bit. You still have to trust yourself, but in my girl form, we're just barely heavier than a two meter guy together, and the bridge has to hold up to that. So I'll help you with your balance, and you just focus on your confidence that the bridge will hold." Hanayo nodded. "Okay, now, follow me backwards. One foot in front of the other…"

Ranma took a step back for each one Hanayo took forward, a hand held out to allow the younger girl a chance to grab onto something if she needed it, but just far enough out that it would be a desperate reach. "Right, you're doing fine, just don't look - no, don't - Eyes on mine."

Hanayo resisted the urge to look down, and instead focused on Ranma's blue eyes. They're the same as in her boy form….how did I never notice that?

Ranma smiled. "Okay, that's good. Another few steps….and...you're across!"

"Huh?" But it was true. Without realizing it, Hanayo had completely crossed the bridge and was standing on firm ground again. This realization didn't last long, as Rin suddenly tackled her best friend. Since she hadn't waited until Hanayo was a bit further from the edge, this nearly sent them both over the cliff, only stopped by Ranma's quick reaction grabbing both their arms.

"...whew."

Nico stared at the room. "It...it's barely a closet."

This wasn't much of an exaggeration, on the whole. The sliding door and paper walls separating the ten rooms of the guest wing were barely wide enough to admit them, and the rooms themselves would only barely accommodate a futon, never mind the gear necessary to work on their dancing. Ranma assured them those had been moved out to the 'hut' and that there would be enough room on the wooden floor there. It was wired up for electricity, with a single outlet, but that was about all that could apparently be said about it.

Ranma just nudged her, having changed back to his male form at some point in the settling in. "That's just how it is at these places. You're gonna have to put your stuff away in the common room. Far end of the hall."

Nico turned on one heel and dragged her large suitcase down the hall. When she got there and slammed open the door, everyone else was already there, standing in front of a shelf or kneeling in front of one of several small sets of drawers, pulling out their clothes to put them away. Nozomi had
already changed into a yukata, although no one else seemed to be in a hurry to join her. The room itself had a central table, which they would obviously be studying around, but at the moment their various laptops and school books were laid out.

Nico had the good grace to look embarrassed and found herself some shelf space next to the rather unexpected television. It wasn't huge, but it was relatively new and appeared to be hooked up to the wall. "Does this thing work?" she asked.

Eri answered with "It seems to, but the signal's a little weak up here. It'll still be useful for dance practice."

Nico couldn't deny that. "Do we have internet?"

Ranma tossed his duffel bag on the ground next to Nico's chosen space. "Yeah. Satelite, I'm told."

"No games, then," Nico shrugged. "Not that I play much. Nozomi?"

"Not what we're here for," Nozomi said. "I can do without for a week."

Umi took a deep breath. "Okay, so how does this work?"

Nozomi thought about it, then looked to Ranma. "From what I've been told..." he said "...the head monk already looked at the details of what happened from me and Nozomi. Because of that, and the fact that we practice at the shrine all the time, they actually want us to stick to normal practice as much as possible while we're up here. Work out, dance practice, and homework. They'd normally want to look us each over for a full day, but there's ten of us and only one private chamber, so we're gonna be pulled one at a time for a half day's meditation practice, on top of the morning and evening prayer of course. And once we're done practicing, we're expected to be in the main hall until dinner. Breakfast at 6 after prayers at sunrise." He added that last bit.

Predictably, everyone groaned. Surprisingly, no one complained, but he still got a sense of an explanation being expected. Nozomi sighed. "I don't know if I'd say it's necessary, but it's definitely safe. Since Ranma and I have been trained to get into the right mindset, we'll probably go first. Then Umi the second morning. The rest of you will probably need some time to get into the right...head space, I guess. Just use the meditation and practice time to clear your mind of the rest of the concerns of the world. Nothing can get to us here, I promise."

Maki gulped. "Are you sure?"

Ranma nodded. "The only things that can get to us here are what we brought with us."

On the other hand, the 'onsen' descriptor turned out to be surprisingly accurate, as well as being an explanation for why the temple was set directly into a mountain. The cavern said onsen was in was expansive, with an underground hot spring running from pool to pool which had been carved out of the rocks, seemingly by hand. The entire thing was lit only barely to the point of being able to see safely by phosphorescent lichen, which cast colored light dimly about. Waterproof flashlights were hung up on the wall near the sinks linked to the temple's water, no doubt a recent addition compared to the age of the structure.

Nozomi nodded approvingly, hanging her yukata and sitting down to wash up, when Eri betrayed her unexpected presence with a cry of surprise. "Wow, the rock's slippery in here. Guess we need to be careful." Eri gave Nozomi a smile and sat down next to her. "Hey, what's wrong?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Nozomi said, genuinely mystified by the question.
Eri grinned. "Nozomi, we're in a remote mountain temple being offered a rare chance for spiritual and even magical training. The first thing you do is retreat to the baths. Now, I'm not religious myself, at all, but I'm pretty sure that's not how this goes."

Nozomi gave her girlfriend her best mysterious smile. "You know that kami, ki, and magic are all real. I know you do, you saw it."

"That's no call to encourage them," Eri said, only mostly joking. "And don't change the subject on me. I know you well enough to spot it. Come on."

Nozomi's entire manner changed in an instant, first to a furtive stare out the door and into the lit hallway to make sure no one was coming, before suddenly seeming absolutely forlorn. "Erichi...what if...what if I'm going to be like this my entire life?"

"Huh?" Eri was shocked. "I don't...what?"

Nozomi shook her head. "I know it's not as blatant as Ranma, but I can...well, do things. Things that aren't normal." She poured water over her head, as if desperate to maintain the pretense that she was still just here for the bath. "And it's been getting...stronger, I guess. Last year I wouldn't have been able to do what you saw at the volleyball game. I'm scared."

Eri wrapped an arm around Nozomi's shoulder, ignoring that this was getting her outfit wet. "I'll be there with you. Whatever happens."

Nozomi whispered. "I don't See that."

"Huh?"

Nozomi sighed. "Even with everything getting stronger...when I try to see...us..."

Eri smiled. "Well, then, there's your problem. Come on." She pulled off her own clothing. "Hurry up, no sense being cold on the wash benches while we do this."

Nozomi brightened, quickly finished her own washing, and went into the pools to wait for Eri. When the blonde slipped into the water, she was nearly groped, but Eri stopped that with a single finger on her forehead, pushing her back into the water before taking her hands. "Okay, Nozomi, close your eyes." She did. "Now, I know you don't do well without your deck, but don't try to see how we turn out. Just try to see whether I'll be happy."

Nozomi pouted, but kept her eyes closed. "I see...a wedding." Her eyes cracked open. "You're dressed as the groom." Eri raised an eyebrow, and Nozomi closed her eyes again. "I'm...sorry. I'm not getting much past that."

Eri nodded. "So you're seeing me at a wedding, playing the role of the boy. It seems to me, you're telling me I'm going to be convinced to marry a very wonderful girl. Now, assuming this isn't wishful thinking..." Nozomi pouted, but her heart clearly wasn't in it. "...with my family issues, do you think I'm doing that for anyone that isn't you?"

Nozomi giggled nervously. "I'm not sure that's a good interpretation...but thanks. I'm a bit less nervous now."

Eri put a hand over Nozomi's mouth. "You may want to think about that one."
Ranma apparently did. "Right, I'll come back later."

Nozomi slipped out of Eri's grasp. "I don't mind!"

"I know!" Ranma shouted back, though it was still good-natured. "That's why I'm leavin'."

Nozomi's pout deepened. Eri smirked.

Ranma was strolling back to the common room when someone grabbed him by the collar. He quickly weighed options, but concluded that the person doing it was no actual threat and let himself be slammed into the nearby wooden pillar. "Yeah, you got a problem?" he said, engaging in his old tactic of letting his mouth run ahead of his brain while he took in the person in front of him. "Hey, wait, I think I kinda remember you."

"Oh, I'm so glad," the monk holding him said.

Ranma couldn't help but sigh. "Look, if Pop did something, please take it up with him."

The monk narrowed his eyes. "A wise man once said it would be your duty to respect and honor his debts."

Ranma frowned. "And, in the words of another wise man, 'what's in it for me'?"

The monk thought about that. "Fair enough. Now, do you remember what you did?"

Ranma sighed. "Honestly, I had an eventful childhood. I don't think I've ever been to this temple before."

"It wasn't here," The monk said. "Kochimi prefecture," he added.

Ranma suddenly brightened. "Haruto, right? Hey, been a long time!"

"You don't remember, then." Haruto said after a few moments. "Very well." He released Ranma, turning around. "Perfect. That's your test, then."

"Huh?" Ranma was confused, to say the least. "What do you mean, test?"

Haruto turned back around. "Your sensei said you're undergoing your Mastery exam, in a fashion. This isn't a formal part of the exam, which to you, means it very much is." Ranma nodded, realizing this was serious. "Put simply, your test...is to understand your test, and your past actions. Come to me when you remember. I'll be in the main hall for the duration."

Honoka held the bridge of her nose. "And you honestly don't remember?"

"Not at all - I was lucky to remember the name." Ranma said. "We weren't even there long. It was a small family temple. The kind of place we stayed all the time, out back or under the awnings and stuff. Honestly, Pop wouldn't have even stolen anything, since they didn't really have anything to steal."

"What about the food offerings?" Honoka asked. "No offense, but I've seen you eat."

Ranma winced, as it was a fair question. "I...think I'd remember that. There's no problem with taking them, o'course." Honoka raised an eyebrow. "The residents get first dibs, but if you don't have any money, yeah, there's actually no problem with it."
Honoka thought about that, but she guessed it was a valid point. "Are you sure your father waited?"

"We were staying there. We sure didn't take everything, even if Pops went first," Ranma said firmly. "He ain't stupid, at least about that kind of thing."

"Okay, so you didn't steal food, and none of the obvious happened." Honoka conceded. "The temple was standing when you left, you didn't take any of the sacred treasures, and you didn't interrupt any rituals. You'd remember that?" She asked again, somewhat pointedly.

Ranma sighed. "Yes, sis, I'd remember anything that big. I mean, assuming I was involved." He frowned. "If it was stealing, Pops might not've told me about it, but usually if he pilfered anything like that he'd be drunk for weeks afterwards. I don't...specifically recall that."

Honoka said nothing, her expression unreadable.

"Nope," Ranma finally said. "The only thing I remember is that we were doing balance training a lot at the time, but I couldn't tell you what that might have to do with this."

Honoka thought about it. "...okay, that sounds pretty harmless. I'm stumped."

They gathered in the temple's main hall. This, at least, was largely what they had expected. A single long table dominated most of it, with ten places set. There were smaller tables set around, where the monks were already waiting. Ranma looked at the setup. "...this is a test of some kind," he murmured. "Our places aren't marked. Umi?"

Umi gave it a thought. "Nico, Ranma, and then Honoka. Eri and Nozomi after that, and then the second years go around and the first years fill out the end."

They took their seats. The gong sounded, and then several junior monks brought out trays of food, setting them on the table. On each was a single bowl of slightly dry rice, another bowl of vegetable miso soup, a block of tofu with a few drops of some sauce, and a salad without any dressing. Ranma looked at it distastefully, with most of the others following suit.

Honoka finally asked the question that was on all their minds. "Can we at least get seconds?"

Mostly.

No one slept well that night, except Nozomi (Eri was considerably less comfortable with being cuddled in the middle of the night.) Their sleep was even more disturbed when, before sunrise, two sets of footsteps creaked across the wooden floor of the hallway, stopping at Ranma's room and opening the door.

Ranma cracked one eye open. "Yeah, I'm awake, I'm awake." The gong sounded, and the girls groaned and began to stir while Ranma pulled on his gi. "Eri, get practice for me?"

Eri yawned, but managed to mumble out a "I'm not using the ping pong gun."

"Wasn't planning on it. Just standard calisthenics, then run the concert set." Ranma said as he was escorted out. Assuming Eri replied in the affirmative, he turned his attention to the monks. "So, behind the main altar?" One of them shook his head. "Ooookay. Lead on, then." The monks gave no indication they were going to do anything else. Eventually he was led back under the mountain, and into a dark room where a man wearing the saffron robe of a master sat at a table, with a single candle sitting on top of an incense burner. Ranma bowed and took his seat. "Sensei," he said, addressing the man. "Standard meditation?"
"Yes."

Ranma's eyebrow quirked. "Not much for words around here. Anything special I should be looking for?"

The master nodded, then, seeing that wouldn't suffice, said "You are to focus on the flame, whatever happens. We will take care of the rest."

Ranma nodded and stared fixedly at the flame, focusing on letting his ki flow.

For his part, while he thought he saw something out of the corner of his eye a couple of times, he refocused without a need for correction. When the four hour session was finally done, he blinked, and stood up. The monk smiled and nodded at him. "Uhh...yeah, thanks." He left, bowing as he exited, and then leaned up against the wall. "Whew...that was different than last time."

Haruto was suddenly standing next to him. "Different practices, I suppose." Ignoring Ranma's jumping, he continued. "It works. In any event, we found nothing unexpected. You won't be called back, unless you wish instruction on your remaining days."

"N-no thanks, I think I'm good." Ranma said, still feeling unsettled.

Haruto smiled slightly. "Did your session give you any insight?"

Ranma felt his puzzlement creep back. "No, should it have?"

"No. Go join your friends. Their break before afternoon meditation is ongoing, and they are currently in the baths."

They intercepted Nozomi just outside of the baths, not even giving her the time to change out of her bath clothes. She was led to the room, where, unlike Ranma, there were no questions. She bowed, and took her seat.

But for her, things were different. For the first hour, it seemed normal, but then suddenly, in place of the lead monk, she saw Eri, arm in arm with...someone. Some man. She kissed his cheek and Nozomi had to blink her eyes to clear them. This came with a gentle nudge from...somewhere, she didn't dare look at the source.

She focused, trying to clear her head, but then she saw a silhouette of someone, maybe Honoka, screaming, a flash of blonde hair fluttering in the breeze, smoke, and then fire. It was too much for Nozomi. She screamed.

"Toujou, you must - "

Nozomi growled. "I...I know, okay. My ability...it's like it's going into overdrive. I'm seeing things."

"Yes, that would be the incense." The Master explained. "It helps heighten your awareness. But you must focus past these images, there is as much chance they are not real as that they are."

...no. Nozomi thought to herself. I don't know about the first one, but the second was definitely real. Blonde...blonde...Eri? She caught the look from the Master and banished her thoughts. Only this time, she actually heard the singing of a blade, saw a flash of blood, and then a shattering sound pierced her. "I'm...I'm sorry, Sensei. I can't do this right now." She fled the room.
"Nozomi!" Maki had absolutely no idea how to deal with this. She'd just been returning to the room during a short break in the meditation when she found the older girl, still in her yukata, trying desperately to meditate, actually visibly shaking. "Oh geez, what's wrong? What did they do to you?"

Nozomi took a deep breath. "No-nothing."

Maki picked up a trembling hand. "Nozomi, you're shaking. That's not nothing." Thinking quickly, she went to their emergency cooler and pulled out a bottle. "Here, maybe you just need some electrolytes."

The older girl took the sports drink and downed it in one go like it was alcohol. "Thanks."

"This was a mistake." Maki suddenly declared. "We need to get you out of - "

"No!" Nozomi cut her off. "No…" she immediately repeated, a bit more calmly. But only a bit. "They...didn't do this to me, not directly anyway. They just...excited my Sight, that's all."

Maki pulled Nozomi towards her bedroom. "So all this is just from your visions, huh?" she asked skeptically. "Death cult? Eri break up with you? Turn into a guy?" Nozomi swallowed. "...no, seriously, you're joking, right?"

Nozomi laughed. "It's...it's stupid, I know, but…"

"I thought you were made of stronger stuff than that, yes," Maki said. "Tell me that's not all."

Nozomi relaxed slightly. "No, it wasn't. I kept seeing fire, and blood, and…"

Maki felt conflicted. In all truth, while she had learned to trust Nozomi's...intuition, she didn't really like acknowledging the girl could 'see the future.' It brought up too many questions on the nature of reality, free will, and basic causality for her comfort. But, at the same time, it was obviously a great comfort to Nozomi. "Okay, okay, so you can't handle the raw stuff. Let's deal with what you can handle. Where are your cards?"

"Huh?"

Maki smiled. "I'll try to help you make sense out of what you saw." She fumbled around, then managed to pull the deck out and started shuffling. "Okay, so, logically speaking, if Eri breaks up with you, you'll end up with someone else. The way things stand, that'll probably be me or Honoka. So, my question is, do you end up with me?"

Nozomi nodded. "...I'm only doing a single card draw. Sorry, my focus is shot."

"Whatever works for you," Maki said. She set the deck down. Nozomi shakily reached out a hand and flipped over the King of Cups, reversed. "Uhm....sorry, no idea."

Nozomi gave Maki a nearly unreadable look. "Uhm, that's not a very good card for relationships in a reversed draw. Emotional confusion, instability, delusion…"

Maki chuckled. "Well, good. What about Honoka?" Some more shuffling, and then when Nozomi tried to flip the cards, two of them were stuck together. "Uhm…"

Nozomi frowned. "That's...very weird." She pried them apart. "Given how sensitive I am today, guess we'll look at both." The first was the ten of pentacles, also reversed. But the second was the Knight of Wands, upright. "...mixed, I guess? The Ten of Pentacles says we'd be lonely, but with
new opportunities indicated by the Knight."

Maki nodded. "That makes sense. You stuck at home reading fortunes, and I expect Honoka's gonna be in the idol game a long time." She stretched. "So, it's not me, it's not Honoka...guess you're stuck with a tall, leggy, exotic blonde. Darn."

Nozomi laughed. "Okay, okay, I get it. They'll probably want me to try again later in the week."

"Good." Maki took a deep breath. "Because I'm not looking forward to my turn."

It wasn't long before everyone had heard of Nozomi's near-breakdown. It put the damper on any semblance of good spirits by the end of dinner, and afterwards, they all found themselves trudging to bed, stomachs full but strangely unsettled by the basic fare. Even Honoka's suggestion of cards couldn't get more than a few rounds of interest, and everyone was asleep, exhausted, by the official lights-out time.

By the time the monks came in the morning to claim their next victim, Umi was already awake and waiting for them. She walked along with them to the meditation room, taking her seat and glaring at the Master. This seemed to be enough to break through his calm, and he coughed before speaking.

"You disapprove."

"I do." Umi said, leaning forward from her sitting position. "Nozomi didn't deserve that."

The old man nodded. "What happens in this room is not about karma, girl. Grown men have left in much worse shape than your friend. The goal here is to clear your mind, to allow your inner demons to come forth where they can be seen."

"And what the hell does that have to do with magic?" Umi shouted as she slammed her hands on the table.

If the old man was bothered by that, he didn't let it show. "It disturbs the aura of your ki around you, making it far easier to separate the threads of magic that might be woven throughout. Also, in those without your talents, it can provoke the psyche into reaching for...let us call them muscles for the sake of argument...that you did not know were there. This is usually stressful, but it is necessary."

"Why?" Umi asked. "Nozomi was so disturbed by what she saw she couldn't hold a cup of soup, from what Maki said."

The old man looked into her eyes. "And what would happen if your friend had developed a new ability? Say, the power to start fires by touch, without knowing or being able to master even basic control."

Umi blanched.

"Precisely." The Master said solemnly. "Now, since I expect a martial artist of your caliber has done this before, please, begin."

Umi focused on the flame. While she quickly heard the whispers, she was able to successfully tune them out. What she found she couldn't tune out was the anger. Anger, specifically, at the people who had done this to Ranma before unceremoniously shoving him into their lives. Throughout the meditation, it flared up only to be violently quashed. The Master must have noticed, Umi realized, but he said nothing until near the end of the session. "First, the good news, Miss Sonoda. We have found nothing that would indicate a spirit has touched you."
"The bad news?" Umi said, dreading what she was about to hear.

The Master shook his head. "You already know what I can tell you. You have an issue with your temper that you must learn to control. In the past, this wouldn't have been a problem, but you will find it magnified immensely by your new training."

"Tell me something I don't know," Umi said. "Believe me, Sensei. I have a great negative example of where that leads. It nearly killed Honoka, in fact."

Sensei nodded to her in dismissal, but he still looked concerned.

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Practice was starting, but Nozomi found she couldn't get up from the breakfast table, even after all the others save Umi had gone back to practice. She picked at the last few grains of rice in her bowl, before sighing.

Eri came back in and put a hand on her shoulder. Nozomi started, then looked back over her shoulder before going back to her rice. "Hey!" Eri said, annoyed. "We're all waiting for you. What's wrong?"

"It's nothing," Nozomi said, putting down the chopsticks and picking up the last of her tea to drink it down. "Sorry. I'll be there in a bit."

"Oh, forget practice." Eri sat down next to her, arm around her shoulder. "Nozomi, what happened? What did you see?"


Eri smirked. "Do you mean you didn't see anything, or you stared into the endless abyss and you're afraid something clawed out?"

"Don't joke, please." Nozomi said, but with no real heat to it. She did, however, gently push Eri's arm away. "I...I...Eri, do you love me?"

Eri felt like she had been punched in the gut. "What's this all of a sudden?"

Nozomi tried to smile. "It's a simple question."

"Of course it's not!"

Nozomi shook her head. "Eri, I know I pressured you into this. I was mostly kidding, so if you don't..."

Eri swallowed. "What...what's going on?" She tried to put her arm around Nozomi again, but the other girl stood up.

When Eri looked into her eyes, she saw Nozomi's looked were dull and flat. "Eri, I saw you getting engaged to a man."

Eri didn't know what to say. She fell back onto her butt, and almost didn't notice when Nozomi turned and left for practice.

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Honoka was livid. Or at least, she sincerely felt like she should be livid. She felt like this had been sold to them as a relaxing vacation in the mountains, away from everything, but instead everyone who went into That Room seemed to come out of it more unsettled than before. Sure, in Ranma's
case it had lasted until dinner time, but, in her opinion, that was more than made up for by Nozomi’s
impression of a cell phone ringing for three straight hours, and now a very nervous looking Hanayo
was being led off after their non-lunch.

Oh, the temple didn't serve lunch, either. Just a breakfast of rice and a dinner of rice, tofu, soup, and
a small salad. They were already halfway through the snacks they had brought that were supposed to
last an entire week, or would have been had Ranma not revealed a bunch of freeze-dried camping
meals in his rucksack. Although he had adamantly refused to allow them to use any of the ones with
meat, which still meant their supply was constrained.

Right, Hanayo. She stood up on seeing the first-year ready to bolt. "No, I think we've done things
your way enough. I'm going next."

Ranma raised an eyebrow. "I see what you're getting at, but Hanayo can't miss a workout and you
can." Rin jumped up, ready to say something, but Ranma just gave the girl a look and she settled
down to sulk.

Everyone else seemed to inwardly debate, until Nico came through the door, tying her yukata on and
trying to look dignified. "I'm not afraid of this little haunted house," she declared. "I'll go in next."

The monks seemed to need a moment to think about this. Umi sighed. "They want us at least a little
stressed out," she finally said. "I probably shouldn't say more than that."

Honoka softened a little bit, but still pulled Hanayo back. "Kayochi's more than a little stressed out."
Hanayo just emitted a little squeak as she was pulled into a protective embrace. "Umi, do you think
she's all right for it right now?"

Umi looked at the girl, who still couldn't speak. "I... guess not."

Nico nodded approvingly. "Besides, I'm still the president of this club. I should have gone first
anyway."

The monks finally seemed to relent, leading her out of the room. Hanayo let out a breath. "Sorry
everyone, it's just...after what happened to Nozomi and Umi..."

Umi nodded. "It's not dangerous, exactly, but I think there's something in the incense that...that..."

Ranma picked up the thought "It makes your worst thoughts harder to ignore, maybe. I was really on
edge, but listening to you two..."

Honoka nodded. "No wonder it didn't affect you...or didn't seem to. Between all the martial arts and
the way you have to think just to get through the day..."

Ranma groaned. "Don't bring this all out in front of everyone. I'm no good with that stuff."

Honoka chuckled. "The point is, well, Hanayo, I don't think you've got much of anything to worry
about. Just try to relax, and we'll let you go ahead tomorrow.

Rin was suddenly hugging Hanayo as well, from behind. "Kayochi, don't worry about it. I know
you, and you don't have a bad thought in your head." A long pause. "Well, except about - "

Honoka chuckled to silence whatever Rin was about to thoughtlessly reveal. "Okay, right. Basic
meditation for everyone else. I don't much care for their attitude, but it is doing most of us some
good."
When Nico arrived, she bowed, but she didn't take her seat as would be expected. Instead, once the doors closed, she gave the man some polite clapping. "Nice one. No, really, I almost missed it."

"Missed what?" The lead monk asked, smiling.

Nico gave him a dirty look. "Any true idol knows when someone else is putting on a performance, mister. The silent treatment, the lack of explanations, dark room, and the bad food is almost a cliche, but you messed up on a couple of points." When the man didn't react, she continued. "One, the baths. No one puts a temple like this on a natural spring like that. Too much money to be made. Even if the temple was here first, you'd have built to cater to rich nobles, not torture people for spiritual enlightenment." The monk showed no more reaction than his smile growing wider. "Two, letting us have wifi and snacks. Three, you wouldn't let us keep practicing if you were really this serious all the time."

"Well done," The old man said. "You're almost completely right. There were other clues too, but a layman likely wouldn't catch them." He looked serious again. "No, it is not typical for us to engage our guests like this. And once we're finished, we promise a more hospitable welcome to you for the time you have.

"But we wouldn't do this without reason..." he continued. "I do wish you had waited until after the session. If you had, the uncertainty in your position would have served." Nico gulped and turned around at the swish in the air. The two junior monks had drawn shinai - bamboo swords that could pack a wallop without necessarily hurting the person about to be beaten. "It really does pain me to resort to Tendai methods. It's...crude, especially when our petitioners genuinely need help and are willing to endure." Nico swallowed, and took her seat. "Begin."

Nico tried...and found that the prospect of being beaten within an inch of her life was a wonderful motivator. Or perhaps the man's threat was empty - she knew full well he was trying to keep her moderately freaked out. It was working too, especially when the voices started, all around her. Children crying for various needs, playing and asking their big sister to join, and generally being as chaotic and messy as younger siblings could be. It was really distracting, and more than once she almost stood up before she noticed the bamboo next to her ear.

When the ordeal was finally over, she was sweating, her hair matted to her head, and her eyes red from more than just her natural color. "So...so...how'd I do?" she asked.

The head monk wasn't smiling at her anymore. "You carry a heavy burden for one so young. Not as much as Saotome, but then, it's a wonder he's sane. Miss Yazawa, if you're seeking any spiritual guidance, you're welcome to return when we move on from this exercise. I promise you, it is normally....considerably less unpleasant."

Nico was about to launch into a denial, before she nodded. "I'll...I'll take you up on that one, Sensei. But the magic?" She said, almost hopeful.

Sensei shook his head. "Though really, you are better off." Nico started. "What would you do that's different if you had the power you were dreaming of?"

Nico thought about that for a second, smiled, and bowed before exiting.

Nico was actually late for dinner, which caused some consternation as the others weren't served until she had sat down. "Sorry, I needed to think."

Nozomi looked sympathetic, but Maki, who was sitting across from her, narrowed her eyes
"You don't look nearly as bad as the others," she pointed out.

"Actually," Nico said sharply "They pulled swords on me, so yeah, don't try to make me feel guilty."

Maki went quiet, as did the others. "Anyway, no, I'm not going to talk about it. But I did have a bit of a talk with the guy. They're not backing off, but once we're done with this things should get better."

Everyone heaved a sigh of consternation. Three more days, and not even halfway through.

When the door to her room slid open in the morning, Honoka just pulled the futon completely over her head. This proved to be a mistake, when feathers tickled her feet. She skittered across the floor, then shrieked loudly enough to wake the dead when she realized she was being looked at by two young men in nothing but her nightshirt.

Then she screamed louder when she remembered where she was and tossed pillows at them. "Out! Outoutout! At least until I'm decent!"

The monks momentarily seemed disinclined to do so, until suddenly there was a shadow behind them. "Boys, don't push me." Honoka's jaw dropped at the note of genuine menace in Ranma's voice. "Give her all the time she needs, or you find out how far down that cliff outside is first hand, capice?" The monks seemed to think better of their actions, and stepped outside the room.

Honoka took a minute to breathe before she finally felt together enough to stand up and pull on her usual practice clothes. Another deep breath, and she slammed the door open hard enough to make everyone but Ranma jump. "All right, let's get this over with."

When Honoka was out of earshot, Nico murmured "I think letting her build up a head of steam was a mistake."

The trip to The Room wasn't without incident. In fact, it was more like the entire trip was plagued by ghosts. Everywhere Honoka passed candles blew out, floorboards that had no right creaking did so, and decorations fell off the walls. All of this with her seeming oblivious to it as she somehow picked the right door, slammed it open, and took her own seat without bothering with the niceties.

That was when the man held up his hand. "Miss Kousaka, you may go."

"...what." Honoka felt the wind go out of her sails.

"You may go," he repeated. "I can see everything. I am quite sure you have not been so blessed as to have magical abilities like your friend Miss Toujou, nor are you cursed like Saotome. You simply have a spirit that is trying to help you."

Honoka narrowed her eyes. "How can you be so sure?"

The old man smiled. "You are...protected. Your desire to defend your friends has revealed this to me. Yes, that probably seems unrelated to you, and if you mean directly you're right. But as to what is behind your blessing...I cannot say."

Honoka felt confused. "So...I can go to dance practice?"

"I daresay you should."
When Honoka made it out to the hut, she was feeling even more confused than before. Everyone stopped to look at her. "Honoka, you're okay!" Umi shouted and rushed up to hug her. "I was so worried that you wouldn't be able to - "

"He…" Umi realized Honoka's lip was trembling. "He barely even looked at me when he said...I don't know."

Ranma was there, suddenly holding her up with one arm under hers and a bottle of tea pressed into the opposite hand. "What did he say?"

"He said I was...protected, but I don't know what by." Honoka was pale. "I've never...I mean…"

Ranma frowned. "I think I do. Think about it. At the beach house. We know something intervened there. It didn't go right, but something was trying to help us."

Honoka felt her hand go to her lips. "Riko. When I was trapped in the closet with Maki, I wished for another red head, and then you found the only one in the city who would probably have helped."

Umi blinked. "Wait, wait, what about that reading of Nozomi's? How can Honoka be hanging under a threat with something like that?" She held up a hand to forestall Honoka's protest. "No, that still applies. You were never in danger."

Nozomi sighed. "It's more complicated than that. Because of course it is. The kami can't be everywhere at once. Whoever's watching over Honoka, she's almost certainly not their only business. That's probably why I'm getting warnings about it."

Honoka sighed. "So that explains how we got here, but that's not very helpful. Let's just get practicing."

After the warmups, Eri gave Ranma a look. "I think it's my turn," she pointed out.

Ranma nodded. "We gotta figure something out for some of these numbers. The height difference is a problem."

Eri smirked. "If we can't handle it, we don't deserve to make Love Live."

Ranma nodded. "Okay, girls. Let's do Shangri-la Shower. Some subtle movements in that one." A quick step outside for a bottle of water, and she joined the formation in Eri's spot. A quick swipe on the smartphone, and the music began playing. The dance started, and Eri turned her trained eye on it. As much as some nasty part of her was still loathe to admit, they had improved. A lot. She was still sure none of them would ever be ready for the Ballet, but that wasn't a useful or healthy line of thought to follow. She ruthlessly quashed it and turned her attention to things…

It was, perhaps surprisingly, Ranma herself was the first thing Eri noticed. Normally, while Ranma was perfectly on her marks and making the gestures needed to link the dance together for whoever she needed to interact with, but that was all. But today, she had relaxed just enough to start to get into it. Oh, not completely. Eri could tell she was still balking at some of the more feminine conscious gestures. But that drew her attention to some of the others.

Umi seemed to be relaxed, able to focus and move from step to step. Nico exuded an aura of confidence that was downright attractive. And Honoka...was still making her usual array of little errors that gave every one of her performances life, but today they weren't just 'barely noticeable' but seemed to finally be a completely natural part of the dance. The only one who hadn't improved after her session was Nozomi, and she hadn't actually completed the 'training.' Something weird's going
She decided not to let on to her observations. It might, after all, just be the relief of not having to deal with whatever awful thing was happening to them again.

When the break came, though, Eri resolved herself to get to the bottom of it.

The room actually proved easier to find than Eri had anticipated. It was unmarked, but no one had bothered to clean up from Honoka's trip in the morning. "Just like her," Eri murmured as she reached the end of the line, opened the door, and nearly slammed it shut again.

Unlike the rest of the temple, there were no electric lights, and in fact no electronics of any kind. Eri didn't have her phone on her, but she was sure that if she checked there wouldn't be any signal or wifi in there. Further, the walls were only covered in paper - the whole thing was sealed-in wood. With the door shut, it would be completely dark. Not to mention she couldn't see any way for air to get in or out.


Which was somewhat undermined by the jump when she heard a voice from behind her. "Oh, you're not, are you?" The blonde spun around, ready to strike, only to see a little old man. "Now, now. Miss Ayase, your friends - "

"My girlfriend," she said, trying to restrain a hiss. "Was in shock when she left. And she's supposedly done this before. Yes, you did some people some good, but - "

The old man shook his head. "Toujou has some issues to resolve. As do you. But that's neither here nor there. By now you've all been instructed on the basics of meditation. Please, take your seat and begin. We'll endeavor to make this as quick as possible."

"No," Eri said. "No one said anything about being locked in an airless, dark room with creepy monks."

The old man smiled. "Would you prefer the waterfall?"

I hate my life, Eri thought to herself. 'The Waterfall' wasn't actually much better, as it wasn't on a wooded path nearby as one might expect. It was in among the caverns the temple's facade had apparently been set over, fed from an underground river.

She was being forced to sit under it, in the near dark (although still better lit than the meditation chamber), while wearing nothing but a loose white shift she was sure was transparent by now.

She was also seeing the monks, who were apparently observing the room through some kind of secret passage or something, because there were six of them, not including the Master, all staring at her intently as she tried to concentrate while freezing cold in the near dark while worse than naked.

Which just made the fact that the water was splashing in unnatural patterns even worse. It wasn't really consistent, but she could definitely occasionally make out a human shape.

Nonetheless, she tried her best to shut out external thoughts. It worked until the water sprayed up into a rainbow that...Eri couldn't help it. She laughed.

"Miss Ayase!"
"Sorry, sorry..." Eri giggled. "The kami were apparently feeling a bit stereotypical today." Still, she needed to find something to focus on. This would do. How do I feel about Nozomi.

When the hours were up, she heard the gong and stood. "You didn't find anything." She said. "After Honoka, I know you wouldn't have made me sit there the whole time without saying anything otherwise."

The Master nodded. Eri made her way to the baths to warm up before dinner.

Nozomi sighed, leaning on the edge of the baths by herself again, staring deeper into the caves. It was nice while it lasted, I guess. She heard someone entering the water behind her, and turned around to see Eri come up and suddenly hug her. "I'm sorry." Nozomi made a brief, confused noise while Eri hung on. "I didn't realize this was hurting you. So, I'm sorry." She released the other girl and sat down. "We need to talk, though."

"Yes," Nozomi said. "I'll be fi-"

"Okay, okay, stop there." Eri said, starting to settle into the water. "We don't have time to hash everything out, but I'm not letting you stew on that. I said I wanted to see if this would work, and I meant it."

"No, you didn't," Nozomi said sadly. "I remember clearly. I asked you if you wanted to see where...being my girlfriend would lead and enjoy it, and you didn't actually answer," she continued, looking up. "I just dragged you into it, and - "

"Fine." Eri said. "I'm answering now. Yes, I'll be your girlfriend. For real, not just letting you tell people, but we're going to need some ground rules." When Nozomi didn't say anything, Eri sighed. "Okay, one, yes, I'm fine with hanging out, and even touching and kissing, but you're being way too forward. What was with sneaking into my room on the first night here?"

Nozomi's jaw dropped. "I just...didn't think you'd mind."

"Exactly. You didn't think." Eri said. "And yes, it was nice, but also kind of annoying. We're still in high school. Hell, we're about to start studying for our entrance exams. Nozomi, do we really have time for a serious relationship?"

Nozomi nodded. "I see what you're saying. I think we will, but we're going to need to be careful about it. That's why I've been so forward. I didn't think we'd have long. We don't. Any fun we're going to ha - "

"This isn't about 'fun.'" Eri interrupted. "I mean, sure, there's maybe a little, but you know what I mean."

Nozomi nodded. "I know, but what are you saying?"

"Maybe it won't work." Eri said, picking her words carefully. "We may not be compatible. But. But. But...if you're not looking for something serious, I don't think I'm interested. What's the point of trying something so hard if we're not looking at the end goal?"

"Are you..." Nozomi asked, bewildered.

Eri shook her head. "If you mean 'am I proposing' or something, no. The idea that we're better off as
friends than . . . that is one you have to be willing to accept. I'll explore this, but that's all I'm promising. In return, you need to be serious too."

"Oh." Nozomi nodded after a moment's thought. "I can live with that."

Eri nodded too...then leaned in to give Nozomi a quick kiss. "Good. We can talk boundaries later."

After dinner, Nozomi found her eyes turning to the head of the dining room, where the Master of the Temple waited. When he nodded, she gulped, but knew what she had to do. She finished eating quickly, leaned over to give Eri a kiss on the cheek, and stood up. "It'll be a late night. Ranma, let me sleep in till prayer?" When Ranma nodded hesitantly, she bowed to the table and left.

She had half expected the Master to beat her to the meditation room, but was slightly disappointed. She bowed, took her seat, and lit the candle and incense before beginning to meditate.

Eri appeared with her beau again, but Nozomi just smiled. "You're not real. I mean, not even in the sense that something I can see in the future isn't. Go away."

With that, she took a deep breath and settled down to focus. The visions appeared a second time - blood, then smoke, then flame. Another flash of blonde hair, a scream that sounded suspiciously like Kotori, then an older woman, a flash of steel, and...nothing. That's not all one event, is it?

She tried to ignore all thought, let the visions come. The phantom Eri reappeared at her shoulder, whispering. "You can't actually stop it, you know. You told me yourself - anything you see like this has to happen."

Nozomi glanced at her. "That's not much like Eri," she couldn't resist saying. "Even if I can't stop it, I can make plans. Now, please leave me alone. I need quiet." The phantom left her, and she focused. More details emerged. Fire and fireworks. Kotori wearing the maid uniform from her job. Ribbons everywhere. A drum beat and an electric guitar. More fire, intense enough to burn away at concrete. Music, playing throughout the world until it reached a sun-kissed beach, with Mt. Fuji just visible in the distance across the bay. The woman, with red hair fading with age and a fine kimono, back to Nozomi. It still wasn't enough to make sense of. And then the blade, flashing in the lightning of a late summer's storm, before she opened eyes she hadn't realized she had closed to meet the Master's eyes. "Thank you. Did you see anything?"

"With your own Seer's talent, it's impossible to say for certain," the Master's reply wasn't unkind, but still slightly chiding. "However, I think you have enough gifts to be getting on with."

Nozomi chuckled. "I never said I wanted any more, but it would be nice to know."

"That it would, Miss Toujou. And now, off to bed with you."

Morning came, and with it, seemingly for the first time, the chirping of birds. Kotori sat up in her futon, and restrained a little glare at the window. Her hair was a complete mess, and the dark circles under her eyes were getting more pronounced, which she discovered with a brief look in the mirror. It's getting worse, she decided, trying to get her brush through her hair before the monks showed up. I know it'll be my turn today. I just...don't know what to do anymore. She stood up as soon as her hair was deemed halfway presentable. When she opened the door, Ranma was there waiting for her. "Oh!"

He shook his head, then jerked it towards the entrance to the guest wing in an obvious 'follow me' gesture. Once the door was closed and they were sitting on the ground, he said, quietly, "You
okay?"

"Wha-what makes you think I'm not?" Kotori had expected to get this from Honoka, in all truth.

Ranma chuckled. "I wouldn't make a very good sensei if I didn't know how to spot someone who's
worrying themselves sick. Literally, in your case. Wanna talk about it?"

Kotori sighed. "Will you keep it a secret? If I tell Honoka, she'll just get mad at me." Ranma nodded.
"Promise?"

"I swear on my life and honor." Ranma said firmly.

Kotori knew what that was worth. "I...I was invited to skip high school. Go to a famous design
school in Paris. I'd be apprenticed, make clothes for the stars and. . ." 

"...you're trying to figure out how to tell her and Umi," Ranma said sympathetically. "That's great
news, but you shouldn't put it off."

Kotori shook her head. "I'm not going."

"...oh." That really seemed to sum it up. "Did you tell them that already?" Kotori's nod seemed like
the death knell, but Ranma had to make sure. "It's final, then?" Another nod. At this, Ranma had to
sigh. "I'm sorry, 'Tori. I really am. I don't know what else to tell you."

Kotori couldn't say anything for a very long time. "Tell me what you really think, please."

"Kotori, are you sure?" Ranma hesitated. "You know how I can be." Kotori nodded. "...okay." He
took a deep breath. "That was absolutely the dumbest thing you could ever have done, if you really
want to be a fashion designer. How many of them are there? I mean, really?" Kotori's eyes widened
in understanding. "At best, they'll forget you ever existed and you're going to have to start over from
scratch when you get to college. If they don't forget...well, they won't forget this."

Kotori took a deep breath to hold back her tears....which failed as she suddenly latched onto the
nearest person, which was a very uncomfortable Ranma. He slowly felt his discomfort rising, until a
splash of water came out of nowhere. She looked back at Honoka, who didn't seem too pleased but
took a seat and wrapped her arms around Kotori as well. The blonde didn't seem to care about the
shift, she just held onto Ranma more tightly.

When she finally calmed down enough to listen again, Honoka squeezed her shoulder. "I can't say
Ranma's wrong, however blunt that was. Kotori, you shouldn't have done that. Not for me, not for
us, not for anyone. That was your dream. I'm sure there were other options. I don't think we'll be
doing Mu's in our third year, you could have gone then, right? Or asked to defer 'till college?"

Kotori sniffed. "I...I don't know. I was so upset I tore the package up. Mom handled the refusal
letter."

Honoka sighed. "Okay, since it's already out there, yes, that was pretty stupid. But I get it, you were
stressed. We all are. And...it's too late now." She smiled, and gave her friend's shoulder another
squeeze. "Pull yourself together, okay? You ready for the torture chamber?"

Kotori couldn't quite restrain a giggle. "Ye-yeah. Thanks. Both of you." She gave Honoka a brief
look. "Don't be too hard on him. I asked him to say it."

Kotori was led off, and then Ranma and Honoka were alone. They looked at each other. Finally,
Ranma spoke first. "Don't say it. I should know better, but she did ask."
"That's the only reason I'm not yelling," Honoka admitted. "Could you have been less...well, hurtful?"

Ranma shook her head. "I'm trying, Honoka, but she told me to be honest. That's...that's way more important. How'd you sneak up on me, anyway?"

Honoka smiled. "I'm getting lighter on my feet." Then she turned serious again. "This isn't the first time, though. What about what you said to Maki in the closet?"

Ranma sighed. "That wasn't my best move, but I was trying -"

"Bad way to do it, Brother," Honoka said. "If you're going to let her down, just do it."

Ranma snorted. "Right now? You've got to be kidding me. I'd break her, and she's on the edge of it anyway. I was trying to get her to do it herself. I didn't think that would be as likely..."

"...to hurt her." Honoka finished the thought. "Okay, I can see that. It was dumb but for you I guess that was what I should have expected. Are you going to do it?"

Ranma sighed. "Honestly? No." Honoka looked like she was about to object. "Hear me out, okay? I'm definitely not just stringing her along. I already told her straight up it probably wasn't going anywhere. If she's going to keep pining away after that there's not a whole lot more I can do without breaking off the friendship, and that's something none of us needs right now. She's gotta get over this on her own. You're helping, but I don't think there's anything more I can do besides remind her I'm not this girl she's put up on a pedestal."

Honoka sighed. "I...guess you're right."

Kotori took her seat in silence, looking at the Master before sighing. "Let's...get this over with." She took a deep breath. She knew by now she wouldn't be able to focus on nothing, anyway, and they wanted her to be upset. The fastest way to get there was to dwell on the conversation she'd just had. That was so unlike Honoka. Was it Ranma? He did say it first. Is she...no. If Honoka's interested in you, she'll just tell you. Unless she's got a good reason not to.

That led to a different thought. Is...is she interested in me? It honestly seemed ridiculous. They were childhood friends, they'd known each other forever, she would have said something, right? ...unless she thinks we already are. That nearly startled her right out of any semblance of meditation she was in. This is just weird. Girls liking girls is unusual enough, but Honoka and...everyone? Unfortunately, with the specter raised, Kotori found she couldn't dismiss it. Is this what they mean when they say 'if you love something, you should be able to let it go.' Did Honoka tell me I should have left because...because...?

No, that wasn't right. Honoka wasn't like that. She was selfish, and spoiled, and wanted everyone to stay with her. She...she lied? Is that even...?

She stood up. "Are we done?"

The Master shook his head. "Please sit down," he said, not unkindly. "Whatever you need to do will still be there when we are finished. Besides, I think you are not confronting a deeper issue."

"Eh?" Kotori asked, but then she realized the old man was just guessing. It was probably a good guess, but one based on her actions, not any knowledge of the situation. So she stared at the flame. Deeper...what could be deeper than...oh. Did she even really want to leave? At the time she'd said she didn't...but...I couldn't leave...no, that's wrong, I could have. Ranma wouldn't blame me,
Honoka...would, but if I'd been honest she would have accepted it. I even could have made costumes...well, designs. I know tailors who could make my designs just fine. It would have been a little expensive, but I'm sure we could've worked it out.

She smiled. She knew what she was missing now.

After practice, Honoka was looking forward to the baths. A good, hot soak immediately after the hard workouts was really nice, she found. Maybe we should look for a public bath near the shrine, the thought to herself, even if it would normally be early. She was so lost in this thought she didn't notice when she turned the corner and nearly ran into Kotori. She was about to go for her usual greeting when she caught a look in her friend's eye. "Uh, how'd it go?"

Everyone was shocked when Kotori suddenly slapped her. "That was for lying to me!"

"Huh?"

Kotori grabbed her by the shoulders. "I'm borrowing her for a minute."

Everyone nodded, dumbfounded. Umi managed to squeak out an 'um, sure,' but by then Honoka had been dragged into a side room. She finally held a hand up to her cheek. "I'm...pretty sure I didn't do anything to deserve that."

Kotori shook her head. "Honoka, you love me."

This seemed so obvious to Honoka she could only reply with "Uh...yes?"

"No, no, I mean...agh!" Kotori grabbed her hair. "This is seriously way too complicated. Honoka, what's wrong with you?"

Honoka sighed. "What do you mean, what's wrong with me?"

"This isn't normal." Kotori said. "Most people don't...don't...love multiple people."

Honoka sighed. "I guess I don't know. It's just...you're the one who's making no sense. I know, I know, that sounds weird."

Kotori sat down on the tatami mat, hard. "I guess that's not the point. I don't even know if I love you. That way, I mean. But if you love me, you wouldn't let me go to Paris. Never in a million years."

Honoka felt horrified. "Do you really think that? Kotori, that was your dream! I'd be sad, yes. Hurt, of course! But do you really think so little of me?"

Kotori sagged. "No. No. I'm sorry. You're right. Honoka last year would have tried to stop me, but not now. At least, not very hard."

"...okay," Honoka admitted. "I'd probably ask. And I'd try to spend every vacation in Paris with you that I could. Yes, I'd skip Okinawa for that. For you."

Kotori blushed. "And that's very sweet, but Umi deserves a vacation too."

Honoka finally looked up. "Kotori, you look like hell," she said, although the truth was she was barely worse than she had been before the session. It was just...Honoka realized that she'd been letting her friend's cheerful attitude and deft hand with makeup hide it from her. "Have you really been bottling all this up?"
"Y-yeah,"

Honoka hugged her. "Okay. You can bathe before dinner. Right now, you're skipping meditation and going straight to back to bed."

Maki gulped when she saw the monks coming. "Okay, okay, I'm ready."

In all truth, she wasn't. She knew what she'd be looking at, but not what would happen. Would the room go dark? Would they just kick her out for loving Ranma, as some are wont to do? No, probably not, or Nozomi would have burst into flames the second she stepped off the bridge.

In a way, the worst thing that could happen would be 'nothing' because everyone else had had some kind of trouble, except Honoka who didn't really surprise her. She sighed, and took her seat. "How do we know this isn't a waste of time, anyway?" she asked, pushing some loose hair aside. "I mean, just because magic's real doesn't mean this specific magic of yours is."

If the Master was insulted, he didn't show it, just smiling at her. "Miss Nishikino, you don't."

"Huh?"

The old man's smile grew even wider. "You have no assurances but our reputation, as understood by the head of the Sonoda school. So the question, then, is whether you trust your friends."

Maki growled. "That's manipulative and you know it."

"The door is, of course, over there." The Master pointed out. "While the donation for your stay was substantial, it wouldn't normally justify nine and a half girls being allowed in our sanctuary. We took this on because we see it as our duty to help whenever something like your case, where you came into contact with a spiritual phenomena of such magnitude. But if you don't wish our assistance, you're free to leave."

Maki glared for another moment, then sighed. "I don't believe this for a second."

The door slammed shut.

Neither of them moved for quite a few seconds, then Maki looked at the old man and decided, no, this was not a trick to impress the skeptic. "Uhm….no offense, but I'm going to make sure I can take you up on that before I get to work, okay?" Without waiting, she did stand up, and tried to pull the door open. "...great." She raised her voice to a shout. "SOMEONE OPEN THE DOOR!"

This went on for a few minutes, but when no one came, Maki returned to her seat. "This is just wonderful. Well, if you're trying to stress me out, it worked. What Is Going On?"

The Master seemed disturbed. "I don't know. I've never seen such a strong reaction from anything but a kami present. Even Kousaka didn't…"

Maki frowned. "Okay, what do I do?"

"Clearly, something is present," the old man said. "Normally, I would forbid you from leaving, but that seems taken care of. Unfortunately, the next step would be light a different special incense." At that moment, the door opened, and several sticks floated through. "...You are either the most blessed or the most cursed individual I have ever met, Miss Nishikino."

"...that's nice. Can you fix it?"
"We shall see. Miss Nishikino, I must warn you, this will very likely be unpleasant. Unfortunately, this sacred place is much better suited to the task at hand than a hospital would be, but we are remote enough that your life might yet be in danger. I don't wish to proceed without your consent, but there is a very real chance we won't be allowed out of this room until and unless you do. Do you understand?" Maki nodded slowly. "I assure you, all precautions have been taken. There is even a helipad nearby, so in the extremely unlikely event that this goes wrong you can be airlifted to the hospital in town. That said, do you want me to proceed?" Maki nodded again, more sure this time, and the Master set up the new incense and set it alight. "Now...if you will, just breathe."

Maki did, but this time she immediately felt light-headed. "Woah...what's in this stuff?"

"Something we don't like using," The Master admitted. "Altered mental states are generally not desirable, but sometimes this incense allows us to see a glimpse of the realm of the kami. More often, it shows us a realm where the centipedes dance or similarly improbable things."

Maki felt her head spinning. "This stuff should be illegal...."

"It is," The Master said bluntly. "I have spent many years exposing myself to it to lessen the effects, so I can guide you. Tell me, when have you interacted with the kami before?"

"Uhh..." Maki felt her eyes cross. "Uhh..." she repeated, before something came to her. "Well, shrines and temples and things like that. My parents make donations all the time, it's just what you do, right?"

"Do any of these stand out to you now?" The Master insisted. "It may be important."

Maki tried to focus, but the smoke was clouding her mind. "Uhh....did you get a lot taller?" she mumbled, as the man seemed to grow. "No, wait...it was at the Kanda shrine...Papa had dedicated...something...there was a big bag of coins...I think...but I'd just had a flower from my first piano recital. I don't even think I knew what an allowance was...or that it was supposed to be money, so I put the flower in the incense holder in front of the shrine." She giggled. "It was so silly."

She slowly blinked her eyes. The room was coming into and out of focus now, until she felt like she was looking at herself in a mirror, except this mirror showed what you looked like when you were ten years younger. She giggled again. "Wow...this is..." The room came into focus, but the little girl was still there. The girl winked at her, then vanished. She screamed, the room around her erupting into flames. "What is going on?!"

"Miss Nishikino! Calm yourself!" The voice came from somewhere in the fire, but Maki was in no state to understand. Or really care. It was only when she looked down and realized the flames under her weren't hot that she took a breath, and the whole spectacle died away.

"What...what was that? Some bad trip or something?" Maki asked.

The Master stared at her. "I assure you, in a sense it was real. I saw the fire as well."

"...oh."

With some hours of practice later, Maki found she could make a little ball of flame that would neither burn nor consume anything between her hands. It wasn't even hot. The time for the evening meal was approaching, and she stepped out of the room, no longer confined, but still feeling light-headed. She immediately met with Nozomi. "How...how do you deal with it?"

"I'm sorry?" Nozomi asked. Her eyes widened when Maki held up the little fireball. "Oh...I'm sorry."
Maki flicked it at her. Nozomi screamed, until she realized she was not, in fact, merrily ablaze. "It's not real. What good is magic that makes things that aren't real? Especially fire."

Nozomi blinked several times. "...maybe it's not just fire. Try to focus on making a firework."

Maki gave her another skeptical look, but closed her eyes, held out her hand, and there was suddenly a small streamer of fire as if from an exploding rocket. "...Oh. Okay, that...that might be useful."

Nozomi chuckled. "Right, glad to hear it. You're a member of an elite club. I'll email you the pamphlet."

Maki leaned against the wall. "What do I do, then?"

"Well, you'll need to practice." Nozomi said. "That seems to take it out of you. Headache?"

Maki looked over at her. "Yes, actually. Have an aspirin?"

"Won't help," Nozomi said sadly. "We'd best get you some water so you can sleep it off."

The mood was mixed at dinner. Maki had barely managed to stir herself from her nap, and was now briefly entertaining the second years with an appearing and disappearing gout of flame. Honoka clapped in amazement as the younger girl caused it to dance from one hand to another, before making it hover right in front of her nose. Maki sighed. "Honestly, it's not like there's anything to it."

She let the illusion vanish and picked up her tea. "Honestly, it's not like there's anything to it." She let the illusion vanish and picked up her tea. "Anyway, it gives me a huge headache to keep it up like that, and the more I change it the worse the headache gets, so..." She sipped the bitter liquid, and made a face. "Nozomi, is this some special stuff?"

"I'm afraid so," the older girl confirmed. "You do get used to it, and eventually you don't need the tea anymore."

Maki nodded, and sipped. "Okay, so, anyone who knows what's going on, can you explain this in small words a future medical student like me can actually follow? There's a lot of talk of chakras and auras and mantras and other things that end in 'ah' that, until three months ago, I'd have told you were complete nonsense."

Nozomi chuckled. "Okay, so, this isn't actually that difficult in a practical sense. There are technical details, but, if we're being honest, they're not really important to you." Maki raised an eyebrow. "Uhm, Ranma may know more about this part."

Ranma coughed. "Don't look at me. Mousse is the one you'd really need to talk to. He's the 'master of Dark Magic.'"

Nozomi nodded. "Okay, I'll try to muddle through, then. What you're probably thinking of as 'magic' isn't. For the average person, incantations and all that stuff are just nonsense. Even my cards are, when you get down to it, just cardboard. I bought them at a gift shop somewhere, and I could probably use just about anything. To really get anywhere, you have to look into things that the kami, or whatever they're called where they are, have touched." She looked at Ranma significantly. "Like Jusenkyo."

Maki shivered slightly - something about mentions of that place offended her on a level she didn't like admitting. "Okay, so I've got some wild spirit's favor. That's the easy bit."

"And for you and I, that's really it." Nozomi confirmed. "It works, and you don't have to understand why or how to get it to do what it does. It's like a light switch. You'll figure out the rules as you go."
Maki sighed. "So what about all that other stuff?"

Ranma took over. "I'm not too up on that either, but I get the idea that most people you'd call 'wizards' and 'alchemists' today know damn well that they're playing in parts of reality science doesn't get yet." Everyone, even Honoka, stared at him. "What? I gotta stay in Otonoki, so of course I sat down and figured out most of this school stuff. Even if I don't get the point of making us do it."

Everyone looked uncomfortable. "Uhm, anyway, yeah. A lot of older stuff about mixing flowers and turning lead into gold doesn't work because they weren't looking at it the right way. But the thing is, once something living's been changed by magic, or once it's been absorbed like Jusenkyo, it can be passed on."

Umi nodded. "Like the apples. One tree, blessed by... I guess a Greek kami or something, grows magic apples forever?"

"Right." Ranma was smiling. "A magic rabbit might pass some magic on to its' kids, or not. And so on. Even those few 'spells' that do work, well, ya need to be in the right place for the thing that made it to hear, or have something that draws its attention. That's how Dark Magic works, you need to use rare dyes and inks to make the pockets, and there's a whole bunch of math involved in getting the spaces really big. I can manage a sword or a staff, maybe a day's worth of food and water, but Mousse had to have really put a lot of time into making his clothes, and that's on top of whatever else he gets up to."

Honoka blinked. "You mean he's not a ki user?"

Ranma thought about that for a bit. "Well, he is but now that you mention it, I don't think it's a natural talent for him. He probably magicked himself into it with elixirs and stuff. Not that it makes a difference." He held up a hand. "And no, that's not useful for self-defense. Even that route takes years and some luck. It doesn't work for everyone, or after two thousand years either the ingredients would be extinct or domesticated and everyone would have ki."

Honoka sighed. "Okay, okay, that makes sense." Everyone looked at her. "What, I can't be jealous? There's just no point pining over it if it can't happen."

At the other end of the table, Hanayo picked at the rice. This place managed to ruin even that perfection, somehow. It was always too watery and gruel-like, or too dry. She looked at Rin, who seemed even more miserable than she felt, and swallowed. "Hey, cheer up. We're almost through with this. I'm sure we can head into town once we're done."

Rin sighed. "I just...can't help but feel we could've avoided all this."

Hanayo groaned. "Please don't bring this up now. I actually rather like Ranma."

"I didn't say it was him. Her. Whatever." Rin pointed out, snatching a bit of tofu and slipping it into her mouth unhappily.

Hanayo turned back to her own meal. "You didn't need to. I hoped a week meditating would...I don't know..."

"Haven't been doing it," Rin muttered. "This is stupid."

Hanayo's jaw dropped. "Hoshizora Rin! How can you say that?!" She glanced meaningfully down the table to where Maki, with the aid of Nozomi massaging her temples instead of certain other parts (for a change) seemed to be up to one more try, a pinwheel firework spinning in multiple colors in her hand. "Doesn't the idea that you have some kind of magic now... do you feel anything?"
Rin shook her head. "I didn't get anything. I'm the ordinary one, I'm sure of it."

Hanayo snorted. "Now you're just being stubborn."

"And you're being an idiot!" Rin whispered harshly. "This is dangerous, Kayochi. I know I encouraged you at the start, but at the time we didn't know what we were getting into."

Hanayo stared at Rin, completely baffled by this sudden turn. So she said the only thing she could think to. "Then stop."

"Not when you're staying in. Someone has to keep Kayochi safe."

Hanayo squinted her eyes. "Rin, last week you were telling me everything was fine and we could outrun any problems, now you're... I don't even know. What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

And 'nothing' remained resolutely what was wrong as Rin was led to the meditation room. She took the seat without a word, just a glare at the old man who had been torturing her friends, before shutting her eyes and purposely letting her mind wander.

This lasted about ten seconds until something poked at her. "Oi, trying to get some extra shut-eye here."

"Of course you are. But I'm afraid that won't do, at all." The Master's voice had a hint of amused menace. "I heard you last night."

Rin gulped, and opened her eyes to stare at the flame. "Sorry, Master, it won't happen again."

"If we're wasting your time, you are perfectly welcome to leave," the Master said as if she hadn't spoken. "You are also perfectly welcome to stick your hands repeatedly into a fire. I understand Saotome would recommend the practice to some students, but it might not be for you."

"I get it, I get it," Rin said. "Just like going to the doctor after something happens, right? Just tell me what I've got."

"...very well," the man said after some hesitation. "I can see you're eager to put this behind you. Of course, without doing the test properly we are much less sure, and in your case there are considerations."

"Do I have anything or not?!" Rin snapped.

The old man shook his head. "At this time? Almost certainly not. But you have gained a certain...sensitivity. This may or may not have already resulted in changes, but if you have another spiritual encounter in your life, you'll not be so lucky again."

"Fine, fine." Rin stood up. "I'm going to practice."

Hanayo crept up to the room some time after Rin had left. "I'm sorry, Master." she said, noting the old man had just finished cleaning the room. "I really don't know what's gotten into her lately. We used to be childhood friends, and she likes dancing, but everything to do with Ranma just seems to make her...."

The Master sat down again, and gestured for her to do the same. "Are you really seeking advice from
Hanayo swallowed. "I...I guess I am."

He laughed. "Well, you could do worse. In this era there are things that, back in my youth, would have gotten you sent to a monastery. Let's just say we're not as innocent as we sometimes pretend up here." He looked Hanayo in the eye. "I suspect you already know what's wrong with her, but admitting it would mean admitting things you aren't ready to."

Hanayo gulped. "Uh, I don't know what you're talking about."

"Of course you don't!" The Master laughed uproariously. "But you will. Now, since you've skipped your practice, why don't you take the rest of your friend's session. She's refused anyway, so I see no point in delaying." He clapped. "Haruto, prepare for the special ceremony for midday," he said, addressing the young monk who apparently had history with Ranma. "You'll find out," he told her, and she could tell there was no use arguing.

She began to meditate, this time trying to hold an image of Rin in her mind. But it was no use. Every few minutes, it slipped into the sounds of arguing, or the image of Ranma. She would close her eyes more tightly, only to get a light poke in return. Finally, after too much of this, she stopped and opened her eyes fully. "Master?"

"I'm seeing very little potential in you," he admitted. "We could continue the full time, but honestly, I haven't had a good lunch in almost a week. If you wish instruction, we'll be happy to help."

Hanayo found herself led to the dining hall, where she joined all of her very surprised friends. "What's going on?" she asked, taking her seat automatically at the dining table.

The head of the temple smiled at them. "I congratulate you on enduring the past several days," he said. "For those who discovered new things, and new things about themselves. Of course, we also exist to spread the teachings of the Buddha. There are some evils that are necessary in this world, like the doctor's knife or the sword of a righteous warrior," at that, he nodded to Ranma and Umi. "The things you endured at our hands are one of them, and a burden on our souls. However, your personal suffering is at an end, at least until you leave us."

With that, the anonymous monks suddenly seemed to burst forth from every door. Trays were placed in front of each of the ten girls, and their eyes widened. Vegetables, fruits, and various small dishes were laid before them in a feast. Hanayo's eyes sparkled as, seemingly glowing like silver, a bowl of the most perfect sticky rice she had ever laid eyes on was opened before her. It almost seemed too good to be true. The Master, who had a similar tray laid before him, smiled. "Let's eat."

After lunch, Ranma found her way towards the baths barred. "One last bit of business, Haruto?" She asked archly. "Can you give me a hint? Cuz' I got nothing."

"Very well," Haruto said. "I have a twin brother."

"Huh? I don't remember that…" Ranma said. "Wait, seriously? I got you and your brother mixed up or something? How the hell am I supposed to deal with that?! Is there anything to deal with?" Haruto was silent, waiting. "...huh? You mean…"

"An apology would be welcome," the young monk said, suddenly smiling. "But probably excessive. It was an honest mistake, and there was no harm. It was almost a decade ago." His smile grew. "Now, can you work out the intended lessons?"
Ranma forced herself to think. "Maybe...that I can't possibly cover for *everything* me and my old man pulled," she said cautiously. "If I tried, there'd be no end to it."

"And?"

Ranma nodded. "At some point, I guess it's not my job anymore?"

"Correct." Haruto smiled. "Also, my name's not Haruto."

Ranma's eyes narrowed. "...what?"

"Your sensei's instructions were quite clear. I was to allow you to believe whatever you wished," Not-Haruto explained. "He believed you would either remember, or construct a memory of a temple you spent time at. Oh, don't worry about it, I'm sure the real Haruto is doing quite well. If not, then you can deal with it as you choose, depending on your feelings about it."

Ranma nodded. "Uh...okay, thanks," she said with a slight sigh. "Uh...what is your name, then?"

The unnamed monk just smiled and left Ranma to her thoughts.
Chapter 20

It was a very different Mu's that stepped off the plane compared to the group that had left. With only a week left to the first concert, they were ready. Every song they had was rehearsed to the point where Ranma was confident they could do it blindfolded. He hadn't actually tested that yet, but he was confident. They were, themselves, more relaxed, more confident, and could smile even through the roughest conditioning session.

Studying had gone equally well - their vacation homework was entirely finished save for a couple of research papers that, it turned out, needed non-internet resources. Even those would be no more than a few hours' effort. For the foreseeable future, the only studies to worry about were for the third-years' entrance exams, and they had promised there would be no issues on that front.

Most importantly, while there wasn't enough time to choreograph, Kotori had the lyrics for her new song under her arm. Umi had a cleaned-up copy, and Maki spent the entire flight over a laptop making notations and listening to the electronic playback. She'd need a day with the keyboard to fully work it out, but right now, it looked like Takaramonozu would at least make it to the concert's inside portion, where there wasn't enough room to dance anyway.

It wasn't all good news, of course. Just before they made it out of the terminal, an announcement came over the loudspeaker. Something had happened to the baggage, and while there was no damage, it would be significantly delayed.

Ranma felt a twinge of concern. "Maki, can you get everyone somewhere safe?"

Maki's eyebrow twitched. "Why me?"

"Well," Ranma pointed out. "Your family's the swanky one with all the cash. You probably fly a lot, so you know this place."

"Well, yeah, but…” Haneda's terminals, like any modern airport's, were open to allow everyone to easily keep an eye on everyone else. "...I'm not sure but given everyone's on my family's tickets, maybe we can use the lounge."

Ranma thought about it, then nodded. "Worth a try. If not, food court or somethin' I guess." With that settled, he looked to Umi, who blinked but followed him. Past the guard, Ranma turned to her. "All right, so, if this goes bad, you're not here for backup. Let me take care of the fighting. You know which suitcase is Maki's?" Umi nodded slowly. "She's got some unfinished song work in there. Now, they can't just steal it like last time, but that don't mean they won't try if they can."

And even if they can't use it, they could set Maki back any progress she's made on everything but Kotori's song, "So grab Maki's stuff and run for it." Umi confirmed. "Can do. Unless it's your grandmaster, then it's every girl for herself."

Ranma chuckled. "Okay, but I don't think this is him. Hell, I don't think it's any of'em, but after that scare with the ninja let's not take chances, right?"

"Right."

It turned out that they had just barely enough clout with the airline to retreat to the lounge, although Maki had had to promise they wouldn't be disruptive. Few of the girls had seen the inside of an airline lounge before, so they quickly split up to take a look around, while Maki just grabbed a cup of
the terrible (in her opinion) coffee and took a seat in the library, opening up her laptop again and plugging in headphones.

She was surprised when a second pair of headphones was plugged into the other jack, and looked up at Kotori. "Sorry, do you mind if I take a listen?"

Maki smiled. "Not at all. It's your song. I thought I'd go a little more acoustic this time, you know. I mean, we don't have a full band, but it fits with the maid cafe surroundings and…"

Kotori just smiled and hit 'play.' Then she looked embarrassed when no sound came out and Maki handed over her headphones. A quick listen, and she was smiling. "It sounds really good."

Maki nodded. "Uhm…there's just one problem."

"I don't mind that I'm not center," Kotori quickly said back. "I mean, it would've been nice, but…”

Maki nodded. "Are you sure? I mean, this is just a first pass. I can probably figure it out if I really have to."

"When we're all just singing it won't matter so much anyway," Kotori pointed out. "Nico and I can switch parts in the cafe, then when we've got it ready for a full stage we'll do it the right way. That fine?"

Maki smirked. "Well, you know Nico, but yeah, that works."

Kotori giggled at that.

Ranma groaned as soon as he realized that, in fact, he was not just being paranoid. And, worse was who had shown up. He spotted Nabiki walking right up the terminal, and he knew full well his customary Chinese outfits would out him in a second. He could run, but really, what would be the point? He gestured to Umi for her attention. "Remember, no violence. Code applies now."

Umi growled. "I remember, Ranma. But they're pushing it."

Ranma glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. "That settles it. You're taking my lead." When it looked like Umi would object he turned fully towards her. "No. Umi, that Code exists for a good reason."

"I don't see it," Umi shot back. "All I can see is a leash they used to jerk you around. I'm not buying it."

"Later," Ranma said harshly, and then Nabiki was there. "Nabs," He said coolly. "You got a lotta nerve. Ukyo?"

"She'll be here," Nabiki said. "Where's the rest of them?"

Ranma narrowed his eyes. "Not stupid. You aren't getting close to them again. After all, if you remember, Happousai told us how we're going to be settling this. On stage."

Nabiki smirked. "You sure you don't want to join the winning team?"

*If she expects me to be confused, she's in for a disappointment,* Ranma thought, his expression hardening. "You said something to me once, Nabs. The only thing that's more important to me than money is family. I'm not sure I buy it….but I can say the same." Nabiki looked startled. *Good.* "I said Honoka was like my sister - "
"Operative word, Saotome. 'Like'. She's no family of yours, and your family's got some promises to figure out how to keep." Nabiki took a cautionary step back, seeing Umi looking at her. "I'm not saying the Tendos have done their part, and I've got a plan."

Umi scoffed. "You missed the part where he's got to get me, Honoka, and Kotori through Love Live. You weren't on the list."

Ranma nodded. "She's got a point, Nabs."

"Anything Goes?" Nabiki smirked. "Stealing techniques and training's part of your playbook. You've got what you need from these rich kids. And your real family needs you."

"Pops dyin' or something?" Ranma asked with a tinge of sarcasm. "You're barking up the wrong tree, Nabs."

"We'll see." Nabiki looked around. "I am impressed, though. You actually hired security, just in case, huh? Well, toodles."

They waited until Nabiki had gotten a safe distance away before letting out the breath they had been holding. Ranma glanced around, and noticed a single sarariman paying attention to them. He nodded to Umi, and flipped her a coin. "Go get a cart. I need a word."

"Uh...sure."

Ranma walked over to the man, who nodded to him. "Yes, I have been hired to track Miss Nishikino. Yes, I was informed of your potential presence. No, I am not under orders to harm her, nor kidnap her, nor do anything but report back. To the best of my knowledge, there are no further plans at this time for harassment. I do not know what my employer is thinking."

Ranma blinked.

"Surprised?" the young ninja said, going back to his tablet. "We consulted with an acquaintance of yours. Kenzan Konatsu."

"Then you know..." Ranma said slowly, with a little menace in his voice "...that there is absolutely no way you're getting out of this without at least three cracked ribs and a snapped limb."

The ninja smiled. "Quite the contrary. Your Code is important to you. I am unarmed, and you are welcome to verify that. I am no threat to you, or your friend there. Or, indeed, your 'sister' when she's adequately armed. My talents lie elsewhere."

Ranma grunted, but it was probably true. "You seem to know more about me than I'd have guessed."

"Kenzan was most cooperative, when paid the appropriate consultancy fee," the man explained. "She did not reveal many secrets, but made it plain that you are beyond our ability to counter without hiring an outside expert. For the time being, that's been rejected."

"So what are you doing here, and why shouldn't I toss you in the harbor?" Ranma asked.

The man nodded. "To the point, then. My employer proposes a compromise. He wishes me to track Miss Nishikino's movements to ensure no harm comes to her until he can formulate his new plan. In exchange, you will be informed when this new plan is ready by our withdrawal. If something does happen, you will be informed and our resources will be at your disposal. Furthermore, there will be no interference for a minimum of twenty four hours between our retreat and our employer's new plan."
Ranma parsed that. "Okay, so, you'll give us at least one day's warning before you try anything, and anyone else tries anything with Maki, you let me know so I can deal." Ranma mulled that over. "If it's someone else in Mu's?"

"That would fall under our offer only if Nishikino is present when it happens. Our employer's concern is only with her for the present."

"...I don't like it…"

Ukyo growled at Nabiki from across the cafe table at the airport. "And you just let them go?"

"We can't get away with starting a brawl in the middle of the biggest airport in the country," Nabiki snarked back. "And they had a goddamn shinobi. Can you protect me and fight Ranma, not to mention Sonoda, at the same time?" At Ukyo's glare, she continued. "Anyway, we know what they're up to."

"Yeah, about that." Ukyo said. "You promised they wouldn't be able to get a public performance venue after that little propaganda campaign. Maid cafe off Akiba strip during Saturday Open Street? Sure, it's not the UTX courtyard, but how the hell did they swing that?"

Nabiki frowned. "I'm not sure. I looked the place up, and it's most noted for Minalynski. One of the waitresses. I guess she's a Otonoki student or something."

Kotori sneezed. Ranma grabbed her shoulder. "Hey, our newest lyricist isn't coming down with something before the big concert is she?"

Kotori gave Ranma a reassuring smile.

Ukyo snorted. "One hell of a miscalculation, Nabs."

"Don't worry about it." Nabiki grinned. "I scouted the place out. Nine singers, Ranma, and the usual staff are going to have a hard time fitting."

"So?"

Nabiki's smile turned evil. "I've already started a few rumors that Mu's will be covering for the wait staff, and it turns out most of them are working without permission from their school. A little bit more heat…"

"I don't like it." Maki said, echoing Ranma's earlier sentiments. "That guy creeps me out, and this is just…"

Ranma nodded, passing her bags (except for the one with the precious unfinished sheet music) to her. "I didn't make it a blanket agreement, I just said we'd go along with it until we can talk to your parents. Nozomi, he's over there. You got a read?"

Nozomi gave the man a long look, as did Honoka. He simply tipped an invisible hat. She shook her head. "Well, I don't get a bad feeling off him."

Honoka shook her head. "I'm not getting close enough for a chat."

Ranma nodded. "Anyway, I think this is gonna be a case of 'let the parents sort it out.' The brat's one
thing, but the ninja won't break the rules even if he tells them to."

"Uh, Ranma, they're ninja," Umi said uncertainly. "Dishonorable tricks is kinda their trademark."

"Yes and no," Ranma said. "Tricks, sure, but if they outright tell you something like this, it's probably in their contract. They'll give us a day's warning by not being around."

In the end, Mrs. Nishikino promised to have strong words with the Kondo family. A few hours later, the ninja in the car outside had vanished. From a tactical standpoint, Ranma had to regard it as a loss, but then again, if Maki was being followed by a creepy stalker, she'd go back to being an emotional wreck in short order, so it was the only real option anyway.

He decided to step up his emphasis on security anyway, moving practices from the shrine back to the roof and personally giving everyone rides in the morning, whether they wanted them or not. He also handled the technical prep at the cafe itself, from setting up the low stage to figuring out enough of the wiring to get everyone mic-ed….before going to retrieve each girl personally and leaving them in the office.

By the time he'd gotten Hanayo, the last one, there, the manager was standing out front tapping her foot impatiently. "You couldn't have used the change room for this?"

"Heheheh," Ranma said nervously, scratching the back of his head as he let Hanayo down. "Uh, anyway, we can get started just as soon as you open."

"You sure you guys are good all day?" The manager asked.

Ranma nodded. "We're ready."

The little clock on the wood panels of the cafe's walls chimed 7 AM.

"We're not ready!" Honoka shouted. The cafe was indeed set up perfectly for a concert, but there was just one small problem. The wait staff. Half of them had yet to arrive, and there were customers lined up outside the door. The floors weren't quite mopped yet, the silverware wasn't out, and the coffee wasn't ready.

Ranma looked at the whole thing, then sighed. "Kotori, give everyone a crash course on the maid thing." She glanced towards the door to be sure she was out of view of the public, then pulled off her Chinese shirt reluctantly.

Eri bapped Nozomi on the back of the head lightly, before primly adjusting her own maid outfit. Nozomi pouted at her.

Honoka just rolled her eyes. "Ranma, honestly!"

"No one saw." Ranma shouted back, somehow finding the last of the shop's ready-to-go uniforms. She was about to pull it on, when Kotori suddenly tossed something at her. Ranma blinked, and looked at the package. "Bra and panties? Don't you gotta size this stuff?"

"I did," Kotori said innocently. Ranma gave her a questioning look, but Kotori put her own hands on her hips. "Buster, you better not try to wear that outfit without anything under it. Anything splashes on you and everyone will see."

Honoka gave Kotori a grateful look. "And the point of this is to show we're not the kind of girls who
do that sort of thing."

Ranma nodded. "Okay, okay, got it." The black pullover dress was simple enough, but Ranma decided it was thin enough it might stick to her when it got wet. That would be a problem like Honoka had said, but when paired with the ruffled apron, the result was feminine without being showy. She put on the hat, then got to work on the silverware.

Meanwhile, Kotori lined everyone up. "All right, it's actually really simple. That doesn't mean it's easy. All you have to do is keep the orders straight, and be as respectful as you can to all the guests. You've all heard how maids and servants talk in those old movies. It's like that. Or, I guess, like this." Then she straightened up, and bowed as respectfully low as one could get away with unless it was the Emperor himself being addressed or one wanted it to circle back around to insult. "Welcome, Master."

Everyone stared in astonishment at the way she seemed to transform in that moment. Or, rather, the way she didn't transform. It was all so different from the way Kotori acted normally, and yet it was completely natural. "That's really it. You just have to do everything you can to make the customers feel welcome."

Honoka shrugged. Apparently, now they were the wait staff. She bowed to Kotori. "Welcome, Master," she said, although it was with less gentleness and much more enthusiasm.

"Right, exactly like that," Kotori said. Everyone stared at her. "It's not just the form. Everyone puts their own personality into it. The important thing is that your customer thinks he or she is the most important thing in your world, at least for the hour they're here."

At that moment, the first of the silverware flew out of the kitchen and landed perfectly in place at the table farthest from it. "Duck!" Rin shouted, and the rest of the girls decided it was safer to follow suit. In about two minutes, every place in the cafe was set.

Umi stood up. "Ranma! Warn people before you're going to violate the safety codes!"

"Okay, okay." Ranma stuck her head out of the kitchen. "Looking good, everyone. Sorry about this."

Eri nodded. "How do we handle it when we're on stage?"

"Kotori, how many tables can you keep track of in your head?" Ranma asked her, and they got down to work. It would actually be pretty simple. The only issue would be when everyone had to perform together. However, since those were the big songs, they'd simply suspend table service during those performances, and let Ranma do her thing during the lead-up. They'd give the guests an extra five minutes per window to compensate.

The hardest part would be, since they would be sharing tables by necessity, keeping track of the orders. Eri came up with the solution there - a simple online document was quickly thrown together and sent to everyone's cell phone so they could write down the order, and everyone else could access it. It wasn't as good as a dedicated restaurant system would be, but with Ranma watching things they were sure it could be done.

Nico noticed one problem. "That leaves us three minutes to get changed, and that's if the evening shift shows up on time. If they don't…"

"Manager'll have to deal with that." Ranma said. "Let's go."
The most amazing thing was, it worked! The first seating windows in the morning were handled beautifully, with everyone handing off orders and keeping up the act between their turns on the stage. They opened the morning with *Boku no Live*, of course, but everyone got a chance to perform the new songs they were working on, the ones that hadn't been claimed in the purge. From Rin’s energetic *Kururin Miracle* setting the scene, to Eri managing to inject real pain into her *Arifureta Kanashimi no Hate*, to Honoka bringing a smile to everyone’s face, everything seemed to be going well.

That was when Nico, managing the line, spotted Nabiki at the back. She quickly noted down that she would be seated in the 11 o’clock block, finished booking the guests she was greeting, then led them to the table personally before flagging down Ranma. Lowering her voice to a whisper to avoid disturbing the guests, she murmured "Tendo bitch is at the back of the line. She's gonna get into the last block with the big inside number. What do we do?"

Ranma sighed, but she couldn't see a way out of it. "Pass the word along, but we can't keep her out. The others, maybe, but...

"Gotcha," Nico said back, returning to the line and seating people.

When Nabiki got to the front, though, she couldn't prevent her smile from turning brittle. "Greetings, my lady."

Nabiki couldn't resist. "Oh, this is rich. Fine, fine, table for one."

Nico seized on that. She couldn't refuse to seat the pest, but..."I'm very sorry, but we have a minimum seating of two."

"I'll pay the seating fee twice," Nabiki countered. "There's no way I'm passing this up."

Nico very pointedly did not grind her teeth. An Idol maintained composure at all times. "Very well, my lady. This way." There were some tables for two remaining, or she’d have tried that obvious tactic too. Nico considered her options and decided the best way to handle it was to make sure Kotori was the one handling the table. She quickly made the edit to the table chart, then got back to dealing with the other customers.

In the kitchen, Ranma saw the notes change on her cell phone and gave Kotori a worried look. "Hey, you sure you're up to this? She's got a way of getting under your skin."

Kotori nodded. "This is my job. I do have to handle unruly customers who mistake what kind of maid cafe this is every now and again." With that, she took a deep breath and put on her persona, slipping out and managing to slide up to the table right behind Nabiki. She bowed. "Good morning, My Lady," she said, causing the older girl to jump and nearly hit her head on the low-hanging light over the table. "Oh, goodness, I'm so sorry!"

Nabiki gave her a long, level stare. *Right, Minami. I thought she'd be the easy one, but I'm sure she did that on purpose. I'm sure of it. But there isn't even a crack in her facade. She seems genuinely sorry. I'll have to poke her. "All right, I think I'll have the Wild Horse,"* she said, naming the most expensive mocktail on the special menu. She’d considered trying for the alcohol, but no sense being too obvious just yet.

Kotori nodded, and bowed. "It would please me to inform My Lady that the bill will include all drinks and food ordered, in addition to the seating fee."

*Dammit! Kotori's smile didn't waver, didn't show the least hint of triumph.* *She's supposed to be the*
ditz! A fashion designer! How am I getting played so easily by this bimbo?! I can't even complain to the manager because the whole cafe would back her up! Instead, she took a moment to compose herself while Kotori simply waited. "If it's not too late to change my mind, I'll just have a latte."

"Of course, My Lady," Kotori bowed again, just as respectfully. "There is a table minimum. May I recommend some of the crepes, or are you in the mood for a lighter breakfast? Or would you prefer an early lunch?"

"No one mentioned a table minimum," Nabiki pointed out, finally glad to be on some kind of footing. A table minimum would be for two people - even if she just drank expensive coffee, that would be a bite out of her wallet she couldn't afford without the betting pools.

"My apologies. It was on the sign, but Nico should have pointed it out as well. I will speak with the manager and see if it can be waived…" Kotori said, leading Nabiki to feel a moment's triumph. A moment that was swiftly dashed when Kotori added, "It would, however, help if you ordered something. I believe the bread is just coming out of the oven. Perhaps a sandwich?"

Nabiki hung her head. "Fine, fine, whatever's cheapest, and you don't make me order two. Deal?"

Kotori's smile fell slightly. "That's not necessary, My Lady. Whatever I can do to make your visit more enjoyable would be my pleasure. Your drink will be a few minutes, and we'll begin serving food during the performance set, if that would please you."

"Whatever…" Nabiki waved her off.

Kotori bowed one last time, and retreated to the kitchen, where Ranma gave her an appraising look over her shoulder while continuing to plate the dishes for the lunch rush. "She do anything?"

"I'm afraid not," Kotori said. "Although she did try to kick up a fuss at the minimums. I offered to speak to the manager for her."

Ranma nodded. "Not a bad idea anyway. She wouldn't have risked having to be here without someone covering her tab if she weren't up to something."

"Right." Kotori glanced over the schedule. "Not enough time before Spicaterrrible. I'll do that after. You'll have to deliver the drink."

Ranma looked like she'd swallowed a lemon, but nodded. "She won't eve - " There was a terrible fury in Kotori's eyes as that suggestion died on her lips. "Fine, fine, I'll do it 'proper'. Sheesh, never thought I'd be glad about that thing with Picolet."

Nabiki leaned back in her chair, satisfied, until she caught something out of the corner of her eye. Three very familiar faces. Well, familiar to her, when she'd done research on the whole School Idol business before she'd decided on this last scheme. After all, one couldn't avoid A-Rise these days. They had been seated in the booth closest to her table, and were crowded on one side of it so they could all get a view.

She was surprised when their leader, Tsubasa, spoke to her. "Tendo." The voice was cordial, but cool. "What brings you as far as Akihabara this morning."

"Checking out the competition." Nabiki answered.

Erena flicked Tsubasa's ear. "Unfortunately, I don't think you two meant that the same way."

Nabiki sighed. Tsubasa's orientation was well known in the School Idol world, so it would be
unlikely that anyone cared. And the same probably went for whichever Muse she was actually here to see, assuming it wasn't generic girl-watching. That notion was quickly flattened when Tsubasa added "Oh, and don't even think about causing trouble, Tendo." Her partners stared at her in shock. "Believe me, after that incident at the beach house, I'm very much on to your tricks."

Anju stared at her. "Wait, she's the Amazon?"

Tsubasa groaned. "No, just in the same group, but Ranma gave me the run down."

Forestalling an argument, Ranma approached the table. She set the coffee down. "My lady…"

Nabiki smirked. "Oh, this is too good. I wanna get a picture of this…" she said, pulling out her cell phone.

Ranma gave her an icy smile. "My lady, if you wish a picture, please see the front desk to rent the camera…although the list is long today."

"What'll you do, Saotome? You can't touch me." Nabiki snarked back, but realized with some worry that Tsubasa was leaning back in her chair, looking satisfied.

What Ranma said next chilled her to the bone. "I am charged with maintaining the peace and sanctity of the cafe this morning, My Lady." Her words grew clipped. "As long as you respect the rules, we are happy to serve you."

Translation. Nabiki grumbled. She's not just a maid, she's security. One step out of line, and the Code lets her boot me out of here as long as there's no long-term damage…if I don't fight back. Bet he's been waiting all year for this chance, too. Well, not giving him the satisfaction.

Seeing Nabiki put the phone away, Ranma bowed formally and left. Kotori was joined on stage by the others, who all bowed. The applause rose, but Kotori quieted them with a smile. "Now, please, we'd like to perform a special song for you. I wrote the lyrics myself, and it's about the most important things to us."

Tsubasa grinned and stage-whispered, just loudly enough that Nabiki knew she had been intended to overhear, "Let's see what their second-string can do, then."

The song began with a low guitar. There was no dance, but the small performance area meant there really couldn't be. The beat of the drum, though, told even Nabiki that one would be added later. Then the girls started singing, and she couldn't quite contain the curse under her breath.

_Courage is important, so let's hurry and go!_

_Wish for it with all your might_

_Right now, let's go!_

_Let's use our frustration too; we'll turn it into something positive_

_When things get unbearable, it's okay to be a bit selfish_

_It's fine, so let's go!_

It wasn't just a song, it was a goddamn declaration of victory. Oh, not in Love Live, but over _her_. They thought they'd _won_ just because they managed to throw together enough new songs to make a set.
Tsubasa smirked at her while they built up to a new refrain. "What, upset that your thieving wasn't enough?" She held up a hand when Erena and Anju looked at Nabiki with near murderous intent. "Let her go, girls. I'll explain everything during the break."

No one knows about these treasures yet

They're all searching for them, yes, everyone's trying hard

These undiscovered treasures

Are so close, yet so far, they'll never stop shining

Nabiki threw money for the sandwich on the table and walked out during the applause. I've got more up my sleeve than some stupid songs, Ranma. Time to stop playing with you.

Honoka put on the hat that completed Kotori's costume, glanced in the mirror, and let herself feel a moment's satisfaction. "Let's do it," she said, mostly to herself. Everyone else was already outside, either setting up or cleaning up. Thankfully, the afternoon shift had started to arrive. Everything was going great.

She then opened the makeshift door to her dressing room and found herself face-to-face with Erena and Anju. "Oh, hey! Nice to meet you!"

Something in their expressions told Honoka that the sentiment wasn't returned. "So, it seems Tsubasa was right," Erena said acidly. "We're forced to acknowledge you today as being worthwhile as School Idols."

"Huh?" Honoka looked behind her, but there was no exit. "Honestly, what's with the attitude?"

Anju sniffed. "Just remember you didn't get here on your own. Your skills may have won out, but without Tsubasa's help you'd still be struggling to get crowds half this big, or just known as the biggest hussies in the School Idol world."

Honoka looked between them. "You think I don't know that? I'm grateful, believe me. So what's this about?" Erena help up a cell phone. Honoka took it silently and read the headline. "'Relationship on the stage?' Huh?" The top of the article included a picture of Honoka and Maki walking, hand-in-hand, through Tokyo station on the night the Kondo boy had been stalking Maki.

Suddenly Tsubasa was standing behind her fellow Idols, enraged. "What are you two up to now?"

"Protecting you! From yourself, if we need to!" Erena shouted back, before thrusting her phone at Tsubasa.

For Tsubasa's part, she just glanced at the headline. "What about it? Rumors like that circulate all the time, and anyway, I already knew Honoka's poly." The other two members of A-RISE stared at her incredulously. "I hadn't decided what to do about that, but at this point I think I've figured it out."

She pushed past the pair of them, grabbed Honoka firmly around the waist, and planted a kiss right on her lips.

When she was done, everyone's jaw had just about hit the floor. Tsubasa stuck out her tongue. "Seriously, let's just enjoy the outdoor concert. I'm fine, guys."

Honoka slowly nodded. "Uh...yeah, please enjoy the concert." When she was alone again for a moment, she gently touched her lips. "...what just happened?"
"Yep. Ranma's in Kanda, the Pig-Tailed Girl's busy putting on a concert in Akihabara….yes, I know neither of them has been around lately….Ranma's been seen hanging out with Mu's, remember? Well, that's what the Pig-Tailed girl has been doing...yes, I completely agree, Ranma has no business with ten very attractive girls who aren't his one-and-only...well, I trust you know what to do. Hot water? Sure, I guess that's been effective. Of course, she might be stronger now. Better make sure it's extra hot." Nabiki turned her phone off and continued towards the train station to set up her alibi. "Now to wait."

Ranma found herself spending the entirety of the outdoor concert scanning the crowds. After all, the girls could handle the performance without her, the equipment was all set up, and there was pretty much nothing else to do. She had been afraid of another appearance by Nabiki, but nothing of the sort happened. The full set closed out with no further incidents, and Ranma got started packing up. When Honoka joined her, she glanced at her out of the corner of her eye. "Hey, something happen?"

"Well, Tsubasa kissed me," Honoka admitted. "But I've got no idea what to make of that one."

Ranma shrugged. "Well, she's a looker. Just remember not to mix business and pleasure and everything will be fine."

Honoka chuckled. "I'm half surprised you know that phrase."

"Yeah, well, just 'cuz no one in my life can seem to do it…" Ranma laughed softly. "Anyway, why don't you girls take off? The stream and ratings are trending good, and there's not a whole lot more violence could do to stop us now."

Honoka stopped and put the speaker she was carrying on the cart. "Are you sure about that?"

Kotori had, in fact, already left. The narrow alleyways of Akihabara had practically become a second home to her in the months since she'd become Minalynski. The niche shops, the smaller cafes, and the private apartment buildings were a far cry from the flash and noise of the main strip. She was well known down this way, and almost no one dared bother her despite the costume. Almost no one.

The first sign Kotori had that something was wrong was when a gymnastics ribbon lashed out of nowhere around her wrist. The second was a laugh that chilled her to the bone. She looked over her shoulder towards the other end of the ribbon. She had never met the girl, but Ranma's photos and description were enough to chill her to the bone.

Kuno Kodachi had arrived.

"So, this is the harlot who dares pursue my Lord Ranma! Defend yourself!" Kodachi declared as she yanked, hard, on the ribbon. It loosened, but not before Kotori almost felt her arm being ripped out of its' socket by the surprisingly tough material.

Kotori backed away, holding up her hands. "Please! I surrender! I'm not a martial artist!"

"SILENCE!" Kodachi responded, throwing several pins at her from out of nowhere. "As if I would believe any of you strumpets!" Kotori dove into the wall for something resembling cover, crying out as her already-abused shoulder took the impact. She reached for her phone and barely managed to hit the speed-dial for Ranma when it was plucked from her hand. It landed in Kodachi's hand, and she glanced at the screen. "Oh dearie me, think you can call my precious love to save you?"
Kotori blinked, but surprisingly, the screen changed to indicate Ranma had picked up.
"HEEEELLLLLLLLLLLP!"

Kodachi crushed the phone.

*It's too late, Kotori thought to herself. Ranma knows I'm in trouble. I just have to last till he gets here.*

Ranma felt her blood go cold at the sound that came from the phone, then the sudden silence. "Dammnit! Honoka, get the speakers back up, turn them up to the max, and start up...I don't know, *anything!*"

Honoka, who had heard, just nodded and started plugging cables in. Ranma didn't bother with fancier tricks, just hopping between two fire escapes to reach the rooftops quickly.

Kotori quickly realized just how long a few minutes could be when you were being assaulted. She was fast enough, just, to avoid the various tools Kodachi was hurling at her from her Hidden Weapons-like pockets, but she felt like she was being toyed with. It was like dancing without a beat, Kodachi always tossing something at her just when she thought she had stable footing. A razor-hoop embedded itself in the brick of a nearby building as she jumped to one side, only to find a bouquet of black roses headed straight at her.

Kotori held her breath and batted it away, and the gymnastics pin behind it cracked into her skull, sending her sprawling off her feet. She wasn't unconscious, but she realized it was a near thing. She heard Kodachi walking up behind her, and half scrambled, half stumbled to her feet. The world was spinning now, but she thought she heard something.

With the speakers set back up, Honoka was flipping through their library on her laptop, until she found the right song. She started the music playing, and covered her ears. Her entire body, including her teeth, and even the shop windows rattled as the song began to play.

No, Kotori did hear something. The first chords of *Start - Dash* resounded through the whole of the ward. Kotori closed her eyes, since being able to see right now wasn't doing her much good anyway, and began to dance and sing the song.

Kodachi stared at her in amazed dumbfoundment. "What are you *doing*?"

Kotori ignored her. She had no idea what Ranma and Honoka were planning, but what she was supposed to do couldn't be more obvious. She opened her eyes and started to improvise along with the music, her vision seeming to clear a little with the music to focus on. "I saaayyy...Hey! Hey! Hey, *Start, Dash!*" She stepped to the left and right, and to her amazement, Kodachi couldn't seem to help but follow along. Sure, she was still aiming the attacks at Kotori, but with the music she was subconsciously doing so to the rhythm of the music, and not her own.

But Kotori had practiced this song for over a hundred hours of her life, in separate incarnations. She knew it far better than Kodachi, and with the timing of the attacks known to her, she could adjust and keep ahead far better. Kotori managed to keep singing, but her voice got a hard edge as her focus narrowed to a razor's edge pointed at the next incoming projectile. "*Don't ever give up!*" Pins and hoops flew past her, missing by centimeters. "*That day will come!*" The ribbon was harder to deal with, but she stepped back and spun around as it trapped her wrist a second time, and it simply
unraveled before Kodachi yanked.

"How are you doing this?!" Kodachi screamed, suddenly leaping forward with the Strike Of One Hundred Clubs.

"You can feel it too, can't you?" Kotori leaped far to the right to get out of the way of the handful of pins, still singing as loudly as she could to try to draw Ranma's attention.

You're not trained!" The ribbon lashed at her feet, and she drew on the jump from another song to get just barely over it. "You can't possibly fight back!"

What Kotori didn't know, but it was helping, was that the singing was also forcing her breathing to deepen. She had more oxygen and extending her endurance over simply running and screaming. That combined with Ranma's subtle training with the ping pong gun to give her the reflexes to dodge in time, and to improvise new movements to keep it up rather than stick to the scripted dance.

But what she, and Ranma, had failed to account for was Kodachi's poison smoke bombs. When the deranged girl threw one of those at her, Kotori took a deep breath by instinct. Her vision clouded suddenly, and she passed out.

Ranma arrived at the scene of the crime, but for a moment it looked like it was too late. Then she heard it. Over the music, the faint, insane laughter that was a dead giveaway which way Kodachi had gone. She leaped up to the roof, and from there the signs were clear enough to anyone who knew what they were doing. Ranma was, by no means, an expert tracker, but she could see footprints on the loose-stone-covered rooftops and the occasional black rose petal.

The trail swiftly led Ranma to an old, abandoned building along the waterfront, far from the docks. What had once probably been a factory lay, long-abandoned, and probably too toxic to clean up easily without releasing more chemicals and waste into the harbor. So it had been left to rot. If Kotori had been poisoned by Kodachi, as seemed most likely, he had to find her and get her out of here now. A martial artist who had trained their body properly to handle the toxins wouldn't have a problem, but for her friend it might already be a fatal dose.

She made a call. "Doc, send me a chart for delaying toxins," He said, not waiting for Tofu to give him a greeting. "Female, sixteen, good health."

There was a long pause at the other end while Ranma forced his way through the debris. "Ranma, that's not for amateurs."

"We may not have time to get you here before she needs it. Call Mrs. Nishikino, tell her to have an ambulance on the way. Guardians can track their kids' phones, right? She can find mine."

Tofu hesitated. "I'll do it, but I hope you know what you're doing."

"So do I." Ranma said, throwing aside yet another fallen girder. That was when she found what she was looking for.

Kotori was, literally, strung up in the middle of a large open space, surrounded by large mixing vats that were rusted, pitted, and dented, but possibly functional with a lot of work. More alarmingly, they had been cleaned, with no cobwebs around. Ribbons held the girl's arms apart, while her legs were left to dangle in mid-air. If she were conscious, Ranma was sure she'd be in excruciating agony.

Ranma's answer to that was a simple trick. In her sleeves were several kunai, appropriated from the fights she'd had with Konatsu. Ranma was right behind, intercepting Kotori on the way down and
laying her out gently on the ground. She glanced down at the phone, and hit the pressure points as indicated for her shallow breathing, thready heartbeat, and constricted pupils.

She almost missed the razor hoop aimed at her own neck. Almost. Another quick jump, and she was clear with Kotori. "Kuno Kodachi. You have one second to go away and never bother me or anyone I care about again." Ranma's voice was pure menace.

"I think n-" That was as far as Kodachi got before Ranma practically seemed to teleport the three meters between them, straight up, leading with her foot in a flying kick that smacked her straight in the chest and sent her over the other side of the railing she had chosen to dramatically stand over the pair from. Ranma calmly caught the rail and flipped herself on top.

"Your funeral."

Kodachi was about to try to start her speech again when Ranma was on top of her a second time, hitting her several times with an Amaguriken-fueled punch before Kodachi could throw a smoke bomb at her feet to try to buy some more distance.

When the smoke cleared, Kodachi realized that 'the pig-tailed harlot' was nowhere to be seen, and neither was the blonde slattern she had managed kidnap. She only barely sensed Ranma's return in time to block the punch which would have put her in the hospital with a solid lead pin she normally used for shattering an opponent's arm completely.

She stared at it in shock when the head flattened and the handle bent. This was far beyond anything she had even seen from her Ranma, never mind the hanger-on. "W-w-wait!"

"No." Kodachi was kicked and went flying into the maze of her own booby traps, the ones she'd intended to lead her opponent into. Maybe I can get out of this! She thought to herself. She was down to her last smoke bomb that wasn't poisoned, but that was OK. She set it off and faded into the shadows as Ranma chased her down.

Ranma's first indication something was wrong was feeling the tripwire, and then the nearby pipe burst. The rancid liquid that rained down on her was more annoying than anything, but it was hot. Hot enough to trigger the change. Ranma vaguely realized he'd been burned, but it didn't seem important next to the need to make damn sure Kotori got out of this alive. And there was only one way to ensure that.

He ran down the list of techniques in his head. Unfortunately, all of the ones he was normally comfortable with seemed to be out. Kodachi was too slippery. That only left...The Saotome Forbidden Schools. Umi-sen-ken. Yama-sen-ken. The technique to seal off martial arts methods was fairly advanced, so of course Ranma knew it. It was intended to prevent one from using more force than the situation warranted. Strictly speaking, he had never even practiced the Yama-sen-ken, but at the moment the motions were there, just tantalizingly out of reach, right next to the stealthy fade-and-strike techniques of its' partner school.

Kotori's in danger. Honoka's in danger if you don't do this! They'll never stop. There's only one other option if you don't use them! That thought brought Ranma up cold. Oni-do. Was it really worth his life to reach for a thing so forbidden even the name couldn't be spoken to those who hadn't proved worthy.

He concluded it was...if this didn't work. Normally, to unseal a technique would require a short ceremony, but the momentary panic at what he'd almost done gave him the strength to force through his own bonds. Ranma faded into the first stance, and vanished. Umi Sen Ken.
Kodachi suddenly realized, no only could she not feel the Pig-tailed girl anymore, she couldn't feel anything at all. It was as if her senses were being cloaked, covered in fog at a cloud of *ki* that seemed to flood the area. It was as if the girl was everywhere and nowhere. Until she heard *his* voice.

"MOKO KAIMON HA!"

The sudden flip from Ranma's *ki* inversion to the straight blast of the opposing style was enough to substitute for the Yama-sen-ken's normal opening technique, startling Kodachi into staying still long enough for the male, scalded, and suddenly extremely angry Ranma to grab her by the shoulders while simultaneously delivering a punishing kick to her torso. Even worse, instead of being sent flying where she could absorb the momentum in any of a dozen ways, Ranma's technique forced her barely-trained body to take the full force of it. The combination was simple, but devastatingly effective, far moreso than either of the Forbidden Schools alone.

In desperation, Kodachi pulled out her last smoke bomb. This one was filled with a knockout powder, but maybe if she got him with it she could tie him up and figure out why he was so angry. "R-ranma?"

"SHUT UP!" Before she could throw it, Ranma simply grabbed her wrist and twisted. She felt a grinding and then a flash of pain. He hadn't snapped it clean, but there were definitely broken bones there that might never heal properly. "I am sick of this!"

Kodachi braced for it when Ranma flung her into the air. For a moment, she had been afraid he would throw her into the wall, where, at the moment, she was too weak to fully absorb the impact of his full-strength. If he had done that, she knew she would have died, but instead she went through a window, landing on the street and barely managing to reduce the impact with a mundane rolling. She coughed, and realized she was coughing up blood. "R..Ranma...please....what..."

And then she realized. Ranma wasn't supposed to be here. There was no way he could be here. It simply wasn't possible for him to be in Nerima, Kanda, and Akihabara at the same time, and she knew he was supposed to be in Kanda. It wasn't possible. Not unless he had been here all along. The Pig-Tailed Girl vanished in the face of hot water. She had made sure the pipes were filled with water, hot enough to deter even the most determined.

But not hot enough to deter Ranma, who had simply...replaced...no..."No...what a fool I've been."

She rolled over, to see Ranma standing over her, fist ready to deliver the killing blow.

There was a scream, but not from Kodachi. Kotori was there, where Ranma had left her, getting to her feet. "Ranma, NO!"

Ranma stood there, seeming frozen. "Honoka -"

"Will *never* forgive you!" Kotori answered, staggering from side to side. "She would hate it if anyone died!"

Kodachi coughed. Ranma seemed to hesitate a moment longer, and Kodachi closed her eyes. "Please..." Kodachi wasn't even sure if she was praying for death or to be spared. She wasn't sure she cared, as long as the decision came swiftly. *Kodachi, surely you jest. After everything you've done, you deserve this.*

She vaguely considered that dying at the hand of the man she loved and had tortured so often didn't hurt nearly as much as she thought. She cracked her eyes open briefly when she thought she heard sirens, and realized Ranma hadn't killed her after all. He was simply ignoring her to take care of his friend.
His…friend….truly, Tendo has made a laughingstock of me. Kodachi thought, before consciousness slipped away for a good, long while.

Ranma slowly forced the blonde to lay back down as he felt Kodachi’s \textit{ki} begin to gutter and die down. If she didn't get medical attention, he was sure she would be dead in a few hours. Fortunately for Kodachi, that medical attention would be here in a few minutes. Ranma consulted the chart again. "Kotori, lay still. I need to apply constant pressure to four points, and two of them are on your chest. You good with that?" Kotori nodded, and then blushed when she realized \textit{exactly} where Ranma was pressing. "Okay, now, I need you to try to stay conscious. Just for a few more minutes."

"Th...thank you." Kotori said back, with a smile. "Ho..Honoka…"

"I know. I'll tell her." Ranma smiled and continued to channel his life energy into the chakras on the chart. "How you feeling?"

Kotori's eyes were slightly unfocused now. "Uh...better. My chest hurts less, but I still feel like someone tried to rip my arms off."

Wisely, Ranma refrained from mentioning that that was about what had happened. "Yeah, that'll go away in a few days, I think. Guess I should let the doctors say that kinda stuff."

"It's fine," Kotori murmured. "Do you think I'll be ready for the next concert?"

Ranma nodded. "Yeah." He realized Kotori was slipping a bit. "Uhh...so, yeah. Don't worry about that. Oh, I do got a serious question."

"Yes?"

Ranma grinned. "You're not gonna be declaring your eternal love for me after this or nothin', are you?"

Kotori giggled, a giggle which turned into a cough. "Of course I am, silly!" Ranma paled. "You're the best friend anyone could ask for. You went through so much just for me, when the police could have done something. Who wouldn't love you after that."

"Uhh…"

Kotori cough-giggled again. "You're really asking if I'm getting into the fiance game. No. Not crazy, not stupid, and not interested in \textit{that} kind of love."

Ranma laughed. "Okay, okay, you got me."

The rest of the girls were gathered in the hospital waiting room, silent and anxious. Even Rin, who had been the greatest naysayer up until now, had just taken up a place in the corner, hugging her knees to her chest. Maki and Hanayo had settled into an uncomfortable rhythm of pacing in a circle around the chairs. Nico was trying to keep herself in good spirits by watching the ratings, so that she could tell Kotori how well the concert went when she woke up. Umi, anticipating a long wait, had managed to snag a magnetic shogi board and was currently crushing Eri at the game, who for once didn't seem to mind being on the losing side of anything. Nozomi had separated the major arcanas from her own tarot deck for a game of Klondike, while Honoka just sat there and tried to restrain her tears.

It all lasted until Tsubasa came in. "I just heard," she said quietly to them. "You'll be happy to know the rumor isn't spreading on the net so far, but when you broke the noise ordinance I knew
something was wrong and I checked the neighborhood. How is she?"

Umi moved a piece. "It would help if we had any goddamn idea what that lunatic did to her. Unfortunately, Ranma had to put her down good. It'll be days before she wakes up, if she ever does."

Tsubasa nodded. "Uhm...you guys hungry? I can make a run to the convenience store for you so you can all be here when the news comes."

There were some general grumblings, but Honoka shook her head. "Can you please stay for a bit?"

Tsubasa took a seat next to Honoka and put an arm around her. "How did it come to this? I...I thought..." She didn't want to say it. Nozomi could have predicted this.

"I screwed up." Nozomi said quietly. "It's my fault. It was so basic." Everyone looked at her. "The reading, the one predicting danger. The Celtic Cross is always about the person getting the reading. I let the presence of the Ace of Cups convince me it was about Honoka, but the warning was meant for Kotori the whole time. I'm a complete moron." Eri couldn't really find an argument for that, so she just left the shogi game to hug her girlfriend, but Nozomi just pushed her away and hugged herself. "What good am I if I can make such an idiotic mistake?"

"Hey. hey." Eri gave her another squeeze. She made sure to speak loudly enough that Umi and Rin, who were both glaring at Nozomi, could hear. "We've all been stressed out. Don't beat yourself up. Kotori's gonna be okay. The reading still got us to figure out how to defend ourselves, so it worked. Yes, you missed a major detail and that probably made things worse, but we'll recover."

Umi sighed with exasperation and put the board aside to read a book on her phone while Nozomi held onto Eri's shoulder to hide her crying. Honoka decided to follow suit with Tsubasa for awhile. That was how they sat when Mrs. Nishikino finally came out of the emergency area. Everyone looked up, but they restrained themselves from immediately mobbing her. "Okay..." she said. "First, the obvious news - Ranma's fine. Some minor scalding, but he assures me he'll be fine in a few hours." She took a deep breath. "It looks like, right now, the Kuno girl will recover, and strangely the first words out of her mouth were I'm not pressing charges.' Which the police and the prosecutor heard, so he'll be fine legally too."

Everyone breathed out a sigh of relief, but there was still one bit of news. Mrs. Nishikino braced herself. "Kotori's also going to recover, but it might be a week or so before she can be allowed out of the hospital. But she'll be fine by the time school starts back up. I am recommending she not give any performances for awhile, but she is insisting."

Honoka nodded. "I'll try to talk her out of it." She smiled. "I'll just tell her that it's a great opportunity to get Ranma in costume."

Everyone laughed at that.

Two nurses walked up to the room where Kodachi was being kept, wheeling a cart with the soap and water needed for a sponge bath. The officers stopped them, but one flashed a hospital ID and they were allowed in.

Kodachi was completely out, of course. With her history, no chances were being taken until they were certain of her recovery. The two nurses looked at each other, and nodded. "Everything, right?" One asked.

"Right. I'll give you the formula once you've done the job." The other confirmed. "We've only got
"I know, I know," The first said. "Honestly, it was over a year ago that you got this stuff. You're really scary, you know that?"

The other nurse smirked. "Well, you get the recipe out of it, so I don't see why you're complaining." She grinned. "Cell phones. So useful. One picture and who knows what you can save from the fire. Or Doctor Tofu and my sister." She glanced at the door. "Anyway, get to work before the officers get suspicious."

Three minutes later, Kuno Kodachi had been sponged off...and her hair was cleaned, conditioned, and combed. She slept on, completely unaware of what had been done to her.

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Ranma opened his eyes and looked around the hospital room. No one was present at the moment, not even the nurse. Perfect. He pulled out the IV and rubbed the wound closed. Then he sat up, unwrapping the bandages around his chest where Kodachi's water trap had hit him. The skin underneath was no longer burned, which just told him it hadn't been anything serious, no more than second degree burns.

_I guess after Saffron, I've got a new way of thinking about that._ The thought briefly amused him. But there was time enough for that later. He noticed that he was hooked up to a number of sensors, but he'd be gone by the time anyone could respond to the alarm. He pulled them off, and then heard a voice from the bed next to him.

"Hey, Kotori?" He stopped by her bed. The blonde was obviously conscious, but weak. He saw a lot more tubes on her IV, but if they were in the same wing it couldn't be too serious. "Hey, 'Tori, you with me?"

"Yes," Kotori said, her voice still quiet and weak, but her attention all focused on Ranma. "Please, stay. The others will want to..."

Ranma felt his heart stop for a second. "'Tori...ya know I can't. Not after that. Nabs did this to hurt me. If she thinks I'm done here..."

"But..." Kotori murmured. "Honoka's gonna be so mad if you're not here when she gets here."

"Better angry than dead." Ranma answered back. "C'mon, sleep. You need your strength."

Kotori sighed, but closed her eyes. She was asleep again by the time Ranma had left the room.

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Nabiki strolled down the hallway, dressed in her usual street clothes again, talking casually into her phone. Coming from the other direction were all the expected girls, plus one extra. _Well, now, looks like the rumors about Kira weren't just rumors. Wonder which one of them she's banging._ "Huh, funny seeing you here..."

Honoka stepped out in front of the crowd. "Tendo. I should say the same. You've got no reason to be in a hospital in Akihabara. Shouldn't you be home by now?"

Nabiki chuckled. "Oh, but I heard one of my musical rivals had come down with something, and I just had to make sure she was okay." She lifted up her phone and was about to take a picture, when she suddenly found it being ripped from her hand. She looked behind her, completely shocked, at Umi. "Hey! You can't do that!"
"Can't I?" Umi said with a barely restrained snarl. "I think you'll find I'm not Ranma, Tendo. You don't have anything on me, either, so lay off the Yakuza tactics or you will regret it."

Nabiki laughed. "Oh, I don't, do I? You're not a recognized Master, yet, but even so I'm sure you're aware of the assault laws. I, on the other hand, have no paperwork on my martial arts skills. I may as well be a rank amateur as far as the law's concerned. How would it look in the blogs if you lay a finger on me? After you're thrown in jail for attempted murder, I mean."

Umi felt her fist curling around the phone, and barely stopped before she heard the crack of shattering glass.

"So, and I'm not saying I did a thing, and you'll never prove it..." Nabiki said, sure she was back on firm footing, "...If I did anything, you still can't touch me." She gestured around. "After all, there are cameras everywhere." She stared Umi straight in the eyes. "You know what? I can just deny it later. Fine, everything that happened today was all me. What are you gonna do?"

Honoka grabbed Nabiki by the shoulders spinning her around. "Why? Why do you hate us so much?"

Nabiki just sneered at her. "Everything was going great until you came along, Kousaka. Ranma would've given in eventually. Akane would be set for life with a martial artist like that to mooch off of. I could've gotten Kasumi hitched to Tofu too, with enough time. Family taken care of and I get the whole college fund in the process. But no, he had to fall in love with you." Her sneer turned into a glare. "You ruined my entire endgame. Sure, I could blame myself. The wedding bit was a little greedy, but hey, there was no indication it would change anything. There were other incidents, of course, but a girl needs her spending money. So, instead I'm blaming you. For stepping in where you weren't wanted. For having everything I deserved. Perfect school, perfect friends, perfect life. Well it's not so perfect now, is it Princess? The little blonde who's too cute for words is probably dying from Kodachi's toxins right now, and trust me, there's no help coming for that. And I'll just deny this conversation took place, so you can't prove it."

Nabiki would have gone on, but that was when someone punched her in the mouth. Not Umi, who was still holding on to the phone, but Eri. Everyone stared while Nabiki went down like a sack of bricks, and stared even longer as Eri started screaming in Russian. It started with "Ty che, suka, o'khuel blya?" and rapidly went into incomprehensible, at least to everyone but Nozomi who was staring in shock. Eri's fists were balled up, and at several points she pulled her leg back as if to give Nabiki a swift kick. Each time, Nabiki cringed and Eri stopped, but it seemed the stream of profanity would never cease.

Finally, when she was done, the taller girl grabbed the phone from Umi and stuffed it into Nabiki's pants pocket. Breathing heavily, she added "Poluchite nash otsyuda bol'noy, otravitel'nyy kusok musora!"

Nabiki didn't understand a word of it, but the meaning was perfectly clear. "I...I was just going to leave it alone after I won the contest, but you haven't heard the last of this." She scrambled to run away, though.

Nozomi squeezed Eri's shoulder. "Hey, don't let her get to you that much. Seriously, half of that wasn't possible. The other half wasn't survivable."

Eri grinned weakly. "You'd be surprised what you can live through."

Maki gulped. "Guys, she was obviously bluffing. Mom said Kotori's going to be fine, and I believe my mother over that bit of human refuse. Let's just go see her, huh?"
When they arrived in the room, Kotori was obviously straining herself. Honoka rushed to the bedside and pushed her down. "Kotori, yeesh. You just woke up, everything's going to be fine!"

"Ranma's gone!" Kotori shouted. "I don't know where he went, but he wasn't making any sense!"

Maki and Eri both felt a sinking sensation in the pits of their stomachs. Hanayo strangled back a noise that had Rin looking at her sidelong. Honoka's jaw dropped softly. "No…"

"I...I'll go." Maki said.

Tsubasa squeezed Honoka's shoulder. "We can take my car. I'll have my driver pull around."
Honoka looked at her. "No. You stay here, on the off chance he comes back." And in case that Tendo bitch wasn't lying.

The limo pulled up to the Nishikino's residence with a screech. Maki jumped out and raced into the door, slamming her shoulder into it when it didn't open before she remembered she had the key.

Tsubasa followed behind, trying to piece together why Maki was so terrified. The redhead ran up the stairs, and checked the second room in the hall.

The bed was neatly made. The desk had been cleared of books, including the school books from Otonoki. The laptop was no longer plugged in the corner. In desperation, Maki opened each of the drawers, but they were as empty as always. Then, she spotted it. The cell phone her mother had bought him had been left on the shelf. "He's left…"

It was almost sunset when Ranma got off the local bus. His 'allowance' had just barely covered the trip out here on the shinkansen and the one back he hoped to not have to take for awhile, but he'd need a place to stay. And a job. Preferably something that covered both. He quickly headed for the highest point around.

From the rooftop of a local, seemingly empty temple, it was easy to see he'd picked the right destination. The town, while not run down, was obviously the kind of place nothing happened. The blue waters of the sea, beaches that were almost abandoned even at the height of summer vacation, the two local aquariums, and even the view of Mt. Fuji. It was all beautiful, the perfect place to get away from everything. He spotted the local inn, but that would almost certainly require revealing the curse to get a job.

However, off in the distance...that was what he was looking for. Row after row of mikan trees, still getting ready for their harvest in a few months. There was always work to be done around a farm, and Ranma knew he could handle it in either form. It was perfect.

For tonight, he'd camp out at one of the shrines, but tomorrow, Ranma would set up his new life in Uchiura.
Honoka sang to herself as she skipped down the hallway at Otonokizaka. She had two armfuls of snacks and drinks and not a care in the world. It was time for the latest meeting of the club, and everything could not be more perfect. At least by looking at her.

Following well behind were Umi and Eri, staring at her retreating form. "Is this...normal?" Eri asked slowly, not quite believing it.

Umi shook her head. "Sadly, yes. Honoka's got denial down to an art form. I think it's how she gets through when she otherwise can't cope. To be honest, I'm a little surprised she didn't end up like this months ago."

Eri pinched the bridge of her nose. "At least Kotori's bloodwork is all normal. She'll be here for the big meeting. The question is whether Honoka will be."

Umi sighed. "She doesn't go completely nuts or forget stuff. I mean, not really. She just...kinda ignores everything she doesn't like for awhile." She turned away from Eri to keep heading towards the club room, only to be staring into Honoka's eyes from about five centimeters away.

"I'm not ignoring anything." Honoka said, grinning like a loon. "I've got a plan to get Ranma back!"

Watanabe You was, in short, one worried middle school girl. Her best friend, Takami Chika, had said she just wanted to hang out today rather than work on studying, but instead of retreating to her bedroom over the inn or You's apartment, they were wandering the roads alongside the extensive mikan orchards in the region. Sometimes, when she was younger, Chika would beg the farmers for the fruit, but it was out of season right now.

"Hey. You wanna talk about what happened in Tokyo yet?" You asked her friend.

Chika grinned at her. "Nah. Wasn't a big deal."

You wasn't buying it. "Chika, you won. You should be screaming and celebrating until school starts." She suddenly stepped out in front of her friend, stopping the other girl with a hand on her shoulder. "Have you even started your summer homework?"

Chika looked at her with a tilt of her head. "Well, yeah. I finished it the day after I got back." She said as much as asked. "And you think you're fine?"

"Well, yeah. Why wouldn't I be?" Chika asked, completely baffled. "Anyway, I was gonna see if I could get some mikan."

"There won't be any for three months!" You screamed. "Now I know something's wrong." It was about at that point that she realized Chika wasn't paying attention to her. She looked up.

There was a boy with a pig-tail, digging an irrigation ditch. That wasn't actually anything special. Even the fact that they hadn't seen him before wasn't really noteworthy. They didn't visit that often, especially outside the season for migratory workers. What was special was that he was swinging the backhoe about four times a second, and every strike threw up enough dirt to extend the channel being made to the same depth of about ten centimeters.
"...wow." Chika murmured.

You looked between Chika and the boy, before she just sighed. Anything to cheer Chika up, I guess.

It was at that moment that the boy looked up at a branch. With a grumble, he leaped up to the branch, about five meters above, and casually snipped it off, completely oblivious. You's jaw hit the ground. But then she sensed something truly terrifying. She turned her head to look at her friend, the stars already appearing in her eyes. "Chika, leave the nice man alone."

Chika already wasn't listening. "Heeeeeeey! Mister! How'd you do that?!"

The boy, or rather young man, looked down at the pair and sighed. He jumped out of the tree and landed right in front of them. "Hey, kids." He said, slowly looking around. "Uhh...did ya record that?" When both girls shook their heads, he wiped his forehead in seeming relief. "Yeah, what'll it take for you two to forget you saw that? I'm tryin' to keep a low profile."

"How'd you do it?!" Chika shouted, the three braids down the left side of her head dancing in time with her bouncing.

Akane was sitting in meditation. Around her were Doctor Tofu, Cologne, and Happousai. Her three tormentors. The ones who held her future in their hands. Kasumi was out shopping, to ensure that there would be no interruptions.

A wise person would have pointed out that, in Nerima, this was usually the point where, in fact, all of the interruptions would occur. But it seemed that the change in the air had even reached the dojo, for no such interruptions occurred. It was just Akane, those conducting the test, and a rebuilt Wack-a-Ranma machine.

Once she felt the air noticeably cool around her, she was ready. She stood up, and put the coin in the slot, and began the exercise. Ranma's voice shot out the insults, faster and faster, and Akane held back each time, carefully measuring her responses. Target after target evaded her, but that was acceptable now. She would get her chance.

She knew it was coming, too, the point where all the little figures would pop up with their red eyes. She took a deep breath when that happened, and stuck her hands in her pockets for three full cycles.

The three masters said nothing. The full field of red eyes passed without comment, and Akane resumed the challenge. It was only a few more hits and the game ended, with one million points. Akane smiled, then turned and bowed.

Cologne was frowning. "I say 'no.' You subverted the point of the exercise."

Tofu was pensive. It took him a long time to speak, but when he did it was as grave as Akane had ever heard him. "I must concur with the Elder. Akane, this was a test of self-control, not of how well you can exercise external controls on your behavior. You've already seen that, in the worst of circumstances, there is no one to stop you but you."

Happousai took the longest, and then nodded. "While I see their point, I disagree. At least enough to declare this test passed." Akane blinked. "Everyone has their own ways of doing things, and one of the core precepts of the School is that anything that works is acceptable." The Elder and the Doctor gave him troubled looks. "Don't misunderstand. I take responsibility for this decision, for as long as I can. If you haven't fully mastered yourself in a few years, we may revisit this. But I expect there will be no more deadly outbursts. This is your last chance."
Akane gulped.

"Very well, as long as you understand that, you are now a student of the school of Anything Goes Martial Arts."

"Okay!" Honoka shouted to bring the meeting to order. Mu's was sitting in the sweltering club room. Kotori's wrists were still in bandages, and she wasn't looking entirely present thanks to the pain medication, but she could at least focus on her friend. "It's simple. Hanayo, Nico, how are our ratings?"

"After the concert, or the rumors?" Nico asked. "Honestly, Tendo miscalculated. Someone wants a band out of the competition so badly they resorted to murder? Everyone's wondering what we're about and they've been downloading all our stuff like crazy. One more big hit and we'll be beating A-RISE."

Honoka nodded. "Maki, remember back at the meeting with the lawyer? Just because Tendo stole the songs doesn't mean we can't use them, we just have to credit, right?"

Hanayo frowned. "Even if that's true, School Idol groups that do covers tend to get slammed. Especially if it's covers of other Love Live groups."

Maki was more thoughtful. "Normally, that's true, but music is like art. There's sort of signatures to it. Hmm...how to explain...I could write an original song that sounded like Eguichi Chisato's, just to take a completely random example. It would be a whole lot more work than just doing what comes naturally. But if I really, really wanted to and had six months and listened to nothing else but her work, I could make something that you wouldn't be able to tell from a new song she wrote in a week. Key words, that you could tell apart. Anyone familiar enough with music that knew one of them was a forgery would figure out which one pretty quick unless I did a much better job than I think I can."

Umi shook her head. "How does that help?"

Nozomi smiled, and flipped a card. "I think what Maki's saying is that we can get results a whole lot faster now that the public knows something's going on." She took a deep breath, shuffling the card back into her deck. "Okay. I'll try a single-card." She flipped another one. "...The Star. That makes sense."

Eri grinned. "You think we've strayed from our core values?"

"Well, we didn't have a lot of choice," Nico pointed out. "But yeah, in hindsight we've gotten pretty far from being idols just trying to get through this nonsense. Now that we're in the spotlight, though, it's time to look back at that."

Honoka grinned. "Eri. We have three days. Can we put together a PV?"

"Impossible." Honoka deflated. "It takes us three weeks to do the choreography, program the drones, rehearse, and everything else that goes into a full-quality PV that's worthy of the top idols on the web site. Even if we were all gifted with Ranma's brain for memorizing movements and Maki's perfect pitch, used a still camera, did without costumes...I can't see any way to do the job in less than a week and that's cutting production to the bone."

Kotori sighed. "You were hoping to send a message to Ranma, weren't you?"

"...yeah." Honoka said with a sigh. "I guess some things really are impossible."
They all sat quietly for a few minutes, lost in their own thoughts. Eri with a resigned sigh. Nico looking deeply troubled, thumbing through the ratings as she often did these days. Nozomi looking to her cards longingly before putting them away without so much as a single draw. Maki starting to seem drawn again, much to Umi's notable discomfort. *I just hope she doesn't get depressed again.*

They passed that way for nearly twenty minutes. Finally, Nico stood up. "What's the song?" That got a chorus of shouts. "What. Is. The. Song?!!" She shouted over them. "I'm club president around here! I say we do it. It'll scuttle our chances at the National round, but that has the advantage of taking us out of A-RISE's sights until the Festival. We can make back the lost ground later, but we can't get another Ranma."

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Ranma was doing a quick circuit of the edge of the property when he saw some of the barbed wire fencing, strung up between long, sturdy poles, had fallen down. He leaped up to the top of a pole easily enough to grab the top strand, intending to cut it and throw it away so it could be taken care of later.

He had just finished gathering it up into a coil for transport when he heard someone breathing hard on the pole behind him. He turned around and there was the orange-haired girl from earlier. Forced to take a closer look, she was slim and definitely supremely fit - nearly at the peak of what was possible for her age. She was wearing a pink dungaree cutoff over a simple white shirt with blue pinstripes, and well-worn sneakers. Her wine-colored eyes shone brightly, and for reasons he would probably never understand she had done her hair up in three braids down the left side of her face. "I'm Takami Chika! Nice to meet you. Can you teach me how you're doing - "

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Ranma was busy stacking up empty barrels that had been delivered earlier that day in the warehouse. They would later be used for collection and transport of the fruits as they came into season. Of course, being Ranma, he wasn't stacking them with a ladder, but simply tossing them into position.

He nearly missed when he heard the sound of clapping. He looked up to the second floor, and Chika was, indeed, there, with the blonde-haired You right behind her looking decidedly concerned. He sighed and went off to do something else.

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Ranma had decided to try to escape his newfound problem by forgoing the superhuman stuff for awhile in favor of something more tedious - specifically cleaning up the tool shed. It was the sort of thing that would make everyone's lives easier, but took forever and didn't directly accomplish any of the vital tasks of running a farm, so no one ever did it. But Ranma knew he was ahead of his assigned tasks for the day, even with the interruptions, so why not? He could probably have used the Amaguriken to speed it up, but he was feeling slightly off and decided he was just going to do this normally.

When he opened the door, Chika was already in there. His eyes went up to a tiny window that a contortionist would have trouble with. "Can you - " He slammed the door in her face and ran off.

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Ranma noticed another tree with branches in need of pruning. He leaped up and dove in among the leaves with his clippers to get to work on some of the middle branches. He had just barely gotten started when he suddenly had a face full of middle-schooler. Chika had somehow, without his noticing, climbed up the other side of the tree even higher than he was standing, curled her legs around a branch, and flipped down to stare him in the face. "Even I'm not that good! How do you do it?"
Ranma... was rapidly getting annoyed. Little Chika had apparently never heard the word 'no' in her life. And he still had a job to do, which unfortunately involved more ki-fueled feats. In this case, he needed to pick up the fertilizer and move it to the outer fields. Thankfully it would stay in its' bags - the boss didn't want an amateur actually applying it. So now he was carrying eight large, thirty kilogram bags of the stuff over his shoulders, being followed by a girl who was barely a teenager.

"How...how do you do all this stuff?!" Chika asked. Again. The fourteenth time she had phrased it that way specifically. There had also been several 'How are you doing that's and entirely too many 'Can you teach that to me's and three 'I need to know!'s.

You was following at a more respectful distance, looking increasingly embarrassed with every repetition, but it didn't change that this was starting to get dangerous. Ranma could work without a truck, but they were all over the place and not looking out for little kids. He also couldn't leave them in the dust, for the same reason. So he finally just started distributing the bags to the trees they were needed at at the edge of the farm.

Once the last of the dung was set down, he turned to Chika and put his hands on her shoulders. "Takami? That was your name, right?" She nodded. "Look, Takami, I see this is important to ya, but it's no good. You can't do this stuff, no matter how much you work." That had been the wrong way to say it, apparently. The color drained from her face, and her eyes started to fill with tears. Ranma swallowed. "It's...it's nothing to do with you personally, exactly."

That had been even worse. She finally broke out into tears and tried to slug Ranma in the face. "I can too do it!" Chika screamed. "You....you stupid...city boy! I can do anything you can! You just won't give me a chance!"

Ranma blinked. "Uh...where the heck did that come from?" Chika kicked him in the shin. It didn't exactly hurt but Ranma had learned when to let things go, which he did to Chika to feign a bit of a wince in that leg. "No, seriously. Takami, I'm sure that whatever you need it for is important, but it ain't worth your life."

"Yes it is!" Chika screamed. "I don't want to be stuck out here forever!"

It was at that moment that You finally made her reappearance, grabbing Chika by the wrist. "I'm so sorry she's bothering you..." she said, bowing. "Come on Chika."

It was time to set - to try to discuss recent events with Ranma like reasonable adults. Akane took a deep breath. Soul of Ice. Soul of Ice. Akane repeated it in her head as she approached the lion's den. Otonokizaka Academy. She remembered from the blog that the club didn't even have a proper practice room, instead having been exiled to the roof despite half the school being empty. Since school was technically out of session, there was no one to stop her the way Shampoo had been.

She went straight up the stairwell, switching to a pair of visitor's shoes where in the past she would have simply stomped her way up the stairs. She nearly - nearly - lost her control of the technique when she heard the strains of music. Our songs! What the hell are they doing practicing one of our songs?!

She opened the door, and they weren't even dancing, just standing around their music player singing the lines. "What the Hell is going on here?!!"

Umi's expression went cold and hard. "Get lost, Tendo. You're even less welcome than you used to be."
Akane took a deep breath. *Soul Of Ice, Akane.* "I came to speak to Ranma. He's still my fiance. I have the right - "

Umi snarled. "Yeah, well, you've got no rights here. You're officially trespassing. Eri." Eri nodded, pulling out her cell phone. Akane's eyes narrowed. "Don't you get it?" Umi added. "After what your sister pulled, even if Ranma were still here he wouldn't talk to you again."

Akane's sudden expression of shock and incomprehension suddenly got to Honoka. "Wait, you mean you seriously don't know? That Kodachi loon attacked Kotori and you were...what? So busy with your training and singing practice you didn't even know?"

Akane took another deep breath. "Okay, so Kodachi finally tried to kill someone. That's not really a surprise. In hindsight, we really should have gotten the authorities involved a whole lot sooner. How does this automatically become Nabiki's fault?"

Honoka put a hand on Umi's shoulder to restrain her friend's obvious anger. She did the same to Eri with a gesture...then found she couldn't stay calm either. She looked to Nozomi imploringly, who finally spoke. "She confessed, Tendo. No, that's not right. She bragged that we'd never be able to prove it."

"Hmph." Akane said. "I can't believe she'd actually go that far...but I can believe she'd say she did." She let that comment hang. "Anyway, where's Ranma?"

Honoka shook her head. "He's not here. He took off the instant he recovered from saving Kotori."

Akane took another breath. "You mean you didn't even try to stop him? Some girlfriend you are!"

Honoka didn't even bother trying to correct her. "I'm going to go talk to Kodachi. She's probably got him stashed somewhere."

The last of the firewood was dumped at the campsite. Somehow, despite fending off an attention-starved wolf in the shape of a thirteen-year-old girl, he had still managed to get all of his assigned work done early and then some, so he'd gotten off his shift early enough to double-check his new home for the next few months. "I'll probably need to move on after harvest..."

A snapping twig put him on full alert, but then he realized he couldn't sense any *ki* users in the area and relaxed. Sure enough, it was...the other girl. A part of him that had adapted his opponent evaluation skills to the contest looked her over - just beginning to grow into the frame that would make her an excellent School Idol. He also noticed some scars across her knuckles that indicated she was probably a mundane martial artist of some skill. She wore her ash blonde hair shorter, but not so short that something couldn't be done with it.

Her outfit was obviously chosen for a mix between practicality and appearance. The jean shorts were fine, and appropriate to the heat, but Ranma suspected that her light blue shirt was a little too delicate. When she spoke, it was with a gentle cough. "Mister, I'm sorry about today. Chika can be a handful, but lately..." She sighed. "Are you sure you won't change your mind? I'm worried about her."

Ranma sighed. "Kid...what's your name?"

"Watanabe....Watanabe You," the girl said.

Ranma started building the fire. "You...have you heard legends about *ki*?"

Surprisingly, You made an affirmative noise. "My sensei's sensei can do some of that stuff. Two years ago he came through looking for special students, but I wasn't picked. But I still got the lecture,
and I guess I don't have what it takes."

Ranma snorted in amusement. "You're better off. Trust me - you wanna get to my level you gotta be willing to go all out, even if you've got the talent. I don't just mean you gotta work yourself into exhaustion, either. You'd almost certainly die. And no, Chika doesn't have the talent either."

You sat down and watched Ranma at work with a solemn expression that was obviously out-of-place on her. "Isn't there anything you could do?"

Ranma looked at her levely. "Why is this so important? Let me be perfectly clear here, Watanabe, in case I wasn't before. If I just agree to train Chika, to the level she wants, my way, she'll die." You just looked back at him levely. "So, either you don't care about your friend's life, or that isn't what you really want. I'm guessing it's the second. I can't work with 'she wants to do what I can' so what do you actually need from me?"

You finally broke down, sniffing. "I...I don't know what to do. She went to a gymnastics tournament last week. Up in Tokyo, the big regional one."

"She lost?" Ranma guessed reasonably.

You shook her head. "She brought back a gold medal in horizontal bar, a bronze for an uneven bars routine she tried to add, and every other event she got at least eighth. It was amazing and she's been depressed ever since!"

Ranma busied himself with shredding some tinder. "Damn, that's insane."

"Well, obviously," You huffed. "But she won't tell me what happened afterwards!"

Ranma nodded, thinking. "Well, if she's that good, she should be training for the Olympic team. I mean, if I understand the way it works right."

You stared at him. "Wait, really? You think Chika's that good? I mean, she's from...here."

Ranma nodded. "She's a mundane who can keep up with a ki adept like me. You're damn right she's that good. Better, even."

You blinked. "But, then...what...?"

Ranma shrugged. "Okay, so yeah. She really wants someone who can help her work on her gymnastics game for next year? Or maybe some way to leverage that for a better use of her time than moping around or harassing me?" He seemed to think about that for a few minutes. "Okay. Tell her that, if she doesn't keep harassin' me tomorrow, day after I have off. Meet me by..." he thought about it. "You're from Uchiura, right? There's a small market between there and Awashima. Meet me there and I'll show her something she can work on."

"Honoka?" The ginger was startled by the soft voice from behind her. She turned around, Hanayo standing there. She was shuffling her feet, arms linked behind her, unable to meet Honoka's eyes. "Honoka, can I ask you something?"

The older girl gave Hanayo a close look. "What's the problem?"

Hanayo made a little 'meep' sound. "Uh, it's no problem, it's just...uh, the new arrangement for the song?"
Honoka shook her head. "We're scrambling as it is. We can't change the lines now."

Hanayo blushed. "I just...I want Kotori's part." When Honoka didn't say anything. "I don't know, it's just...I know we wrote that song months ago, and that...I don't know. I'm just..."

Honoka nodded slowly. "The lyrics really are perfect, aren't they? But...why those lines?

"I don't...it's...it's what I want to say to him. Her." Hanayo finally said.

Honoka gulped. "Oh...oh dear." She sighed. "Have you cleared this with Kotori?"

"Y-yes. She's fine with switching."

Honoka nodded. "You'll have to practice all night, as late as you can, and so will she. We can't slip up."

Akane walked in through the front doors of the hospital. It was a weird experience for her - she immediately felt a rush of terror and determination from the security booth, and glanced over to see the man there staring right at her and saying something into his phone. She was about to go over and ask what the problem was, when two large, uniformed police officers came through the door next to the booth.

Then she remembered that the Nishikino family owned a hospital in Akihabara and put two and two together. She ran out, and thankfully wasn't pursued. Geez, Nabiki, whatever you did to try to scare them did way too good a job. They're completely paranoid! She started walking down the streets. Now, how am I going to get past them? Windows? No, that's what Ranma would do. Back door? No, they'll be watching that. Then she remembered. Wait, I'm in Akihabara.

An hour's shopping and a very tense conversation with a cosplay shop clerk later, Akane was back at the hospital with sunglasses, a long brown wig, and a surgical mask. As disguises went it wasn't even in the top 100 for sophistication, but it got her as far as the front desk and a bored-looking receptionist doing a sudoku puzzle. "Excuse me, I'm here to see Kuno Kodachi, please."

"SECURITY! POLICE! HAAAAALP!"

Akane's jaw dropped behind the mask. "Wh-what's gotten into everybody in thi - erk!" This time the police had arrived in seconds, grabbing her by the arms. She could easily kill both men if she wanted, but it wasn't worth the inevitable price, so she let herself be taken to the front entrance before dusting herself off. "Seriously, what's going on?"

One of the officers pulled out a piece of paper. "Miss Tendo. This is your official warning. You, your relations save for your eldest sister, your associates, and any others acting on your behalf are officially unwelcome on all property owned by the Nishikino family. If you return a third time, you will be arrested for trespassing" The restraining order was placed into her hands. "Also, I am told that there is an inquiry open for your sister Nabiki. If you would be so kind as to inform her the police are looking for her, that would be appreciated."

By the end of the speech, Akane was trying to figure out why the world was spinning. "Wha-why so extreme? This is ridiculous."

The officer snorted. "I don't know what you think you're trying to accomplish here, but you're wasting your time anyway. Kuno's with the psychiatrist. She barely managed to give a half-coherent statement when she was brought in, only got out that she was claiming it was her fault, then she wakes up a total amnesiac. The psych boys are working on her now, but they don't think they'll get
anything." He spat. "So get outta here and go back to Nerima. And don't forget what I said about your sister."

Honoka was breathing hard. Eri had managed to do a bang-up cut and paste job, taking familiar motions from each of their current sets and putting them together in a way that, when Eri did it, looked smooth and completely natural. Anything remotely complex was left to its' own routine, and they could know what to do simply by remembering the complete program for the upcoming concert. Pure genius. With thi - "Cut, cut…” Eri said with a sigh. "Girls, take five. Honoka, Nico, over here."
The pair sighed, and accompanied Eri to look at the footage.

It was a disaster. The dance moves were as basic as they came, but even so it would take days to get them all in sync - it always did, and they just didn't have even that much time. "I'm sorry." Eri said. "This is the absolute best I can do, but it's like I told you. At our pace right now, I think we can get this down in five days if nothing else goes wrong."

Honoka closed her eyes. "And we're racing Tendo now. She's known Ranma for a year. She'll figure out where he went sooner or later, and I bet her dad will buy train tickets anywhere if it gets Ranma back. Five days is five days we don't have."

Eri looked it over again. "...we can try cutting down even further, but…”

Nico shook her head. "No. Cut everything." Both of them looked at her. "We'll do the song itself in the recording booth. Eri, did you keep our other practice footage?" Eri nodded hesitantly. "Okay. Did we do anything else before I joined? PV footage, that kind of thing?"

Honoka shook her head. "I think there was some talk about it, but...that would have been on Ranma."

Nico looked across the room. "Maki, did Ranma leave his laptop behind?"

"As a matter of fact…” Maki said, digging through her pack. "I brought it, but I don't know the password."

Honoka grinned. "I do." She opened it and quickly typed in. "I'll have to yell at him about security later." She scanned down the files. "Hey, yeah, there's some videos here with just dates on them…”

The next morning, Akane stretched and woke up. "Morning Shampoo…” she mumbled, before she remembered - with the test passed, the Amazon likely wasn't around to provide bodyguard duty.

"Is good morning, Akane," the Amazon girl mumbled sleepily.

Akane tried to hide her astonishment. "Uhm...you know, you didn't have to sleep on the floor last night."

Shampoo blinked. "Oh...I forget. Still, we need to study for school." She stood up. "I'll go make breakfast. Kasumi will be sleeping in."

"...again?" Akane asked. "She's been kind of out of it lately."

Shampoo just shrugged. "Is thanks for letting me stay here last night," she said by way of explanation. "You is finding Ranma today, yes?"

Akane sighed. "I wish. Kodachi's a dead end. Apparently she finally cracked in two, claims she can't
remember anything."

Shampoo thought for a few moments. "Could be some things, but..." she took another breath, forcing herself into proper speech. "Akane, I just want to say that we didn't bring any more of the Formula 411. There are other magics to change people's memories but most of them are even more difficult. And I don't think we have any from the Amazon's stores, but you'd have to ask Great Grandmother."

"...yeah," Akane said. "Don't know why but I believe you." She sighed. "Ranma, where did you go?"

Shampoo shrugged. "Challenge is still going on, yes? Test?" Akane's jaw dropped. "Dancing girls only need to win contest. Ranma not need to be there. So Ranma somewhere he can watch."

"...that's true, but..." Akane sighed. "The Internet's everywhere." Shampoo stared at her levelly. "...wait, you mean?"

Shampoo nodded. "Ranma is close enough to get back here if he needs to."

Akane nodded, and went online to look at a map. "This'll probably take all day."

Ranma had been half hoping that Chika wouldn't show up, but he was surprised when the girl was already waiting for him at dawn. "Well, if you think I'm impressed...you got another think coming, missy!" He shouted. "Out there you don't get points just for showing up, but you know that already." Chika started at the sudden harshness of Ranma's tone. "You want me to be your Sensei, for real, show me you're worth the time. I could be eating breakfast this morning, but that ain't fair since if you made that mistake you're gonna be puking it up!"

"Huh?"

Ranma stopped, and suddenly broke out into a grin. "Was that what you were expectin'? Nah, don't think that's quite how you wanna go with this. But I wasn't lying about puking up your breakfast. That's how much work I'm expecting from you, but by the end of the week, I promise as long as you don't care about your modesty you're gonna have the shortest and most interesting trip to school in the mornings out of any of your classmates."

Chika blinked several times in rapid succession. "Wait, what? I wanted you to show me how you do all that nifty stuff like jumping up onto poles! I know it's not just tricks!"

"Actually, it is," Ranma said. "That's just side effects. Did You explain ki to you?" A nod. "Okay, so, in a very real way what I do is 'just a trick.' There's some practical applications to the Art, but it's mostly a side effect for what we're really going for. And no, even if you started practicing martial arts you couldn't develop enough extra ki in time for the next tournament to do you any good. So instead, we're going to scale it down. You won't be jumping twenty feet in the air, but in a way what I can teach you is even better."

"Huh?" Chika took a deep breath. "Okay, so what are we going for?"

"It's really simple, but my school never starts with the explanation." Ranma nodded. "You can address me as sensei, or not. We're not in a dojo, so I don't care. But we are learning, starting now. So, your first task is to get your butt into the school yard as fast as you can."

Chika blinked. "Wait, what?" But Ranma had already taken off, at a pace she could match. Reading the room, she started sprinting after him until she had caught up. "Okay, so, basic conditioning? But I
can do that on my own, why do I need you?" Ranma smirked, then calmly turned left and ran down an alleyway. At the far end was a dumpster and a wall. She stopped. "But I can't do tha -"

Ranma kicked off of the wall, running across the top of the closed dumpster before doing a perfect side vault over the wall. Chika swallowed. "Oh, and this is a race!" Ranma's voice called back.

"WHAT?!" Chika ran down the alleyway, but there was no obvious way over the wall aside from the one Ranma took, and that....well, she couldn't do that. She wasn't superhuman. Instead she ran around, only to see Ranma well down the road leading up the hill from the school. Hah. He'll be late if he takes that road, he has to go all the way around. She took off, the right way, and stuck her tongue out at him when he was looking at her, passing by a tree with a long branch hanging out over the gap between the road and the school's roof. Amazingly, he turned, and jumped out to grab the branch, and did an incredibly smooth swing and release to land on the roof, before disappearing towards the door.

Chika put on speed, trying to reach the front gate before Ranma did, but she ended up putting her hand on it only to see him already standing there, calmly, not even out of breath. "You...you cheated."

"Did I?" Ranma said. "I only told you to get to the school as fast as you could. I didn't do anything you can't. I was even very careful to match your running speed." Chika made an indignant noise. "Now, what happened?"

"I...I..." Chika was still panting. "You...I..."

"Take your time."

Chika slowly realized that Ranma was right. She'd always thought about trying that jump, but one slip and she'd drop about 30 meters to the ground. Technically she could make it any time she wanted, it was just so dangerous the heart attacks she'd give the teachers wouldn't be worth it. And as for the wall...it was so simple, but when he'd told her it was a race she'd thought she had to run. "So...wait..."

"Best part of Anything Goes Martial Arts, Chika..." Ranma grinned as he spoke "Is that the only thing you need to do to pass the first lesson is tell me what the lesson is."

"You want to teach me how to get around more easily?" Chika asked.

Ranma seemed to think. "You could see it that way, but think deeper." He passed over a bottle of water, which Chika took and drank down gratefully. "Okay, so, me and my old man used to do a thing where we'd steal food every day from a food cart. I'm not proud of it, especially now, but at the time if I didn't take it I didn't eat, so...well, anyway, because of the foundation of that, along with some specific training later, I can manipulate objects in a fire without getting burnt. So, if you take that and apply it to what we just did..."

"...it's not about the speed, it's...." And then she grinned. The whole of Uchiura, Awashima, even Numazu suddenly revealed themselves to her in a new light. "Everything can be gymnastics practice!"

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*I can't believe we're doing this.* Eri had decided, against her better judgment, to break the school rules, open up the computer lab, and set up sleeping bags. From there, they had turned Project Find Ranma (*It really needs a better name*, Eri thought) into an impromptu working sleepover.

The problem was the scope. Ranma hadn't bothered with any kind of consistent naming scheme, and
the files were only sorted by day. They had also been largely taken from his own phone camera, although they also mixed in rehearsal video from the drones and even stolen security footage from Kandamiyoujin.

So she had everyone going through their share of the vids, looking for the material they needed. It looked like a straightforward process until she came on one video in particular. It was a strange one, of the school theater dressing room. She nearly cried out, but then she realized that, even if Ranma had been sneaking in there, the angle of the shot had been very carefully picked so only the makeup table could be seen, and nobody was changing near it. She didn't have the volume up, since the music would be playing over whatever they picked anyway, but she could tell anyway it was a good-natured argument between Honoka and Umi, as evidenced by the later's shouting and waving of arms. "Nico, can you come here a second?"

It only took a glance for Nico to come to her decision. "Okay everyone. If you see anything that's not dance practice, send it over to me and Honoka. I don't think we can use this one because of the location, but if Ranma could get that shot, he can get just about anything. With any luck, I can piece something together by the afternoon, and publish by sundown."

It didn't take long for the clips to start rolling in. Ranma, it seemed, could be everywhere if the situation was deemed important enough. Honoka conceded, after some debate, to use of a pic of her sneaking a sweet bread. Eri working on student council paperwork while Nozomi kept her entertained with a card reading. Everyone had double-checked the date stamp and realized it came before Eri had joined, but no one wanted to ask too many questions. Rin mussing up Hanayo's hair, the later grinning affectionately up at her friend got a chorus of 'awws' and was an instant hit. Kotori fitting Maki for her dress. Umi, 'alone' in the archery yard practicing. Nico herself lecturing the group about the history of idols one day after practice, pointing to various DVDs and LDs on the shelves.

After almost an hour of this, Nico yelped. "Oh...oh wow."

"What?" Honoka was sitting over, and leaned around to get a better look at Nico's screen. "...oh..." She gasped in. "It's...it's beautiful." She shook her head. "Throw it out. That's too much."

"Huh?" Nico looked at her. "Don't you like it?"

Honoka nodded. "I love it, but...it's just..."

"Maki, get over here." Nico said. The redhead stepped back from her review of Nozomi and Eri crashing into each other, possibly not entirely accidentally on Nozomi's part, to take a look.

The video in question was of Maki. Alone in the school's music room, seated at the piano. She had the sheet music in front of her, but she was obviously playing freely, letting her hands do what they would. Her eyes were closed, a serene smile on her face as a spring breeze flowed through the open windows, brushing her hair around.

"What's wrong with it?"

Nico and Honoka looked at each other. "Okay, I see what you mean." Nico finally said to Honoka. "It's...it's worse than putting her out there naked."

"Hey!" Maki stomped her foot. "I'm right here, you know."

Honoka nodded. "I know. And...I...look again, please." Maki did, really taking the time to study it. She could almost hear the notes, despite the lack of audio. The slight frustration underneath the calm beauty, waiting to explode out. The way she moved, graceful and stylish and completely open. It
was so...different...from how she usually was. It was...it was a glimpse at the 'real' Nishikino Maki, one she normally didn't let anyone, not even Ranma or Honoka, see.

Maki closed her eyes, turned away from it, completely red in the face. For almost thirty seconds, she said nothing, then, finally, "Put it in. Please."

"Huh?" "Eh?"

Maki looked at the older girls. "Before I change my mind. I...I want Ranma back more than I want this kept out of the public. I'd rather actually pose nude than let her go without seeing this first."

Nico tilted her head. "You know, we could do an artistic shoot..." Everyone stared at her. "Well, we're pulling out all the stops here anyway. If you want to do it, now's the time."

There was a brief moment of consideration before everyone got back to work without answering.

"Hey, this is fun!" Chika was running along a road barrier, leaping between the posts smoothly. Ranma was just ahead of her, with the road to one side, normally too narrow to pass without taking the bus but now an option, and the open ocean just to the left with only a thin streamer of glass-covered beach to land on if you wanted to stay mostly dry. Ranma had recommended to opt for the water, and Chika didn't argue. "Now I don't need as much money to go visit Kanan!"

"Who?" Ranma asked.

Chika beamed. "She's a third year. She lives out at the dive shop on the island."

Ranma smirked. "Wanna go see her now? And did you bring your swimsuit?"

Chika's eyes widened. "Ranma, that's not safe! There's boats everywhere and it's against the rules!"

Ranma chuckled. "Of course it is. But figuring out if you can is good practice." They reached the end of the road markers and found themselves at the pier leading out to the island. With a quick bit of scrabbling on Chika's part and no effort on Ranma's, they were on the roof of a maintenance building looking out. The island and its' resort were about a quarter of a kilometer away, creating a narrow channel between it and the mainland. Boats gently floated around, mostly sailing vessels. "Okay, so, you see the boats going that way. Those are the main ferries, and you don't want to cross in front of them, that's obvious." He gestured. "Currents are going to push through there at about 10 knots. How fast can you swim?"

"I can swim the pool at school in about 45 seconds one way," Chika replied.

"Okay, so it'll take you about six minutes if you swim straight there..."

"Which I can't because of the ferries," Chika reminded him.

Ranma gave her a gentle nudge. "So take all that and tell me what you do about it."

Chika blinked. "Wait, if the water's pushing me I don't need to swim straight at the island, right?"

"Exactly, and if there's a dive shop there's a place waiting for you to climb out safely." Ranma said.

Chika grinned. "There's a fishing pier at the far end of the road. If we start out from there I can make it around the marina in twenty minutes or so."

"Good job!" Ranma said. "Shows the right way of thinking." He leaped down and ran across the
parking lot, Chika not far behind. Then he jumped over the wall, not noticing that the tide had come in until the water splashed up over her shins. "...oops."

Chika caught up, and her eyes went wide with wonder. For a moment, Ranma thought she was in serious trouble again, which was proven mostly correct when Chika was next to her, staring up into her eyes. "Oh, oh wow! Is this that ki thing again? Or can you teach me to do it? I wanna turn into a guy. Or does it just turn you into a cute woman, that would work too. I'm so jealous!"

Ranma blinked. "...you're one of a kind, kid. But no, it's a Chinese curse. And it kinda sucks because you can't actually control it. Cold water for girl, hot for boy."

"Why didn't you say anything?" Chika asked.

Ranma shrugged. "I...actually sorta forgot."

"You...forgot you turn into a girl?" Chika asked incredulously.

Ranma shook her head. "No, I forgot it's important."

Chika needed a second on that one. "...no, you're right. It's not. C'mon, may as well introduce you to Kanan." She took a few steps herself then blushed. "Uhm....I don't actually have my swimsuit."

Soun looked over Akane's maps and itinerary. "You wish to go to Numazu on a trip, and so suddenly?" He looked grave. "I'm certain you do not know what you are asking."

"What?" Akane looked shocked. "I'm sure Ranma's there."

Soun nodded. "Yes. This is good work, and I believe you are right. But Akane, you obviously don't grasp the implications of recent events."

"Huh?"

Soun looked at her gravely. "You are aware our sole sources of income are some investments and the quarterly payment from my work on the Town Council, yes?" Akane nodded. "And are you aware that the police have been making inquiries about Nabiki?"

"What?! I mean, yeah, I knew they were asking - "

Soun slammed his hand down on the table. "Akane! Did you know anything about this?" When Akane didn't answer, Soun nodded. "If you did, I expect you to tell me. It will be difficult, but I have convinced the local police to lose the paperwork for your sister's arrest."

"Arrest!? Nabiki?!" Akane felt her heart stop for a moment. "On what charges?"

"Conspiracy to commit murder, blackmail, and all the various charges associated with her illegal gambling rings," Soun said. "They've known about her for some time, but my position with the city convinced them that...well, that there were more important cases to pursue." Akane felt herself going pale. "Unfortunately, I have no real influence in Chiyoda, and they are now requesting Nabiki be charged."

"No...no this can't be happening!" Akane recoiled. How can it all be falling apart like this?

Soun smiled grimly. "You do not need to worry about Nabiki. I have made arrangements... but the chairman has concluded that, while Nabiki certainly did nothing wrong he cannot continue to employ a member of her family while this scandal is ongoing. I'll be paid through the end of the
month, and a position may open by the end of the year if all of this dies down."

"...I see. I'm sorry, Daddy." Akane said.

Soun nodded. "I see you understand. An inn, or even a business hotel, is simply beyond our current
means. I can't even give you a budget for the shinkansen. You would have to take the local trains,
and to return well after midnight every evening of your search. And all of Izu? There are less than
three weeks until school begins again, and with this cloud over our family I can't allow you to miss
any."

"I'll sleep in temples." Akane declared. "I'll pack for the road. If Ranma could handle it for ten years,
I can manage for three weeks. If it takes that long. I've got a pretty good idea of where he went this
time."

Soun hesitated. The very thought of his daughter, out there in the wilderness, was enough to make
him anxious...but Ranma was now the only one who could fix this. If he withdrew his initial
testimony, the Chiyoda prefectural police would have no choice but to drop their complaint. Surely,
as soon as he saw how badly this affects his fiance he'd be willing to...bend the truth a little. "Very
well."

__________________________________________________________

Up in her room, Nabiki let out a long stream of profanity under her breath as she finished listening in
on the conversation. *Figures Daddy wouldn't even have the guts to tell me the cops want my ass.* She
went over to the loose floorboard next to her dresser, the one she was sure no one knew about where
she kept her back savings. Without even gambling on the various minor challenges that went on in
Nerima without Ranma, she had no extra income source to finance DoCo. The singles they'd sold
online were doing well enough for that, but not well enough to skim off excessively. And now
Akane was going off to the hinterlands instead of working on the next one. *Dammit! Even when I
win I somehow lose!*

__________________________________________________________

You could not believe her eyes. She had decided, after finishing her own summer homework, to go
out and check on how Chika's lessons with her new 'Sensei' were coming along. There were some
rumors about strange things happening that day, but what she did not expect was to see Chika
practically skipping along the roofs of Uchiura, lightly jumping from house to house like it wasn't ten
meters off the ground and one misstep would land her in the hospital. Even more surprisingly, when
she spotted You she waved. "Going down!" She shouted out to Ranma, whose place on the rooftops
was far less of a surprise.

You was about to ask what she meant, but Chika leaped from the roof. You screamed in terror, sure
that her best friend was about to plunge to her death.

Instead, Chika just shot out one hand to grab an electric pole and spun around it, kicking the side of
the building to slow the rest of her momentum down and rolling as she hit the ground. Up close, You
could see she was covered in dust and grime, her hands had several fresh cuts, and her hair was
starting to mat, but she was beaming. "Hey, You, what's up?"

Ranma landed on the ground beside her. "Come to see how things are going? Chika's a natural at
this.

"Wh-wha-what? What's going on? I - "

Chika laughed. "I need more practice time, and there's practice everywhere! It's awesome!"
You boggled at her. "But..but..what about school?"

"Shorts under the uniform."

You shook her head. "Uh...okay, but...yeah, okay." She smiled at Ranma. "I guess this works. I mean, if she breaks her neck I'll come after you, but I guess she was gonna find this out sooner or later." Chika gave her a quizzical look. "It's called 'Parkour,' I think. Maybe freerunning? It's a weird gaijin thing that I didn't tell you about because I knew you'd try it and get hurt, but I guess Ranma knows how to be safe about it."

Ranma shrugged. "Well, no, it ain't really safe but Chika wouldn'ta been happy with anything safe. Right now we're goin' around finding all the spots that are too dangerous without building up to it. After we do that, she doesn't really need me to help her out anymore, but I'll go ahead and spot some formal practices if she really wants to cut loose."

You just shook her head. "Well, thanks Mister, for helping out even though you didn't need to."

Chika got a mischievous grin. "Mister, you said...hehe."

Ranma hung his head. "Okay, okay, get it over with." Chika upended their water bottle over Ranma's head.

You fainted.

"This is a whole lot easier without having to worry about audio syncing," Nico noted. It was a couple of hours to sunset. "Call up Tsubasa?"

Honoka nodded. "She said she wished she could help, but the only thing she can risk doing is telling Anju and Erena and letting them make the call. We're on our own on this one, probably."

"Okay." Nico said. "Anyone have any last-minute additions they want to make? Once it's out we can't take it back." No one said anything, so Nico pushed the button, the mouse's click seeming far louder than it should. "By tomorrow we're going to lose half our fans, but hopefully it still spreads. If Ranma's paying attention to Love Live at all, he'll see it at some point."

You found yourself waking up in Chika's room, groaning and cracking one eye open to see that, yes, Ranma was still red-headed and busty. "...good night." About a minute later, at least by her internal chronometer, she cracked an eye open again. Still redhead. Still curvy. Deciding it wasn't going to change, she sat up. "What happened?"

"Chinese curse, don't worry about it." Chika said. "Anyway, Ranma was just saying he was out here because of a School Idol thing."

Ranma sighed. "It's complicated, but yeah. Things got....well, ridiculous, and I decided to take some of the heat off my group by coming out here. Probably gotta move on in a few days, though. Wasn't planning on getting attached."

"Aww." Chika threw a towel at her laundry basket. "But we were just getting to be friends."

Ranma smirked. "Yeah, well, last I checked my friends end up getting attacked by psychos. Not sure how much more of that I can take."

You rubbed her head. "So it's all true, then. Everything they say about you super martial artists?"
Ranma was actually caught off guard. "Honestly, no. Most of us aren't that bad, it's just my old man decided I needed to be up against the worst of the worst of the crazy and it never goddamn stops."

Chika nodded. "Well, if you like and the farm doesn't need you more, we can probably find some heavy lifting tasks for you for a few days here. You could stay in a room in the back on a futon, anyway." She pulled open her laptop. "Don't mind me, just want to check on your group."

Ranma shrugged. "Thanks." He left which part of that he was thanking her for unclear for a moment, then sighed. "I guess I got paid well enough. The other guys are kinda mad about it, so yeah, I guess I can help out around here instead."

"Great." Chika grinned. "I'll go ask my mom."

They had been prepared for no result. That would make sense - a group already being dragged down by minor scandal making a plea to the social networks being ignored. Nico had honestly expected that, deep down. She hadn't said it out loud to anyone, letting them trust her judgement, because she knew that any victory in Love Live without Ranma…well, it wouldn't have sit right with her. That had been a scary thought.

The idea of an email coming in revealing exactly where Ranma had gotten off to had seemed like the next most likely outcome. Thus, when their phones pinged with the group's shared address, everyone was shocked when Hanayo was fastest to open her desktop up, only to shriek and drop it. "Ohnononononono! They've got him!"

Nico blinked, and opened up her own copy with a few more steps. It read 'I have Miss Saotome. If you want her alive, send one billion yen in the cryptocurrency of your choice to XXXXXXX. ' It took Nico's brain a second to catch up to the fact that that couldn't possibly be a real email address. There was also a badly photoshopped image of a woman, tied to a chair, combined with Ranma's face. "Kayochi, calm down. It's a prank."

There was another ping. Eri got it this time, and sighed at a similarly edited photo of "Ranma" in a bikini on a beach resort. Not that that was impossible, just highly improbable. The thing that made it impossible was the way the woman in the original photograph was being attended to by two gentlemen who, to put it lightly, were in very good shape and little else.

Honoka looked up from her own phone with a grin, even as more notification sounds played. "On the bright side, if we're getting emails it means people are watching the video!"

Umi nodded. "Uhm, okay, here's one we actually need to take seriously," she said. "Looks like someone claiming to have seen him in Kochi. Not impossible if he snuck on the right plane."

Eri sighed. "Okay, dance practice over. Back to the computer room."

Ranma groaned. Of course 'helping out' at the inn would require her to be a girl, in a nice kimono. At least it only took her one trip to retrieve all the bedding for washing. Even worse, it was apparently Chika's day off so she was busy using the 'net to listen to Love Live. Not that Ranma didn't like the music - she'd have taken off months ago if it hadn't grown on her - but it was a bit of a painful reminder. Still, nothing for it but to remind her the guests were coming back soon. When they would be. Which wasn't for a few hours.

"Hello?! I need a room for the night." Oh no. "I can do some chores to pay for it if there's spare rooms." Ranma cursed. I'd better get down there - if she tries to cook it'd be on me for letting Chika's
customers get poisoned. She very carefully made her way down the stairs, pulling the kimono tighter to cover her regular outfit underneath.

"...Ranma?" Akane half-asked, half-said. Then, suddenly, before Ranma knew it, Akane was hugging her. "Oh Ranma! I was so scared I wouldn't find you!"

Ranma did her best to restrain her immediate, decidedly unhelpful response. "Akane, I left because I didn't want ta bring any more trouble. What can I tell ya to get you to go home, right now?"

"What?" Akane gasped in shock. This was not the reaction she had expected. "But... but I passed the training and everything!"

Ranma groaned, feeling a familiar frustration rise up. "Akane, Kotori got kidnapped. No, don't even try it," she said, sensing the anger even before it could get to Akane's face. "Kotori's a friend, okay? You know, one of those? You have at least two of them?"

"But...but..." This wasn't how this conversation went. "Ranma, tell me right here, right now, do you love me?"

She had expected Ranma to waver, to babble, and hesitate like he always did. Instead, Ranma, the girl, just gave a defeated sigh. "I don't know anymore."

"Because you're in love with Honoka now." Akane said, in a bitter tone that indicated it wasn't a question. "Don't even try that sister nonsense with me."

Ranma didn't. It wouldn't do any good now anyway. "It ain't even about that anymore, it's...dammit, Akane, everyone's getting hurt by all this bullshit and I'm sick of it. And now it's spilling over onto people without special talents who genuinely wanted to help."

"Well, maybe if you hadn't brought them into it." Akane muttered angrily. "You had a fiance. Two. You shouldn't be making friends with random girls."

"Ra-Ra-RANMA!" A third voice shouted. "You better see this! Meet me in the living room!"

Akane glared at him. Ranma sighed. "She's thirteen. I just showed her some light terrain hopping tricks because she was getting in the way at work, all right?"

"...I guess...Even you wouldn't be that depraved." Ranma winced at the remark but said nothing, just leading the way to the living room.

Akane felt her stomach clench at the tinny sound of the phone the girl named Chika was playing. No, no, that's the song they were practicing, what could be so important that a stranger would think Ranma needed to hear it right away?!

Chika fiddled with the phone to reset it, then did some more fiddling with the TV until Honoka, wearing her school uniform, appeared on the TV. "Akane, this is Chika. Chika, this is...this is Akane," Ranma explained, giving Akane a glare that actually chilled her enough to prevent being called out on not mentioning the fiance part.

I don't think I like this new Ranma.

Chika nodded. "Yeah, so...uhm, this just hit the trending list. You are Saotome Ranma, right?"

Ranma blinked, but realized she had never actually introduced herself by her full name, so gave a quick affirming noise as a reply. "Yeah, someone really wanted you to see this. It's getting, like, all the upvotes." She tapped on the phone.
Honoka began speaking. "Hello, everyone. I...we..." She stopped with a little choke. "I'm sorry, this isn't easy. It's not really your usual PV either. You see, after everyone supported us for the past few months, we've been so happy to be bringing you the best music we could. That we're even in the running for the Love Live competition is a miracle.

"But you see..." She said with a slight sniffle. "Now we need your help. You see, behind everyone, there was a friend of ours you didn't see. She doesn't like to perform, but she's been behind the camera every step of the way. She helped our practices, scouted members, arranged for our concerts, got us the favors that let us use our equipment. Almost all of it might have been impossible without her. But...it's more than that..." Honoka nearly broke down crying, and she stepped back.

Eri moved forward. "I'm sorry about her," the blonde explained. "This has hit all of us pretty hard. If you live in Tokyo, you probably heard about the 'accident' that Kotori had. Due to circumstances surrounding that incident, our...our Producer decided she needed to leave us unexpectedly."

The camera turned on Maki, who jumped, but grumbled a bit. "That was stupid, childish, and immature." Someone, probably Nozomi, reached out to flick her ear. "Hey, it's the truth."

The camera slowly panned to show the party who had done it was, indeed, Nozomi. "Well, true or not..." She coughed. "Anyway, bluntness aside, she's right. We're strongest when we're together. This doesn't solve anything."

Umi was next, gently holding up Kotori. "Everyone who sees this message, and doesn't just skip straight to the song...please." She made a gesture, and a picture of Ranma's girl form appeared next to her head. "If you have seen this person in the last few days, show them this video."

Kotori smiled. "Ranma....I just want you to know. I do not blame you for what happened. You know who I blame."

Honoka was in the shot again. "To everyone else who hears this message and helps us...Thank you. From the bottom of my heart. To Ranma...please, hear us one more time. Hear me...and come home. This...is Yuujo no Change. Legal copyrights are at the end of the video, but we don't own this one."

Akane lurched forward suddenly, her finger hitting the blue light in front of the TV. "Turn it off! Turn It Off!"

"Akane!?" Ranma shouted as Chika fumbled for the pause. "What the Hell's gotten into you?"

"I don't want to hear them sing MY SONG!" Akane shrieked. Then she immediately realized that she'd said the wrong thing. Ranma started to breathe heavily, obviously using every bit of her self-control to not immediately attack her.

Chika quietly stood up and stood between Akane and Ranma, looking at the other with half-lidded eyes. "Please, not in my house."

Ranma took another deep breath. "Right. Thanks Chika."

"Any time, Sensei." Chika grinned in a somewhat impudent manner.

Ranma noted the emphasis on the word with a smile and ruffled her hair, before looking at Akane. "That is not, nor was it ever, your song. I'm sure Nabiki never told you where it actually came from, and she maybe even pulled some trick so you don't realize, but you and I both know you can't compose to save your life. Kasumi been making new songs for you? Wait, don't answer that, there's no answer where you look good. Then accept that you've got no idea where that music came from.
and it's not 'yours'.

"In the name of the Kami, Buddha, and everyone else who's been having a laugh at my expense for the past twelve years...Akane, this has always been your problem," Ranma said, her control slipping. Akane glared at Ranma, and looked like she was about to wind up to really pound her fiance when Chika moved to intercept again. "Thanks, but I wouldn't do that," she said more gently, almost as an aside, before turning back to Akane. "Let me tell you something. Maki. I'm sure you think of her as the redhead. I'm living in her house, separate rooms. How many hours a day do you think she spends on music practice, not including rehearsal?"

Akane frowned. She was sure this was related back to her martial arts practice somehow. "Uh...two, maybe three?"

"Three if she's feeling lazy or stressed, which is maybe once a week." Ranma ignored the slump in his analysis, figuring that just because she wasn't writing didn't mean she wasn't trying. Heck, maybe that had been part of the problem, since she'd managed most of an album's worth in a couple of days once she'd recovered. "Most days it's five or so, and I understand before Mu's she went in for eight every single day. That's more than I practice martial arts, and that's not even counting cram school. She lives on six hours a day sleep and skips meals to compose if someone doesn't remind her to eat right. SHE has the right to say a song she's performing is 'hers'. You ain't earned that, you don't put in the time."

Akane swallowed. "But by that logic, this song's not theirs either. They obviously put it together in the past day."

Ranma shook his head. "Watch and learn. Or don't. I don't give a damn right now."

Akane felt her heart drop. Chika looked at Ranma quizzically, then started the video again.

Honoka stepped back forward, gently wiping off her tears when the upbeat music started. When she opened her mouth, though, she was fully into it, singing the intro as a solo. "So don't feel down. Hey! Are you listening?" Everyone else joined in for the last line. "Our friendship won't change, It'll be fine!"

Akane swallowed, and instantly understood what Ranma had been getting at. She had worked at the song, thought she could sing it pretty well, and it had sold well as part of the new DoCo's first album. But in just a day of rehearsal, Honoka had completely mastered the song and had even found a way to use it to convey...something. Something she couldn't possibly have been feeling when the song had been written, before Ranma ran away.

"Ranma..." Akane's voice cracked. "You know I've missed you too, these months you've been away..."

Ranma didn't even acknowledge her when Maki and Hanayo stepped forward. "I understand there are things you love." Maki's voice didn't quite hitch, but the changed lyric seemed outright painful to her, an acknowledgement that there was a distance between them that would be hard to breach.

Hanayo's continuation was considerably less strained, almost...curious. "I understand that it's something wonderful so..."

Then they sang together. "I hope no matter what you definitely won't let it go!" Ranma felt a slight punch in the gut.

"They don't!" Akane whispered harshly. "They can't possibly understand you..."
Chika was watching the proceedings with awe. While Ranma was largely ignoring Akane in favor of listening to the message, to her it seemed like Akane was somehow managing to have an active argument with the recording. An argument she seemed destined to lose if Eri's 'responding' line was any indication. "You know because you've lost things before." Nico and Nozomi joined in for the rest of the section, with Nozomi putting a hand on her girlfriend's shoulder to squeeze it as they both sang "I understand it's precious but, Another chance will come down to you in time."

Akane shook her head. "Ranma, there are no more chances! You have to honor your family obligations." That got little more than a snort of irritation.

That, at least, was sufficient to break the weird spell that the moment had seemed to weave as Kotori added her voice. "Sadness resembles a cold, How about you rest?" Ranma seemed to sigh.

"'Take care of yourself' Soon you'll feel better" Umi added, a pure invitation to put the issues behind them. Akane stared, as if the idea that anyone could just...forget about what had happened to Ranma, even for a time, was absurd. But she couldn't do anything but repeat what she had said, and that wouldn't work. So she had no choice but to sit and let those girls all raise their voices together in one final call.

"So don't feel down/
Hey...Are you listening?/
Our friendship won't change, Come here/
Always being earnest is something we share/
I think we'll be together forever/
Yeah! It'll be all right!"

No one said anything as the last notes faded, but then Honoka, seemingly spontaneously, added in a line from a different song, with no accompaniment at all. "'Please remember me,' I murmured/ As the stars shined brightly through the night." She smiled, looking directly at the audience. "Please, Ranma, come home."

No one said anything as the credits rolled. As promised, the copyright was given properly, but even Chika realized something was up. "...that song was written for your friends, wasn't it?" she asked.

"NO!" Akane screamed. "THAT WAS MINE! MINE!" Ranma gathered her ki and prepared for a fight, but calmed when he felt the air cool. Whatever else, the Soul of Ice seemed to be working well enough to keep Akane from having a total meltdown again. "I'm sorry...but Ranma...please, just listen to me."

Ranma sighed. "That's a two way street. Tell me, why are you gonna start listening ta me now?"

"Please, whatever, I promise..." Akane whimpered, somehow knowing it wouldn't do any good. If I'd been just a few hours faster, maybe... "Please...just...come to the dojo when you're done here before you go back." She ran out of the inn without waiting for the answer.

Ranma sighed. "Bedclothes are in the wash, anyway," she said, pulling off her kimono to Chika's yelp and slightly interested stare before she realized Ranma was still clothed. "Mind if I take a break? I wanna see how this vid's doing."

"Yeah, sure." Chika said, passing the phone over. "Will you still be staying the night?"
Ranma chuckled. "'Never turn down a free meal' is the first rule of living as a traveling martial artist. Sure, it ain't exactly free but…"

While Ranma viewed the video, Chika snuck out to the inn's computer. It only took her two tries to remember the password, and then she checked on the Love Live page to get the email she was looking for. Then she sent off a quick message. *Ranma's staying at our family's inn. I think he's planning to head back tomorrow, but I'm not sure.*

Two seconds later, she got a one-word reply. *Proof?* She blinked, but then another reply came in from the same account. *Sorry about Nico. She's been anxious all day and we've had a lot of false positives. But we really do need either a picture or some proof.*

Chika thought about it, then realized Ranma still had her phone casting to the TV. But another second got her the appropriate answer. *His full name is Saotome Ranma. He changes from a boy to a girl with hot and cold water, and he's really nice and sweet when he wants to be. He's also a crazy teacher, but really good. And he's got a fiance named Akane, no idea on the last name.*

There was a much longer pause, as apparently there was some debate going on. Finally, another reply came in. *It's possible you could have gotten that online, it read. We're almost convinced, but there's a couple of holdouts. Tell us something you would have to have met Ranma recently to know.*

Chika frowned. *He didn't seem to think the curse was a big deal, when he thought about it.*

That got an almost immediate reply. *Please reserve one room for tonight. Maki already sent you the money. We'll be out on the Shinkansen.*

Honoka stood out in front of the inn - the only one in the small village that Ranma had somehow found. It was a traditional building, with wooden beams and paper walls all around, designed not so much to survive a typhoon as to be rebuilt in a few hours. But the electric lights in the lanterns broke any illusion of it being lost in time, and thus, it was simply the one spot of luxury in the otherwise sleepy town. The height of summer would normally keep even a place like this packed, so Honoka was glad they had a connection with the owning family or it would be a very long walk back to Numazu.

Of course, there might be a small issue. "So, this is where he got off to, huh?" Tsubasa said sardonically. "You know, I was picturing something like...mist-covered mountain temples maybe. Something out of a movie."

Maki shook her head. "Nah. Turns out for most of those you need advance notice."

Honoka hung her head. "No offense, guys, but why did I agree to let you come along again?"

"You needed someone with money to convince the innkeepers if their crazy daughter didn't." Maki said.

Tsubasa smirked. "And I'm not letting my girlfriend spend a night in an inn with her other girlfriend without turning it into a foursome."

Honoka made a face. "She's like my brother, you know."

"More for me!" Tsubasa grinned lecherously.

Honoka poked Tsubasa in a gentle rebuke. "We're not here for that anyway, and you know it." That
said, she walked up to the door and took her shoes off. "Excuse us. We have a reservation...at least, I hope we do."

A head with three ponytails hanging off one side popped up from behind the desk. "Oh, you're Hono...ka?" Chika shook her head out as if trying to clear it and slid behind the desk. "Uhm, yeah, let me go get Ranma. He can show you up. You'll have to hurry to get changed for dinner."

"Uh, we didn't bri - " Honoka started to say, only for Chika to call back something about yukata in the room. "...did you see what kind of shape she's in? I'm amazed she's alive."

Maki tilted her head. "Didn't seem too bad to me."

Tsubasa agreed with Honoka. "She's pretty banged up. Nothing serious but do you think Ranma was teaching her fighting?"

Honoka shook her head. "No, that's an actual rule. He can't teach real martial arts. But that just leave - "

Chika suddenly popped her head down from the roof overhanging the door behind them. "Ranma's in the bath!"

Everyone jumped in shock, Honoka actually pushing the other two girls behind her as she turned and standing protectively in front of them, meeting the other girl's eyes where she was hanging. "Uhh...can you not do that? We expect it from Ranma, but..."

"Oh, okay." Chika flipped down, casually holding her skirt up as she did so and somehow still managing to land on her feet. "Anyway, like I said, Ranma's getting changed so I'll show you up then go get him."

Ranma grumbled and pulled on her yukata. "Serve tea, she says...sure, I can do it but..." Then she opened the door and the 'excuse me' died on her lips. "Honoka!?" After that, she was suddenly being hugged and there were crying girls everywhere and Ranma felt her brain shutting down.

"Don't ever do that again!" Honoka screamed suddenly, the shift in mood putting Ranma even more off balance. "Ranma, we work together to solve problems! Don't try to do everything by yourself!"

Ranma swallowed. "Okay, okay, okay..." She sighed, but gently pushed back. "Honoka, I...look, it made sense at the time, and Akane did find me. I'm just surprised the whole damn circus wasn't on her heels."

"...so your plan was...what?" Maki asked. "Lure them all out here and then...?"

Tsubasa nodded. "More to the point, if you were wrong, the only person left protecting Honoka would be Umi. I understand she's good compared to anyone normal but what could she do against your fiancées on a real tear? Ranma, we need you close."

Ranma held up a hand. "These are all good points, but Chika - that's the kid - is kinda listening in. Can we not right now?"

"Aww." Chika said, flipping down from the roof into the room, narrowly missing the table. "Okay, so, you're Ranma's girlfriend."

Honoka laughed. "No, but since you just met me I guess I can forgive you for assuming."
Chika took this well, looking up at Honoka with suddenly shining eyes despite her still-dirty face. "Will you be my girlfriend then?" Honoka's jaw dropped at the suddenness of this request. "You're really pretty."

"Uhh..." Honoka swallowed, and looked between the other two bemused girls. "Uhm..." She started again. "Well, er...you see, Tsubasa and Maki are already my girlfriends -"

Chika beamed. "So I get three famous girlfriends! Works for me!"

Tsubasa couldn't take it any more, bursting out laughing. Maki started to snicker as well, and even Ranma couldn't restrain a snerk of her own. Honoka looked at the martial artist, betrayed, but Ranma chuckled. "Sorry, I know I shouldn't laugh but it's a lot funnier when people aren't gonna get hurt if you pick wrong..."

Honoka sighed and sank to her knees to put herself on Chika's eye level. "Takami...no, Chika...I'm flattered, but I don't think it would work to just jump into things." Chika nodded, looking disappointed, and Honoka just couldn't let it go. "How about you give me your contact info. We can chat, and maybe in a few years when you're a bit older..."

"Okay!"

There were advantages to having the principal's daughter in your school club. For one thing, paperwork for club activities tended to get mysteriously backdated as required - which seemed to get more true over a summer vacation, when the school was scheduled to close in the future, and there was serious work that should really fall to grown-ups to be done.

So when they got it resolved in time for those going to retrieve Ranma to get out to a remote inn on the Izu peninsula in time for dinner, the School Idol Research Club had the run of the school and nothing to do. "Hey, Nozomi," Umi finally said. "Can you set up the game you gave Maki? I could use some stress relief."

Eri raised one eyebrow.

Umi shrugged. "Well, it's better than tearing the school's training dummies apart. Father had to order in a whole bunch of special ones at home. Iron filings for sand." Rin and Kotori winced.

Nozomi shook her head. "Maybe for one person, but we'd need six copies for us all to play, and it's kind of a one person thing."

Umi sighed, but Eri just nodded. "I've got this one. Computer lab's still open."

The problem came twenty minutes later at an error screen. "I'm sorry," Nozomi said. "I'm not really any good at this stuff on my own. I had to look up a lot of English web sites to get it working, and I don't know what's wrong here. I think these school machines aren't good enough."

Nico groaned, grabbing her right wrist with her left hand and physically forcing herself to put her phone on the table and push it away from herself. "Does anyone want to watch a movie?"

"Do we have anything except your idol stuff?" Rin asked with a yawn.

Nico momentarily seemed to want to object, but then just grumbled. "I guess I'm not in the mood for that either."

"Wow, never thought I'd see the day Nico would pass up half a chance to make us watch from her
collection," Umi said.

All eyes turned to Eri. "Sorry, I don't have a key to the Cinema club's room, and anyway that's theirs." She shook her head. "And NicoNico's blocked. I'm surprised Nozomi's game downloaded. If we want to watch movies, we need to go out."

Umi stood up. "I'll go. I can get up to Akiba and back in five minutes, just need to agree on what to watch." Then she looked around at the various expressions. "Guys, what are we doing?"

Hanayo shook her head. "We just ruined our chances of getting into the first Love Live. I mean, we had to do it, but..."

Eri slowly took out her phone. "Okay. I'm going to look. It can't possibly be worse than what we're imagining, or the cops would already be outside. I'm just going to turn on my phone..." She thumbed the screen. "Open it up..." Pushing a few buttons on the smooth glass display. "Load the web site...."

Nozomi groaned. "Erichi, your eyes were closed the whole time."

"...heheheh..."

Rin sighed. "Fine, I'll look." She pulled out her phone, and before anyone could stop her, had it opened up. "NYAA!"

"...what the heck?" Honoka stared at the cast phone display.

Maki shook her head. "Dear kami...how..."

Tsubasa's jaw was on the floor. Ranma chuckled and gently pushed her mouth shut before laughing. "Nico thought this stunt would kill us? We're number one in the country right now."

Tsubasa shook her head. "Well, right now, yes. And I'm not just bragging about taking the lead back. You've got the spotlight, but if you don't capitalize on it you're gonna drop like a stone. Nico bought you a shot, despite all this. But you'd better bring your all to that end-of-summer concert you have advertised or it'll all be for nothing after all." She smirked. "But at least I get to say 'I told you so' to Erena and Anju, so this was a good day."

Honoka grinned. "There's just one problem....Chika!" This was answered with a loud thump from outside the door. "Seriously! There's no need to eavesdrop."

The middle schooler sheepishly poked her head in, before dragging a cart around. "Uhh...Mom said I couldn't eat with you."

Honoka chuckled. "Okay, okay, I'll go down there and tell her it's all right."

Chika beamed and scampered off. Ranma shook his head. "You know, you really shouldn't encourage her that much. She might try to sneak on the train with us at this rate. Actually, she might succeed. For a norm she's impressive."

"And whose fault is that?" Maki asked, poking Ranma's chest with her finger. "And you, Honoka..."

Honoka looked sheepish. "I know, I know, but seriously, she can't have the kind of pocket money for a casual Shinkansen ride you do. She's stuck out here. I feel kinda sorry for her."
Everyone looked a little down at that. Ranma shrugged. "Well, I did what I could. If she wants the big city life from her gymnastics, she gets to earn it from here. But I guess we can invite her and You up for the concert."

"Yeah," Honoka agreed. "Maki, do you mind?"

Maki thought about it. "She helped bring Ranma back to us. Yeah, I can swing that."

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After an evening of conversation and helping keep Chika contained ("Seriously, you can't hop between guest balcony - okay, you can but you really shouldn't! Practice on your side of the inn!"), there was one last surprise waiting. A knock announced the arrival of You, and another girl. She was a bit taller than the middle schoolers, with her hair back in a ponytail and light purple eyes. She was also wearing an expression of concern. "I heard Chika got it into her head she's some kind of superhero! What's going on?!"

You sighed. "Sorry. This is Matsura Kanan. She's our friend."

Ranma chuckled. "Nah. It's fine. We already had this conversation with Chika's mom."

There was a familiar mischievous light dancing in Tsubasa's eyes. "Trust me, Chika's far from the first girl who's had her life made more interesting by Ranma here."

Kanan immediately focused her attention on Ranma. "So you're to blame for this. I swear, if Chika gets hurt…"

"Chika, do you know what you can't do? I mean actually can't first, then shouldn't." Ranma asked. Chika immediately straightened up respectfully, in a parody of an overly-strict dojo's newest recruit. "I can jump about one meter in the air, and hold my body weight for about two minutes at one time. We tested my safe fall to three meters, and only minor stuff I can run off for another meter I think. I can also keep going for about twenty minutes at a time before I need to rest, depending on what I'm doing." She stopped, considering the other 'rules'. "I'm not supposed to run anywhere it would inconvenience or disturb other people, try any jump where failure would exceed my safe falling distance, or do anything around spiked fences." Another pause. "Oh, and you promised to personally kick my butt if you find out I used what you taught me today to hurt anyone." She finally took a deep breath. "Sensei."

Kanan and You blinked in surprise. Kanan blinked again, because that was a completely unexpected response. "...o-kay," she finally said. "I guess that's...wait, no, you're still hopping along rooftops all over town and into backyards! Chika, you've always been kinda crazy but this is seriously…"

You put her hand on Kanan's shoulder when Chika slumped. "I...I know it's weird, but you know how she's been...I...this is the first time I've seen her happy since that gymnastics tournament."

Honoka smiled. "Well, I can't say I get it, bu...wait, gymnastics tournament? You mean like, a school thing? Was St. Hebereke competing?" Chika nodded. "And...you were trying out for the national team or something?"

"It's complicated, but yeah," Chika said. "More like they were giving out invites to the top competitors. Hebereke students got a lot." The older girls all looked grim. "What's wrong?"

"I thought there was something funny going on." Ranma said, growling. "I've had some trouble with a high school girl from there. I'm guessin' Kodachi bribed the judges so she'd look better herself."
Honoka sighed. "It seems like something she'd do. Or maybe the school with everything else she gets up to. Even if they're not good enough to get accepted, just having that many applicants…"

"I'll kill her." Chika declared. You and Kanan, surprisingly, didn't look like they were going to argue.

Honoka shook her head. "It doesn't matter now. She...got injured. I don't think it'll be a problem again."

Ranma grinned. "See. At least next year you get a fair shot, yeah? Keep working and I'm sure you'll get in."

After the train ride in the morning, they stepped back out onto the Shinkansen platform at Tokyo Station. Everyone considered, then Ranma made a pass through the whole platform for Chika. When they failed to find her, they descended to the lobby area and out through the gate, to find the others waiting with their umbrellas in hand.

Ranma braced for a chewing out, but instead he was surrounded by girls hugging him tightly enough to cut off his air supply. "Okay, okay…" he said, chuckling to try to defuse the situation. "I won't do it again, you got your message through loud and clear." Then he paused. "I won't do it again unless I'm actually being chased down by a dragon or an oni or something. Like, right at the moment I'm running off, not a hypothetical one."

"Good," Eri said with a stern expression. "We've got a concert in less than a week."

"Right." Ranma nodded. "Okay, I've been working you girls pretty hard for awhile. Right now I think we're where we need to be conditioning wise, so we're cutting back to just rehearsals...also so everyone can get through their summer homework." A chorus of groans. "Hey, I don't like it any more than you do, but if Kotori's mom pulls us out all that was for nothin', so…"

Tsubasa grinned. "Okay, that's my cue to head home. Night kids!"

Everyone waited until she was gone. "So, we were going to do it on the roof, right?" Ranma frowned at the umbrellas. "What's the weather forecast say?"

Nico sighed. "Rain all week, but the auditorium's being cleaned."

"Oh." Ranma shrugged. "I'll make it work, somehow."

On the roof of a certain club of questionable repute in Roppongi, a certain cell phone lay where it had been for over a month, being recharged by the solar cell batteries it was connected to, taking advantage of larger solar panels both to get an ideal angle and to keep the phone itself sheltered from the frequent rains of Tokyo. But this time, as the clouds moved in, a stray gust of wind blew hard enough to knock the old phone off its' perch. The cable connecting the two devices snapped, as it was designed to do under stress, and the phone lay exposed and losing its' charge.
Chapter 22

Everyone was gathered in the club room. Outside, despite the fact that it was well after sunrise, there was so little light that Maki had to discreetly use her illusion magic to light her path to the school. Once she was there, she noted everyone else was already present - even Honoka - and everyone was changing into their backup outfits.

Noting that Ranma wasn't present, she just sighed. "Pass me mine?"

Kotori smiled, pulling out the plastic-bag-covered coat rack with Maki's name on it. "I never thought we'd be using these for this, but I'm glad Ranma insisted."

Just after Maki got the clothes she'd put on in the morning into a spare plastic bag, Ranma came in through the door, laughing. "We should have known we wouldn't get rid of Chika quite that easily."

He passed his phone to Honoka, who made a noise somewhere between a laugh and a cough.

"Ranma, can we focus?" Eri asked peevishly. "We've got a problem."

Honoka and Ranma shared a glance. "This'll only take a minute," Honoka said. "But if we don't deal with her, there's a pretty good chance she'll put in an appearance."

Eri sighed. "Guys, it's going to be raining outside when we do the next concert. The school theater is still being cleaned...and need I remind you, appraised for the real estate company?" There was a general gasp. "Yes, Otonoki will be operating up through the end of our current first years' term, but with one class you probably won't get to keep the building. It'll be cheaper to sell it and rent something for a year or two." Everyone suddenly looked chastened. "If you want to drum up new interest, we really need to see applicants starting next month. That little stunt Ranma pulled turned out to be for the best, but if we're not still in the top ten after this concert I don't see us making the October deadline."

Nico looked up. "It's not quite as bad as Eri's making out, at least. We're ready for this. Everything's in place, we're in good shape, and thanks to the last minute inspiration and your genius," she gave Eri a smile that she probably thought was winning but came across as predatory "...we've got this. We just need to hope that people will come in the rain."

Maki coughed. "I think I've got an idea to make people come." She closed her eyes and concentrated. The dream world from back at the beach house, mostly conjured from her own mind, was still vivid. Golden lights at night, shining on the world around her as represented by various landmarks. It was all just as real as that night.

A chorus of disbelieving shouts from around Maki told her she'd gotten it right. "...what do you think?"

"God damn." Ranma's low whistle summed it up for all of them. Rin, in particular, was so startled and amazed that she took several steps back, looking around, and tumbled right over a chair that was hidden under the illusion. Ranma quickly caught her. "...okay, slight problem. We'll have to warn the audience not to move. Still..."

"...does that show up on camera?" Eri asked.

Maki shook her head. "No. I already checked."

Ranma grinned. "We can still record the concert, and if people want to know what the fuss is about,
they can come to the next one." He took a deep breath. "For today, we'll do one run-through of the whole concert in the club room. Then break, Rin for English, Nico for math. If anyone else wants to help tutor or do a study session, great."

Honoka coughed. "And Chika?"

"Oh, yeah." Ranma scratched the back of his head nervously. "Almost forgot. Chika's sending us song lyrics. They're... well, they need work."

Umi thought about it, then shrugged. "Sure, why not? Forward it to me, Kotori and I can help her out."

Maki thought for a second. "I see where you're going. I'll put them in touch with Sakurachi too."

Nozomi finally added her thoughts. "We don't really have enough clout to get them a performance though. Honoka, maybe suggest the idea to Tsubasa. Let A-Rise take public credit, if we can."

"'Future of Love Live' thing?" Nico asked.

Hanayo nodded. "That's a good idea. Erena and Anju are still mad at us over Tsubasa. That won't be good for anyone."

Eri nodded. "Settled, then? I'll see if I can figure out something easy enough for a few middle schoolers with no trai..." Honoka, Maki, and Ranma all laughed. "What?"

Nico sighed at the math sheet in front of her. "Nozomi, I'm fine. Not great, but I passed. You don't have to babysit me."

"That's true," Nozomi said. "But I do have a serious question." Nico looked up, one eyebrow raised. "What's your backup plan?"

Nico sighed. "I don't have one." She scribbled out a few numbers thoughtfully. "I'm not really suited for anything with math past arithmetic. I mean, I can do it but anything harder than balancing a checkbook is gonna be beyond what I can manage as a job. I'm no good at art, and science is a non-starter without math. I guess I could go into business...

"Doing what?"

Nico frowned. "I don't know. Management, or something? I'm not going to school my whole life or anything, so...

Nico was surprised when Nozomi took her hand and gently squeezed. "Look, seriously, I'm worried about you. Is it really a good idea to put all of your hopes on winning Love Live?"

Nico shook her head. "No, it's not a good idea, but what else have I got? Besides, even if I don't win right now we're in a good place to make a name for ourselves. Maybe with the right degree I can get in the door on the business side with that. It's something, anyway." She started shoving her books into her bag. "I know you don't want to hear this, but I've gotta get home early again."

"No, that's fine." Nozomi said, standing up. "Mind if I walk with you? I could use the fresh air."

"Knock yourself out."

"You think they'll go for it?" Honoka asked, staring into her phone. Tsubasa was peering back up at
her with a grin. The video call wasn't entirely appropriate, but Honoka had found herself missing the idol even after only a few hours separation.

Tsubasa's expression changed from something not unlike a leer to thoughtful. Honoka finally noticed the expression and raised the phone a bit with a blush, but Tsubasa didn't notice. "Yeah, probably. I mean, I can't say for sure, but getting an extra slot on the schedule somewhere wouldn't be hard this far out. They wouldn't be in the running for the prize, or even the ratings, of course…" She bit her upper lip. "Okay, yeah. Erena and Anju are still not happy with you, but I think they've figured out I'm not changing my mind."

"Well, that's good." Honoka's grin was like a ray of dawn through the clouds that were pounding the pavement outside with heavy rain. "Gotta go though. Love ya."

"Love you too." Tsubasa said, before hanging up.

Honoka looked up, only to realize Maki was still there. And the expression on the scarlet girl's face was a strange mix of anger, jealousy, and….something Honoka couldn't quite place. "Love you too." Honoka said, with what she hoped was a reassuring smile.

Maki shook her head. "I know, it's just...it's hard to get used to. Objectively, I know you'd walk into hellfire for me. You're beautiful, and... and incredible. But there's a part of me that... that knows you'd do that for anyone, and even if you're honest about it, it still hurts a little." She was twirling her hair now. "I mean, not everyone, but..."

Honoka crossed the room and put her arms around the younger girl. "You know I don't love you any less than any of the others, right? Please don't make me rank you and Tsubasa, never mind everyone even if they're not my girlfriend girlfriends. I can't do it."

Maki laughed, but her arms snaked around Honoka all the same. "Whatever happened to pretending?"

"I was never faking loving you," Honoka said honestly. "Not from the beginning. I just knew you didn't feel the same."

Maki rested her chin on Honoka's shoulder. Her eyes shut. "You are absolutely crazy, you know that?"

Honoka smiled. Her voice softened. "If I wasn't, would you still be here?"

"No." Maki admitted. "I'd be in the piano room, wasting my last few months in a real school before we all got moved to that conference center by the Akiba Dome, or maybe spare classrooms in the UTX building or something."

Honoka smiled. "Well, it all worked out then."

Maki grinned, and suddenly pushed Honoka back. "Not here," she said, explaining. "It would be too humiliating if Eri looked in on us, or one of the other clubs came by."

Honoka nodded. "Okay. But we need to find somewhere private then soon."

Maki chuckled. "Yeah, right, like that's gonna happen."

Suddenly the door opened. Eri poked her head in. "Hey, what are you two doing here?"

Maki shrugged. "Honestly? I just didn't want to head home yet."
Eri shrugged. "Well, suit yourself, but if there's something you need to be working on leading up to the next concert you should get to it." She eyed Honoka's closeness to Maki with a playful smile. "And if you don't, at least don't break the rules. I am still on the student council."

Umi shook her head in disbelief at the file Honoka had forwarded to her on her phone, walking behind Kotori on their way to somewhere isolated from the others, a paper pad under her arm. "'Needs work...' Understatement of the month." She glanced up, seeing a familiar look on her friend's face. "Uhm...we're going to the sewing room?"

"Uh-huh."

Umi's lip quirked. "To make costumes for Honoka's new friends?"

"Uh-huh."

Umi's quirked lip turned into a smile of exasperated fondness. "Kotori, there's no point to that today. They're in middle school. By the time they get up here, they might be twenty centimeters taller. And that's if you have their sizes, which you don't. Let Chika and You deal with costumes." Kotori's expression turned to the 'kicked puppy' look. Umi just shook her head. "If you really want to help, just stick with sketches to give them ideas."

"Okay!" Kotori immediately brightened and switched direction, heading to the art room. Umi shook her head and followed. "Anyway, what are they trying to do?"

Umi frowned, looking at the lyrics. "You know, I honestly can't tell. Chika's all over the place, and You's notes aren't much better..." She shook her head. "I think this is all some misguided attempt to flirt with Honoka, if I'm going to be honest."

Kotori shook her head. "You know, we really need to talk to her."

"You mean about how being a pansexual poly girl is going to be a major headache for everyone?" Umi laughed. "Do you seriously think that's going to make one bit of difference? I'm just going to enjoy it while it lasts..."

Kotori stepped into the art room and set up some paper on an easel, trying to put that together, before she squeaked. "You mean you actually - with Honoka - not that there's anything..." Finally she covered her mouth, turning beet red.

Umi shook her head. "I was still, you know, high on the ki. Honoka mostly turned me down, I think. Not that she wasn't interested, but Maki was sleeping next to -" She turned beet red at Kotori's gasp. "It...it wasn't like that. Honestly, now that I'm feeling mostly under control I don't know what happened. I mean, she's pretty, but girls don't do anything for me."

Kotori raised an eyebrow. "Are you sure? I mean, are you really, really sure?" Umi blushed heavily. "What about boys?"

"Uh...it's kinda all the same for the most part." Umi said quietly. "I mean, there's something but..."

Kotori blinked slowly, not quite sure what to say to that. "Uhm...do you want to try kissing me then?" Umi turned even redder. "I mean, just to try it out?"

"NO!" Umi shouted. "I mean yes! I mean no!"

Kotori giggled. "Just kidding."
Umi swallowed. "Uhm…"

Kotori's grin widened slightly. "I just feel like I don't want to hold back anymore."

That, Umi could understand. Especially after recent experiences. "I see what you mean. Right, let me try that again." She took a breath. "Okay. Kotori, I can tell you're very attractive, and I'm sure there are a lot of people of both genders who would gladly take you up on that offer. I'm not one of them."

"That's fine." Kotori nodded. "You wear enough outfits for me that I know any more is too much to ask."

Umi blushed. "Wait, so…"

"Well…" Kotori grinned. "It is a bit of a thrill making you all beautiful on stage."

"I didn't need to know that." Umi said, then grimaced as she noticed her pencil bending in her fingers again. "Ugh. Feeling a little out of control again."

Kotori suddenly put down her own drawing implements. "Should we get you to Doctor Tofu?"

"I'm fi-" Umi started, but then the door opened and she jumped, falling backwards over her chair and rolling back up into a ready stance. Eri, who had just poked her head in, and Kotori were both staring at her. "...okay, not so fine."

"Again?" Eri asked. "Okay, okay, safety in numbers. Not that anyone sane's out in this weather."

"I'll pay for the cab from Nerima station," Umi said.

It was the sort of rainstorm where you wondered why you had an umbrella in the first place, since everything got soaked regardless. At least, you wondered until you tried to do without it, which had led to Maki slipping into near cursing when Honoka got tired of holding hers up for them to shuffle underneath it. "Ugh. Knew I should have asked for a driver," Maki commented as soon as she could hear herself think again.

"I don't on a full-time basis. Papa used to pay for one for me but now that I'm in shape it makes more sense to run to practice," Maki explained. "And even then, the company wasn't on call full time, it was just a scheduled pickup thing. We're rich, but we're not that rich." Then Maki paused. "Actually, I think we are that rich but there's better things to spend the money on."

Honoka took the point, but couldn't resist saying "Not today."

Maki gave her a look. "I think Tsubasa's rubbing off on you. Anyway, we're almost -" she turned the corner to her house, and just like before there was an unpleasant surprise visitor. A woman, in a kimono that was absolutely ruined, dark red hair, and a long object she couldn't quite make out in the gloom before she pushed Honoka back. Her girlfriend, for her part, didn't even show outward signs of surprise, just folding up the umbrella so they could flatten against the wall. With a shared nod, they peered back around the corner.

Maki had never met the woman in person, but the paper tube that once would have been concealing a katana (and, in this case, it almost certainly was), plus the traditional kimono were utterly unmistakable. Saotome Nodoka was standing patiently outside the door, facing towards it unerringly, waiting to be allowed in.
Honoka rubbed her eyes in the hope that she was just imagining things. Maybe it was just a really tacky delivery service, or an actor. But no, the red hair and kimono were just too distinctive. It was Saotome Nodoka.

The two girls ducked back out of sight again. Honoka spoke first as she raised the umbrella again. "I knew Ranma's little joke wouldn't work forever," she bemoaned, quietly enough to avoid being heard. "Do your parents have a plan?"

Maki shook her head. "I think we figured that no news was good news. Let me call Papa…"

Honoka risked peering around the corner again. Nodoka seemingly hadn't moved a muscle. "Is that smart?"

Maki took a deep breath. "Okay, let me think. I think Ranma's technically a runaway." Seeing Honoka's confused frown, she went on. "Legally, that means her mother can tell her to pack up and move out." Honoka's snort of derision was met with a soft chuckle. "Yeah, well, the problem is if Ranma doesn't. That could get the police involved."

"Can't we just say he's not here?" Honoka asked.

Maki shook her head. "That'll probably go badly in the long run. Mrs. Minami pulled a lot of strings to get us this far. I don't know that we want the police poking at that too closely, but we definitely don't want them doing it after we've lied to them."

Honoka almost suggested letting Ranma handle it next, but she quickly ran through the scenarios in her head and realized she couldn't possibly predict how that would go. "Maybe we don't have to lie to the police. We just need to convince her to go away."

"Well, how do you expect to do that?" Maki pointed out. "She hates you and she probably thinks Ranma's trying to use me to get out of the engagement or something equally crazy." Maki wasn't really expecting an answer, so she quick-dialed her father. "Papa, listen," she said, in a way that Honoka was sure Maki had never used to address either of her parents. "I know I'm not supposed to call, but it's an emergency. Ranma's mother is waiting out in front of our house." There was a short pause. "Well, she does go around with a sword. I don't know if she knows how to use it, but…" Another pause, and then Maki peered around the corner again, before she muttered. "No, she's just standing there and staring at the door." Another, longer pause. "Okay, Papa. Yes, I can find someplace to stay." She bowed slightly into the phone. "Thanks, Papa. And I'm sorry for calling at work." Then she hung up.

"What's the plan?" Honoka asked.

Maki shrugged, and started walking. "You have to ask? Get the heck outta here. Not your place, either. Papa's secretary should send me an email with a hotel that will let us check in in a few minutes."

"Why not my place?" Honoka asked.

Maki sighed. "Because we don't know how Saotome tracked Ranma down without the phone yet. If Ranma doesn't turn up here…"

Honoka winced. "Right, let me call Ranma and warn her…" She hit the quick dial. "Oh hell."

Rin found herself in, if anything, in an even more implausible situation than the last time she had been given tutoring. Instead of dancing, a freaking target gallery had been set up in one of the
classrooms. On each of the targets was a word. Ranma had said it was to give her something else to associate the actions with to break the habit. But somehow, some way, Ranma had acquired another of those ping-pong guns. Every time she missed, he was there, and she took one to the face. "Do you like humiliati - OW!"

Ranma shook his head. "You want to tell me something, you do it right." Rin growled and took aim at the cards for 'I dislike you.' It was to her surprise that she got to the last one fast enough to actually be able to take a second shot and hit her nemesis square in the face. "See, ain't so hard." He smirked. "You wanna take it out on me, get the right answer." Rin grinned madly, even though part of her recognized she was being somewhat condescended to. There was no way she could land a shot on the boy if he didn't let her, but she knew he'd play fair. If those were the rules, Ranma would play by them.

Suddenly Rin's phone rang with Honoka's tone. She called "Time out?" Apparently, this was allowed, since she got no answer. She took the call, and suddenly her ear rang with screaming.

"I need to talk to Ranma now!" Ranma took the phone and suddenly heard Honoka yelling in his ear. "Ranma, your mom's at Maki's place and your phone's disconnected!"

"WHAT?!" Ranma nearly snapped, and took several deep breaths. He checked the device, and sure enough, while it was still on it was showing a 'disconnected' error. "Okay, I don't get this stuff, but can I read it off to you?"

Honoka replied with an affirmative sound, and Ranma quickly read off the arcane code. A moment later, she knew it. "Someone canceled your account."

"But...how?" Ranma wondered out loud.

Honoka sighed. "I don't know, but Mr. Nishikino has an idea. He wants everyone to stay away from their homes for tonight, except the Sonodas. I'll spread the word."

"Got it," Ranma said. "I'll get Rin somewhere safe then check on the others."

Rin was looking distinctly annoyed. "What now?"

"I gotta take you somewhere. Not home, not Hanayo's place," Ranma said.

Rin felt her annoyance growing. "Well, where are we going to go that's safe all of a sudden?"

Ranma frowned. It was a good question. "Well, nowhere in Kanda, that's for sure. Should probably avoid Akiba too, it's too close…" Then he smirked. "Or maybe not. Can I see your phone again?"

Rin frowned. "Why aren't you using yours?"

"It's been turned off," Ranma shrugged. "One thing at a time." Rin, reluctantly, handed over the phone and Ranma dialed in a number.

Across town, Tsubasa was just between numbers in rehearsal for A-RISE's next big concert when her phone went off. She returned the glares of her partners to answer. "Hoshizora, you'd better have a good reason for calling me in the middle of rehearsal."

Ranma grimaced at the tone. "It ain't Hoshizora, and it is. I need somewhere to hide a body."

Judging by the shriek of dismay and the incredulous look Rin gave him, he realized he'd miscalculated. "Not a dead body. Look, I don't have time to explain. Can you meet me on the roof of the UTX building in five minutes?"
Tsubasa winced. "Okay, Saotome, but like I said, this had better be good."

Rin was staring. "Oh no! That's fine for Honoka, but you are not carrying me up a skyscraper!"

Ranma smirked back. "Wanna try to stop me?" he asked in a rather conversational tone. "Like I said, we don't have time to argue and we don't have a better way into the UTX building."

Rin sighed, but there really was no help for it. She let Ranma pick her up into a bridal lift, and put her arms around his neck. Then, they took off.

Honoka had experienced this for the first time while half-conscious, so to her it must not have seemed like much. At least, that was what Rin was thinking as she was suddenly flying across the rooftops at a speed that would make veteran roller coaster riders question their adrenalin-seeking ways. She only managed to not scream by reminding herself she might distract the person giving her the ride.

The truly scary part, however, was when they reached Akihabara station. Or, rather, didn't, as Ranma instead elected to bound down the wrong side of the street before making a single mighty jump to cross the eight lanes of the strip. From there, she had the distinct displeasure of finding herself being rapidly twisted around in circles while Ranma kicked between windows of the two tall buildings, until they were on the roof of the shorter of them.

Ranma wasn't yet done, however. Without losing momentum, he hit the roof running, then rapidly turned on his heel at the far end to get another running start, finishing the climb with one last leap.

Ranma set her down, where Hoshizora Rin promptly lost her lunch. "Sorry about that," the young woman apologized, leaning down to help her up once she'd finished.

"Thought I was dead for sure…" Rin mumbled, before realizing they weren't alone. Tsubasa was already there, as were Erena and Anju behind her, all looking stern. She blushed in consternation.

Ranma, however, hadn't recently been sick, so she took up the explanation. "Look, we ain't really sure what's going on yet, but my mom's tracked me down." Taking in the puzzled looks from Erena and Anju, she sighed. "I really don't got time to explain that bit, but she's got a sword, and...well, there's worse things that could be goin' on. I figure this is the last place anyone's likely to look for Rin."

Tsubasa seemed to take the hint. "Well, you've got that much right. We'll think of something."

Anju found her voice first. "Wait, wait, wait! I thought I said we weren't giving Mu's any more help!"

Tsubasa glared at her. "This has nothing to do with that!" she shot back. "Ranma's life is...well, he just jumped up the side of a building! I don't think letting someone crash in one of our bedrooms for a night is on the same level as giving idol endorsements."

Erena spoke up quietly. "I don't think the dorm mistress would agree, Tsubasa. This could get us in trouble…"

Ranma groaned. "I just don't want a record. I don't know what Nabs is up to, but she's probably gonna be doing something."

Tsubasa sighed. "Well, we can definitely keep her here late since school's not in session. Overnight, though, Erena's right. That will take some doing."
Rin sighed. "It's okay, I can manage…"

Ranma shrugged. "Rin, if something goes wrong I would be too busy at Maki's to help. Besides, you've still gotta get better at English so we don't end up sunk by your bad grades."

Erena smiled. "Well, that makes it easy. I'm studying for my Julliard exam, so I'll help out."

"You will!" Rin grinned at her, almost maniacally. "Oh thank you, you have no idea what he's like!"

Ranma smirked. "You got it mostly down today, didn't you?"

"Not the point!" Rin shouted back. "I also had to work out three times as long as anyone else!"

"You're up to it." Ranma's smirk didn't waver. "But yeah, more book time's what she needs now. Thanks, Toudou," she said, addressing Erena. "I'd better go check on Hanayo," With that, Ranma leapt off the roof and back down to the ground.

Anju sighed. "Unbelievable."

In the grocery store, again, Nozomi and Nico were looking over sales on vegetables when the phone rang. A short, terse conversation was ended when Nozomi put down the phone, looking at Nico.

"Okay, that's it. I'm coming over, now."

"Huh?" Nico glared at her. "No way, Toujou,"

Nozomi snorted. "You're the one who did everything to lay a false trail, right? Well, code red time."


Nozomi shrugged. "Not sure yet, but Mrs. Saotome tracked Ranma down. Not that hard, but why now is anyone's guess."

Nico thought about it for a second. "We're in a lot of trouble, aren't we?"

Nozomi sighed. "I don't know what'll happen if we lose Ranma now, yes."

Nico looked like she was hesitating. "Should we use your powers?"

"Don't know what I can do."

Nico shrugged. "Pull a card, see how it can go if we try to jump in?"

Nozomi sighed. "We're getting too dependent on this thing," she pointed out. "I know, I know, we're in way over our heads, but…"

That was enough to give Nico pause. "Nozomi…" she trailed off. "Is...is it wrong to hate them like this?" Nozomi's eyes widened in shock. "I...I don't know. I just see what this whole thing's doing to Maki…"

Nozomi's eyes got even wider. "Maki specifically?"

"What's wrong with that?" Nico shrugged. "Look, we're not going out or anything. I don't really like girls that way."

Nozomi grinned. "You don't, huh?"
Nico gave another little shrug. "On stage is different. Sometimes you've gotta do things you wouldn't do in real life, right? It doesn't mean I've got a problem with it if that's what she wants to do." She looked down. "I can even respect it, sort of. I know...I know a lot of people won't think that way."

"What about me?" Nozomi asked.

Nico smirked. "You're just a pervert."

Nozomi chuckled. "Guilty as charged. But really, what's this about?"

"Maki's not the only one with a secret, Nozomi," Nico pointed out. "And mine could break my idol career too." Nozomi just stared at her. "Not like that, but...look, you've really gotta promise, okay?" Nozomi gave her a silent nod to continue. "It's...it's my little brother. There's...well, there's just no delicate way to put it. He's not really as smart as you'd expect at his age."

"Huh?"

Nico sighed. "I don't really understand it. He's not...it's not obvious, yet, and he may just be a slow starter. The doctors aren't sure, but we can't afford a real expert to spend more time on him than we are already so we probably won't know if he's actually disabled for a few years. It's not genetic, anyway. We did check that."

Nozomi nodded in understanding. "And you're the older sister."

"Exactly." Nico nodded. "I couldn't split my time, not that way. I'm sure my younger sisters would help, but being an idol's really a full-time job, and he'd be in the spotlight, and...if he's really..." She laughed. "You know, that's why I didn't like Ranma at first. I thought he was a coward, running out on his family the first chance he got."

"And now?"

Nico smiled, her eyes growing a bit distant. "I don't really know. He mentioned something about swimming away from sharks as training. If it was half that bad...maybe I should be envious. After all, he has a good reason for turning his back. I...just couldn't do that."

"There's all kinds of courage, I guess," Nozomi said. "This is probably a good time to leave it to the adults."

"I guess," Nico sighed. "I'm sorry,"

"Don't be," Nozomi gave her an encouraging smile. "It's nice to see you honest for once."

Umi was surprised when she opened the door to a smiling Tofu. "So, how was your trip?"

Umi groaned and started to pull off her rain jacket. "Honestly, exhausting. But you probably knew that. Also, I think we nearly lost Nozomi." The surprised look from the doctor had Umi shaking her head. "I mean...she just couldn't handle the second trip."

Tofu shook his head. "I can imagine. But you seem to have come through all right. So, why don't you tell me about it?"

Umi shook her head. "After the ninja I'm not allowed to hit and the scam artist I'm not allowed to hit and Honoka having two or three girlfriends depending on how you count? I just want to get out of this town before something else happens."
Tofu shook his head. "You are familiar with someone else who didn't deal with her issues, and you said you don't want to be like her."

Umi sighed, starting to take her blouse off behind a privacy screen while Tofu prepared his acupuncture needles. "I don't appreciate the comparison, Sensei. I'll work through it, but if I stay here I won't be working through it, I'll just be add - "

The door slammed open, with Eri looking panicked behind it. "Look, as interesting as I'm sure this is, we've got trouble. Mrs. Saotome's at Maki's place. Right Now."

"Bloody Hell!" Umi nearly shot out half-dressed from behind the privacy screen before she remembered her state and ducked back, all a blur to Eri's vision. "Did we keep the cab outside?"

"Do I have red hair and a crush on Ranma? If you didn't, neither of us can pay for that either." Eri said shortly.

Kotori peeked her head in around Eri. "Umi, are you all right?"

"I probably won't lose it again," Umi replied, looking a little shaken. "Still, I shouldn't be making the plans right now. I'm still feeling it. Tofu didn't manage any treatment."

Eri nodded. "We need to get somewhere hidden, fast. You're in no condition to be protecting anyone and Ranma's cell phone's shut off."

Kotori bit her lip. "Doctor, I hate to impose…"

Tofu seemed to hesitate for a moment. Then, he came to a decision and moved the skeleton in his closet aside. Opening it, and another door in the cupboard, he smiled. "You can stay in my typhoon shelter for the night."

All three girls stared at this development, but it was Eri who finally found her voice first. "You have a hidden typhoon shelter?"

Tofu smiled, and said, with a completely straight face, "Doesn't everyone?" When the only thing he got back was incredulous stares, he relented. "Actually, it was originally built by the previous owner of the building, during the war. It started life as a bomb shelter, but I had it checked out and it should stand up to a typhoon, so I generally keep it well stocked. It also doubles as a workout room. There's enough room for maybe ten people, and preserved food...but just in case, I'll order ram... " He caught Umi's death-glare. "Uhh...pizza?"

"Better," Umi groused, before covering her mouth in embarrassment. "Erm, sorry, Doctor Tofu. That was almost entirely uncalled for."

"You have a hidden typhoon shelter?"

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"Better," Umi groused, before covering her mouth in embarrassment. "Erm, sorry, Doctor Tofu. That was almost entirely uncalled for."

The young doctor just laughed. "Get some sleep, Miss Sonoda. You probably need it. Just don't destroy my heavy bag, all right?"

Umi grinned. "I don't think I'll work out tonight, just in case. Also, could you call my father and let him know where we are?"

Hanayo was sitting up in the club room, looking over a laserdisc of a blonde girl about her age. 1995... When you put it that way, it seems like a lifetime ago. Of course, it was. The entire concert took up almost six discs. She could barely lift it, but she managed to struggle with the handle and get it onto the table. Removing a disc, she looked around only to realize the large box underneath the second monitor on the computer was actually what she was looking for. "I almost can't believe Nico
I hope it works with Japanese discs.

That was when the call came in. "Hey, Honoka," she said. "Can you believe some of the gems Nico has? I wish she'd let us watch them more."

"There's no time for that now," Honoka said to her. "Look, you're still at school, right? Do you have somewhere other than home to go to?"

"Huh?"

Honoka gulped, barely audible over the slightly crackly line. "Listen, Ranma's mother found us somehow. Until we know how, we have to lay low."

Hanayo frowned at the disc still in her hands, a curious expression looking back at her. She expected to be nervous, but that wasn't all. Her face was all bunched up scared, but even more curious, her eyes only reflected anger. "I...I see. What should I do?"

Honoka went quiet for a moment, as she was talking to someone else - probably Maki - before returning to the conversation. "Uhm...we think maybe it's better to just hang tight at school tonight. The school probably won't mind, under the circumstances."

"But...but...where will I sleep?"

Honoka sighed. "If I know Ranma, there's probably a sleeping bag hidden around there. See if you can find it...maybe in the cupboard in the dance room?"

Hanayo was already looking, and she quickly pulled it out. "Yes. It's a little worn, though."

Honoka paused, trying to think of how to reassure her. She settled on "It's just one night - we'll figure out what comes next tomorrow."

"R-right. I think there's some snacks here too..."

Maki said, loudly enough to hear "Don't let her eat the snacks! She'll gain weight!"

Honoka was a little more reasonable. "See if one of my classmates will grab you something, or one of yours. If that doesn't work, go ahead." To make sure Hanayo actually made the effort, she then added "Remember, every kilo you put on is one Ranma gets to work out of you."

"R-right!" Hanayo squeaked out. "I'll try my best."

Honoka's smile came through in her voice. "Thanks. Maki and I are in Roppongi, and I think everyone else has their own plans sorted. See ya tomorrow morning."

Hanayo gave a noncommittal reply and hung up the phone. She had laid out the sleeping bag when her attention was again drawn to the laserdisc on the table. For a long time she looked at it, indecisive.

I don't want you getting involved.

Come here. Did you have another run-in with those bullies at school today?

It's a hard life, Kayochi.

I just want you to be safe. Why don't you join the school choir?
Yes, it was fun, but I never regretted giving it up to have you.

No! It's too dangerous! I won't let you be an idol!

"Mom...I'm sorry, but…"

When the Principal came by to check on her an hour later, the School Idol Club rooms were both empty. The only clue to what had happened was the recording of the final concert of Koizumi Hatsue left laying out on the table.

Maki stared in confusion at the "hotel room," if it could be called that. Instead of the expected two beds (or even one bed, though Maki wasn’t sure what they would have done if that had been the case) a large futon was laid out in a tatami mat room. If that had been the only unexpected thing, though, she wouldn't have been quite so stunned.

The room was made up in the style of an ancient noble’s palace, with elaborate frescos in the very-much-not-paper-and-wood walls, a large-screen TV over a small chair on the floor, and an actual honest-to-kami tea room to one side in a corner. The open door to the bathroom showed not only a hot tub, but a dry sauna as well. The biggest hints that her father may have screwed up, however, were the massage chair off in one corner and the huge king bed in another.

Honoka was staring beside her. "...I guess the hourly rates should have been a clue."

"Honoka! This is a love hotel!" Maki strangled off an actual scream. This isn't Honoka's fault. She did feel like she was about to bolt, though.

A course of action stopped when Honoka grabbed her wrist. "Come on, there's nothing wrong with this place. It's clean, private, and I kinda want to try the massage chair."

"But...but...but…"

Honoka grinned. "I won't say anything, and if you don't want to try anything we don't have to. Besides, you can take the bed. I'll sleep in the futon."

"Tha...that...Honoka?! How can you be so calm about this?" Maki was now flushing from the top of her head down to her neck, and if Honoka was right, probably all the way down to her feet.

That got the ginger to giggle. "How can I not? It's a nice room."

"In...in…"

Honoka smirked. "Would you prefer something Arabian?"

"I'm never gonna live that down, am I?" Maki groaned. " Seriously, it was just a dream. Who'd really want a harem?" Honoka blinked in absolute confusion, seemingly unable to come up with a response. "...wait, are you serious?" Maki asked. "You'd...wait, of course you would, that's the problem isn't it?"

"Well, maybe not a harem harem, like the hundreds you had," Honoka was blushing now. "But a few? Maybe?"

Maki gulped and turned around, changing the subject. "Anyway, we should go check out and find something else. I...er…"

Honoka shook her head. "No way. This is perfect, Maki. It's not like it's dirty or anything." Maki
looked like she wanted to say something, so Honoka forged ahead. "Look, places like this used to be for couples sneaking off, right? We didn't even have to give names, so no way anyone knows we're here. We can wait until it's safe."

"Ye-yeah, but..." Maki blushed again.

Honoka smiled. "We don't have to do anything you're uncomfortable with. Let's just turn on the TV."

Nishikino Kaede was a woman who wore many hats. "Doctor" was the one everyone knew, of course, but it was actually the least common. "Administrator" was closer to her day-to-day job, and she rather missed the chance to do research. But right now, she was ashamed to admit that the most important of those roles was something she had been neglecting. She had been a terrible parent.

True, she knew of far worse. In her line of work, it was somewhat inevitable that she would occasionally run into the results of abuse of all kinds. The reforms to reporting laws around the time Maki was growing up had helped her conscience tremendously, but that didn't change the fact that she had only noticed her daughter's slide into isolation and depression by its' reversal. And even then, her response shamed her - doing nothing about it but 'buying' a friend with the vast wealth she and her husband had accumulated. After all, a bed and four extra shares of food was hardly a sacrifice when, between them, they were making billions of yen every year.

Even now, she couldn't put a finger on when it had started - more time spent at work as Maki became more capable of taking care of her own needs and wants. A bigger allowance when requested, which wasn't often enough to be worrying. A missed dinner here and there becoming entire months without being home in time to really talk. Ignoring worried comments on the report cards to focus on the continuing stream of perfect exam results. Fewer and fewer friends coming over for playtime, which eventually trickled off into eternal piano practices.

And then two girls had apparently come into her daughter's life and changed all that. Even if one was really a boy. With that, she'd considered the problem well and truly solved. She didn't have to do anything after all. Now, though, the results of that neglect had come in. It was time to pay up.

Saotome Nodoka was exactly where Maki had described her nearly two hours before, standing politely at the door to her family home. The truth was, if it really was a sword in that cardboard tube, Kaede could probably have just called the police. She had even strongly considered it, but that would almost certainly end any chance of settling this without both sides taking drastic measures. She had no intention of letting Ranma be taken back if there was any chance it was the wrong thing to do, but she had enough experience with dealing with children besides her own to know that they weren't always honest. "Mrs. Saotome, I presume," Kaede said, carefully keeping her expression neutral and her tone pleasant. "I assume you're here about your son."

"Quite," Nodoka replied coolly. "You have no right to keep him,"

Kaede couldn't help herself, she actually laughed. "Saotome, I don't have the ability to keep him here if he doesn't want to stay. I'm also not about to refuse my hospitality after I offered it." Her eyes went cold. "Plus, as a doctor I've seen some very disturbing things around Ranma, but the situation is so extraordinary I hesitate to make even a preliminary diagnosis without some other facts."

That actually got Nodoka's attention. "Is Ranma ill? I'm sure Doctor Tofu is more than able to take care of him."

"Unfortunately," Kaede said. "If I'm correct Doctor Tofu is no more able to handle Ranma's case..."
than I would be. I would need to send him to a specialist, but that requires either his or your consent, and so far he's refused. Plus, as I said, I don't know enough for a formal recommendation regardless." She stepped past the other woman. "If you're willing to leave the sword in the hall with the umbrellas, we could discuss this over tea?"

Nodoka bristled "The Saotome family blade hasn't left my side since Ranma went on his training mission."

"That's nice," Kaede said, bracing herself. "But you know it's against the law to carry it about like that, and has been for almost a century. Never mind the sword ban of the ninth year of the Meiji era. Honestly, it's a wonder you haven't been arrested."

Nodoka smiled. "The name 'Saotome' carries some weight in the proper circles, I think you'll find."

Kaede had been afraid of that. She switched to the much more formal dialect she normally reserved for large-scale charity functions. "Unfortunate. But this is still my, and my husband's, property. As such, I can set the terms of hospitality, and I humbly request that you follow the spirit, if not the letter, of the law and leave your blade at the door."

Nodoka visibly bristled. "If you...insist. For my son's sake."

"And for my daughter's," Kaede confirmed. "And before you ask, no, there has not, and will not be, an engagement meeting between our children. I offered, but Ranma's reaction was...odd."

"Good," Nodoka's voice was liquid ice. "My son is engaged to Tendo Akane."

Kaede squelched her anger again. "Mrs. Saotome, surely you understand that I have to prioritize my own family. Your son is a friend, who has done us a great favor. Several, in fact. If he would make Maki happy, I'm not going to object."

"Of course," While Nodoka said the words, Kaede found herself less than sure the older woman really knew their meaning.

Hanayo realized that this was a bad idea at about time she realized she was out of breath. She was lost somewhere in Nerima, soaked to the bone by the storm. It seemed like it was starting to dry out for the moment, but she knew the weather forecast had said that wouldn't last. "Ranma doesn't even have a phone. What am I doing?"

"That's what I wanna know!" Hanayo stiffened, her exhaustion forgotten as she realized the voice had come from behind her. Turning around, somehow, Ranma was there. He had evidently decided to use his thermos to take temporary advantage of the lull. "Koizumi Hanayo, have you gone insane? There's no way you can help out here."

Hanayo had never seen Ranma this...this angry before. No, that wasn't right. "Ranma, I wasn't, I mean..."

"Look, we don't got time for this. I'll take ya ta UTX. Tsubasa'll kill me later, but..." Ranma took a step forward.

Hanayo looked into those eyes again...and saw just a bit of herself. She wasn't quite sure what she had wanted to say to him, even knowing she had to say something, but that got to her. "Ranma, wait. I didn't want to go to Maki's place, I was trying to find you."
"Huh?"

Hanayo swallowed. "I'm not Honoka. I know that. I think everyone, when they see you two, they see...something special. But...I had a question, and it's important, but I..."

Ranma smirked. "You're babbling, Koizumi."

Hanayo giggled. "And you just broke the rule," They both paused for another chuckle. "Okay...look, I'm..."

"Get to it." Ranma cut her off, making her jump. "Dammit, I don't mean it like that, but we're in a hurry."

"Ri-right," Hanayo gulped. "Ranma...at our practices...why don't you sing?"

Ranma quirked an eyebrow. "I do."

"No, you don't," Hanayo insisted. "You might hum a few bars or mouth the words, or maybe do a little bit if you need to to make a point, but the only time any of us heard you sing was the day you landed on the roof." Ranma looked like he was about to object. "Yes, I know about Honoka, but... look, everyone, I mean everyone can see Honoka's special to you. I really don't know what it is."

"How...how do you remember that? Two times in three months." Ranma asked incredulously.

Hanayo smiled. "I always wanted to be an idol too. You don't think I didn't take some voice lessons to get this good, even if I was too shy to..."

Ranma nodded. "That actually makes sense. Now, that's one mystery solved, even if it wasn't one some of us were asking about - " Hanayo just stared at him, not glaring or even projecting any hostility, but...disappointed. "It's...it's a girly thing."

Hanayo just stared at him, completely dumbfounded. "Uh...there's a lot of girly stuff in what we do, yes, but singing?"

"Well...I..."

Hanayo shook her head. "Ranma, this is important. We both know you used to sing, and you used to be good at it. And I don't think it was just that it's girly! Why? Why stop?!" Ranma felt cornered, trapped, he blinked...and suddenly Hanayo was holding a bottle of water out to him. "Change, and sing, and tell me how you feel."

It was so unlike the girl that he reached to take the bottle again....

Ranma had never seen Kasumi so grave. She wasn't sure anyone ever had. Ukyo was sitting in the chair in Furinkan's neglected music room, only recently cleaned up so that DoCo could do their practices. And Kasumi practically had her pinned to the chair with her eyes. "Miss Kuonji, do you understand these rules?"

Ukyo swallowed nervously. "No going after Ranma, I got it," she said, eyes darting to the door.

"That is not what I said." Kasumi did not snap. She didn't even raise her voice. "I said that I have seen that the situation around the marriage promises affecting Ranma have a way of getting out of hand. You are not to permit them to affect DoCo, if you wish to be a member. That does not just mean your own actions. If you think something outside the group will be a problem, you're also
responsible for bringing it to our attention, or taking care of the problem. Now, I ask again, do you understand?"

"Uh...yeah." Ukyo nodded. "Got it. Anyway, you needed costumes, right? Let me go get my drawing paper..."

Ranma grinned. "Hey, didn't know you could draw. That's cool," She flexed her arms to help open up her chest. "Sure you don't want to join in?"

"Probably not," Ukyo said. "Not that I don't want to spend time with you, Ranchan, but if there's a concert and I gotta have the restaurant open, well..."

Ranma shrugged. "Sure thing, Ucchan. We can figure something out."

Ukyo quickly shuffled out. Once she was gone, Kasumi turned to Ranma with a pensive look on her face. "I don't know about this, Ranma..."

"Hey, she's my best friend," Ranma pointed out. "We can't leave her out, can we?"

"I suppose not..."

Ranma stopped. "Hanayo, I don't get it. I gotta go - "

Hanayo shook her head. "Do what? What's your plan?"

"I...I don't know, okay?"

Hanayo shook her head. "It's not okay! Ranma, you can't keep letting your mom ruin your life too!"

It couldn't really be said Ranma was slow - by many accounts he was a genius in the martial arts, and that required a degree of attention to detail that was astonishing in some ways, considering his normal lack of social graces. But recent events had gotten him to expand his mantra of 'Evade, Adapt, Overcome, and Steal' and this time, it was 'adapt' that came to the forefront. Thus, he didn't miss the key word. "Too? Hanayo, wha - " But the mousey little blonde suddenly wasn't talking. Ranma shook his head. "Oh no, fair's fair. You want me to talk my mom, what did yours do that's so bad?"

Hanayo gulped. "Fine. But you already know most of it, you were there when I told everyone." She took a single deep breath. "Ranma, I want to be an idol. I always have." She shook her head. "Rin doesn't understand. Not really. She's with me, but not really. I need to sing, to...I don't know. But my mom...she..."

"She doesn't get it?" Ranma tried to prompt.

Hanayo gulped. "No, Ranma. She was an idol too. Nico's got the laserdiscs, you should watch her. She was...was amazing...." The girl swallowed. "She knows because she was there too, I'm sure of it. But every time I ask...it's all the agents and producers and schedules and how it was terrible. The more I wanted to, the more she told me I couldn't." Finally out of breath, Hanayo just smiled for a moment. "Isn't it the same with your mom?"

"Not really." Ranma shrugged. "She wants me to be a great martial artist, we just...we're disagreeing on what the best way to do it is."

Hanayo shook her head. "But is being with Mu's helping you be a better martial artist?"

Ranma winced. "Well...in some ways, no." The blunt assessment was shocking. "I used ta be able ta
go toe-to-toe with Ryouga, but I've lost some of my edge. If I had to fight him today…" He couldn't quite bring himself to say it, even to Hanayo. "On the other hand…" He took a deep breath. "Okay, can you do me a favor? It's gonna sound weird. And I can't tell you what I'm doing exactly, but…try to hit me?"

Hanayo's jaw dropped. "What? But…"

Ranma smirked. "Seriously, throw a punch as hard as you can. There's absolutely no chance in hell you'll hurt me." Hanayo balled her hand up into a fist, but Ranma stopped her almost immediately. "Okay, guess I gotta break the rule slightly. Thumb outside, like this." He held up his own hand, to show his thumb was, indeed, laying across his fingers. "You got yours inside. You hit me like that, you might break your thumb."

"Right." Hanayo obeyed the command, then pulled her fist back and...well, to Ranma's eyes it was more like she shoved her fist weakly in his direction. He remembered a time when he might have just done something humiliating to her for making a mockery of the Art like that, although he had asked. But this time he just twisted his torso slightly to lessen the impact. Not really for his own benefit, but to make sure Hanayo didn't hurt herself.

With a few moment's consideration, he nodded. "I... yeah, I think I get it. There were two dozen things wrong with that punch, minimum..." Hanayo grumped. "Hey, nothing to be ashamed of. No one's ever shown you how, right? But if I wanted, and you wanted, I could probably have you punching through wood planks by the end of the day." At Hanayo's unbelieving look, Ranma just shrugged. "The hard part's done. You're a lot stronger and more coordinated than you used to be. Honestly, punching through wood and brick's a trick almost anyone can learn. You only need to be a fine specimen like me to do it any way you want."

Hanayo giggled at that, but then she turned serious again. "Maybe after everything else. But...what are you going to do about this?" She stared again. "What is the truth, Ranma? Are you just doing this to learn to be a teacher?"

Ranma looked down, seeing her holding out the bottle of water again.

Ranma looked down at her costume. In all truth, it was very much something she wouldn't mind wearing - the shirt was cut off at the midriff, but the red leather jacket and tight shorts offset it. It looked good without looking girly. Of course, anyone else would recognize that it looked a little too good if you weren't trying to attract male attention, but she would never wear it except on stage. By contrast, she felt she'd gotten off very lucky. Akane and Shampoo were wearing skirts that were pleated and probably a bit too short, along with plain blouses and their own leather jackets. Kasumi and Nabiki weren't quite so bad off, but it still seemed a bit much. But still, Ukyo was standing there, looking at them with her hands clasped in front of her and stars in her eyes. "You're all so cute! Er, except Ranchan, of course!"

Ranma rolled her eyes. "Gee, thanks Ucchan. Glad to know I can count on you." She sighed, and quickly got changed while Kasumi set up the music player.

"Okay, everyone," The eldest Tendo said with her usual serene smile. "We'll have to test these costumes out on stage first. Just to make sure there aren't any problems."

Ukyo grinned. "Well, let me know how it goes. I'd better get back to the restaurant before the evening rush."
Ranma felt there was far more of that night he couldn't remember, but it was overshadowed by what he did recall, and what had been coming. He flinched, dropping the bottle of cold water. "We-we don't got time for this."

Hanayo sighed. "Ranma, I don't want to lose you," she said, missing the growing look of horror on his face. "I know it's been tough, but I've had fun too. And I'm feeling so much better, and the last few gym classes I was actually doing everything, and."

When Hanayo was cut off, it was by a scream of primal terror from Ranma. "No no no! This ain't happening again. One is bad enough, but I really ain't got time for two! No! You're getting out of here, and then - "

Hanayo stamped her foot. "Saotome Ranma, listen to me! Tell me you know what you're planning, anything at all, and I'll go hide! Honest!" When Ranma was silent again, Hanayo held out the bottle. "I don't know you that well. I'd like to, but that's not for right now. But I know Saotome Ranma doesn't lose, and if you try to talk with your family without knowing what you're going to say, you're going to lose! I know it because I couldn't tell my mom what I really wanted."

Ranma blinked in surprise. That was probably more words Hanayo had said about anything other than idols, at least directly, than any other time since they'd met. "And...how's turning into a girl and singing supposed to help?"

Hanayo swallowed. "Maybe it won't, but you can't say it, and I don't know how else you'd express it...."

Hanayo sighed. The truth was, at a time like this he'd normally fight, but the idea of getting into a brawl with Hanayo was so ridiculous it only crossed his mind in a form of desperation. He knew Honoka could fight with words, but that form was new to him. He reached for the bottle again - if nothing else it would get Hanayo to admit defeat and get out of the way.

Furinkan high school didn't have a dedicated auditorium - unlike private schools, it was built on the government's standard educational floorplan. With space at a premium, nearly every Japanese school had devised a simple solution - an elevated stage was built off the edge, with space beneath the trap doors used for stage productions doubling as storage for large gym equipment, as well as the massive number of folding chairs for an audience when the stage was in use.

The lights had dimmed, and DoCo was set to perform on the Furinkan stage. It wasn't the first time, but the audiences for these after-school performances had grown with each. And with the new costumes, Ranma could see through the dark that the entire male population of the school was there. "This is just gettin' worse all the time."

Kasumi just smiled at her. "Now, Ranma, if you didn't like your costume shouldn't you have said something?"

"That was before I saw the audience," Ranma pointed out, still grumbling. "Well, let's get it over with."

"I don't see what you're complaining about," Akane grumbled as well. "This skirt's too short. The front row - "

Shampoo smirked nastily. "What wrong, Akane? Afraid they not like what they see?"

Akane gritted her teeth, but a glare from Kasumi silenced the both of them. Instead, she sighed. "More like they - "
"Won't see anything," Kasumi said firmly. "Unless you get too close to the edge of the stage. Just stand back like we were doing and it will be fine."

"All right," Akane said, taking a deep breath. "Let's do this."

They stepped onto the stage, while Nabiki thumbed the remote control to pull back the curtains. But that day, there wasn't to be a performance. The music, coming from an old tape recorder, wasn't plugged directly into the sound system. Instead, it had been rigged to a small bag of takeout food with a small sparker. Once the music started, the timer began, and just as the first notes played, the spark went off.

In response, pyrotechnic explosions went off behind the five girls of DoCo, startling them. It would have been just like a real concert, except for one detail. The explosives carried a pressure wave with them, and the skirts that Ukyo had provided all blew up. Kasumi's only went up past her knees, and of course Ranma wasn't wearing one, but Akane, Nabiki, and Shampoo found themselves displaying far more than they had planned.

Ranma was the first to react, naturally. She leaped for the taut ropes hauling the curtains up, and snapped it with a quick swipe of a knife-hand. The curtain dropped, but fluttered as it did, pushed out and upward by the continuing pressure waves from the explosion bouncing off the back wall. The glimpse was brief, but enough. The crowds went wild.

Ranma landed, all the while wondering why she had done that. It had seemed right, but...but there was no time. Akane was shrieking in outrage. "I can't believe I let you talk me into this!"

"Hey, what did I do?!" Ranma shouted back, naturally enough. For once, she really couldn't think of anything.

The truth was, that was because Akane wasn't actually accusing Ranma in particular of anything. But at the time, Ranma didn't know that and unknowingly had made herself a target. Again. Akane whirled on her. "Why didn't you tell me there were pyrotechnics rigged up?! We don't use them!"

"I didn't know either, ya uncute chick!" Ranma snapped back. She almost immediately regretted it, but then she felt the sting twice, seeing Kasumi's expression fall as Akane launched into another tirade. At the time, she had noticed a familiar scent, but it wasn't until later that Ranma could place it. Fresh okonomiyaki.

Then, suddenly, Ranma stopped, and looked at Hanayo. She blinked in surprise as, slowly, very slowly, Ranma gently pushed it back at her. "You know what, I don't need to sing myself. That ain't why I'm doing this. He gave her one of his trademarked smirks. "And you were brave enough to come looking for me. Got a little more in you?"

Kaede sighed, looking at the placid expression on Nodoka's face and trying not to let any of her own emotions show. "Saotome, I'm sorry, but can I go over this once more, just to be sure I understand what you're saying?"

"Of course. I don't want there to be any more misunderstandings," Nodoka said.

Kaede restrained another sigh. "So, your husband decided he wished to raise your son, Ranma, to be the greatest martial artist of his generation. I can certainly understand that." She closed her eyes. "I can also understand your initial opposition. A training journey for a mere toddler, in this day and age, is....well, unheard of. What is giving me some trouble is your conditions for agreeing. If I understand
the story from you, your husband counter-proposed to make Ranma a 'man among men.' Did you not
discuss what the term could mean in advance?"

Nodoka gave her a puzzled look "I should think that would be perfectly obvious, Nishikino."

Kaede waited for more clarification, but when it didn't come, it just confirmed her worst fears. But
she knew she needed to be thorough. "Very well. And...to seal this contract, you had a toddler leave
his handprint. Do you believe Ranma understood what he was agreeing to?"

"Of course!"

That about tore it. "Mrs. Saotome," she said, setting her tea down on the table. "I speak now as
Ranma's physician - I cannot allow him to return to your custo - " she was only brought up a little
short when Nodoka's hands went to the non-existent sword that was out in the hallway rather than at
her back "- custody at this time."

"How dare you!?" Nodoka's eyes flared with murder.

Kaede didn't back down. "Ranma is, of course, free to ignore my recommendation. But I believe that
his recovery, which is proceeding apace, would be slowed by being returned to the Tendo household
now."

Nodoka recoiled as if struck. "You mean that Ranma is sick? Why didn't you mention that before?
Doctor Tofu is more than adequately trained at treating all sorts of things. I would prefer him to a . . .
western-trained doctor anyway."

Kaede ignored the jab. "It's not a malady in the traditional sense. But I believe the excess stresses of
living with his fiance may have longer-term repercussions. This may be why he follows and is trying
to emulate Kousaka so strongly." Though I really doubt it.

"If my son is choosing to emulate a girl, then he's in violation of his oath," Nodoka said slowly.

Kaede sighed. "It's more complicated than that. Rather, I would argue that Ranma has come to
understand that there are things your husband failed to teach him. The Saotome school emphasizes a
philosophy of learning by emulating and adapting to others, and teaches its' students to seek out the
strongest opponents to learn from, yes?" When Nodoka nodded slowly, Kaede smiled. She had the
woman. "Kousaka Honoka's greatest talent, one I doubt even she realizes, is that she understands
people. She was able to turn my own daughter from a near-recluse into a normal teenage girl in a
matter of weeks." Well, almost normal, but we'll cross that bridge later.

Nodoka frowned. "I don't understand."

"Social skills are not a battle, Saotome," Kaede explained patiently. "Thus, Ranma, understanding
that he needed someone to learn from, simply latched onto the greatest talent he saw." She held up a
hand to forestall protests. "Again, I doubt Ranma is even aware of this himself - these are principles
that have been trained into him before he could speak properly. He cannot learn while in the Tendo
household, where these skills will be tested before he is ready. So he remains in 'training' until he
feels ready."

"But...but...a girls' school..." Nodoka tried again lamely. "Ranma must atone for his behavior."

Kaede shook her head. "Then we're at an impasse...but I will reiterate my first point. I sincerely
doubt my ability to force Ranma to leave my home if he wishes to stay. Further, even if he left of his
own will, I can't guarantee he will return to your residence."
"He will do his duty," Nodoka insisted. That was when the music started. It was slow, sweet, and sounded through the whole house. The two women looked at each other. "Your daughter?"

Kaede shook her head. "It sounds like her piano, but it better not be."

It was then that the singing started. Neither woman recognized the voice, but it sounded like an angel had descended…

Ranma pulled out Maki's keyboard and hooked it up to the computer and a set of speakers so big Hanayo was sure they were originally meant for a concert hall. She watched him fumble with the whole thing. "Uh...Ranma, before you try something really ill-advised, can you actually play that thing?"

"I haven't got a clue," Ranma admitted. "But Maki uses this thing to record all our background tracks. No idea if the keyboard actually does anything for playback either, but we got one shot so I better hook it up." She watched as he puzzled over several USB connectors and a few others she didn't even recognize, but eventually the computer popped up a prompt indicating that the hardware was connected. "I wonder why she doesn't leave it like that…" he muttered. "Oh well, she can yell at me later. Right."

He turned to Hanayo, who gulped nervously until he returned it with a very nervous smile of his own. Then, he said "I said I got an idea...but...I gotta tell you something. Shoulda thought of this earlier. Once we get my mom up here, I gotta say a lotta stuff that ain't strictly true. I just want ya to know in advance. And if ya wanna insult me or anything about it….yeah, I'm cool, just wait till my mom's gone, okay?"

Hanayo nodded. "Okay, but - "

"I... all right, look, Hanayo…" Ranma frowned. "I'm not quite sure how to put this. I need you to think back for me. Remember the day Maki recruited you? She said you got the whole classroom to stop and stare when you sang a scale." Hanayo blushed a beet red. "That's not a problem!" Ranma tried to clarify, keeping his voice down to a whisper so as not to shout. "But here's the thing. Ever since you've been good, yes, but to do something like that? That's Art. Not the Art, if you get what I mean, but…"

"Ranma…" Hanayo tried to interrupt.

Ranma wasn't having that. "Hanayo….I just gotta ask. Can you do that for me right now?"

"N-now!" Hanayo squeaked. "I don't even know how I did it then!"

Ranma sighed. "Shoulda thought of that," he said. It took them a few moments of looking at each other before Ranma swallowed. I hate sayin' this... "Hanayo...Kayo…" he began, although he refused to use the honorific some of the other girls tacked onto the shortened name. "Kayo...is that okay?" Hanayo nodded reluctantly. "Kayo...I can't do this alone." The girl gasped at him, her purple eyes widening in shock. "I'm a martial artist. That's all. Before I met you guys, I wouldn't have had the first idea how ta do...any of this. I'm still learning the how….but the why? Forget it."

Hanayo swallowed, but let Ranma continue speaking. "Remember, back at the big meeting when we put our notes into the hat?" She nodded. "I think I know what you told Honoka now. But if you had to do it again, right now….you gotta look deep down. Why do you want to sing, want to sing so bad you'd go in front of a crowd when you hate it like you do."

Hanayo took a deep breath, but Ranma cut her off with a small, sad smile. "Kayo, don't tell me. Tell
And she did. Hanayo took a deep breath, and nodded. "Your mother's downstairs. We...we don't
know if I've got it, but we have to try. If it doesn't work…"

Ranma nodded. "I'll...I'll think of something." But now it was Ranma's turn to look like he had no
confidence in what he was saying.

Hanayo found it was an ugly look on him, so she smiled. "I...I've got it."

"Which song?" Ranma asked, turning to the computer and turning up the volume.

Hanayo smiled. "Nawatobi."

Ranma gave her an uncomfortable look, but nodded. Hanayo took a seat, and straightened her back.
A pair of headphones with a mic were put on her head, which caused her to look questioningly at the
boy. "If I got this figured right, it'll block out some of the background music for you, but you can still
sing and have it coming out of the speakers." He held up a mic. "Also, I can give you direction
through this."

Hanayo shrugged. "Okay, but..."

"Just in case," Ranma said. "I know you're good, but..."

Hanayo nodded, and took one breath. It was obvious with the first note that Ranma had nothing to
worry about, except for the one thing he knew was coming. Rather than address the door or the
screen showing the current place in the sheet music, Hanayo chose to look Ranma right in the eyes,
as if addressing him personally with the song. The slow piano started, and Ranma felt a chill run
down his spine when Hanayo closed her eyes and joined in, right on cue. "I feel as though our
encounter has changed me. I've found the person I want to become. I've always, always felt this
longing, growing in my heart..."

Kaede stopped dead at the bottom of the stairs, the words (and voice) finally registering as she
realized Ranma's plan. Oh no. And he had to drag Koizumi into this. She looked at Nodoka,
realizing she had stopped too, and was paying attention to the soft voice carrying down to the
hallway below.

When I was about to give up
You reached out your hand to help me
The warmth of your gentle hand -
I love it!

Kaede almost reflexively glanced at Nodoka, only to realize she was already going down the hall
towards the umbrella stand, a glint of determination in her eyes. "Stop right there," she hissed. "I told
you, I won't condone any violence in my home. As a family of medicine, you would dishonor us by
shedding blood here." Nodoka's nostrils flared, but she silently nodded and walked back to the stairs.
"And don't interrupt," Kaede added. "Whatever you have to say can wait until that girl's finished."

Nodoka whirled, obviously restraining herself from screaming. "You go too far, Nishikino!"

"Do I?" Kaede smirked. "Tell me, what's she singing about?" That was, barely, enough to get
Nodoka to stop and listen again.

Ranma smiled, as Hanayo's eyes closed and she continued to sing. She was gently swaying now, all her focus on the words and notes. *It's like...* he thought, then smiled in return. Gently, he whispered into the mic. "Perfect. Keep that up."

Hanayo didn't even pause to acknowledge the direction, just continuing to sing, her voice still gentle, almost lilting...

*Rather than hanging my head, unable to form words*

*I'll say goodbye to these feelings of hesitation*

*I've always, always longed to see you*

*I can't let it end only in my heart*

*Over and over, everyone jumped along the jump rope*

*And I smiled and laughed, too*

*Let's always be together and play*

*That feeling is precious to me*

Then, suddenly, her eyes opened again, and her eyes seemed to brighten still further even in the ordinary light of the room. On stage a dark stage, with spotlight and maybe a camera on her and a projector screen, it would be dazzling.

*When I lost my way, your eyes led me*

*Those gentle eyes made my wish come true*

Ranma would have gulped in nervousness, but he recognized the place the feelings were coming from now. He turned back to the music playing on the computer screen.

Nodoka listened, her expression unchanging. When the lyrics reached a pause point, she was obviously baffled by Kaede's insistence on this exercise. "Quite clearly yet another girl throwing herself at my son, of course."

"Saotome, you're hearing but you're not listening." Kaede groaned quietly. *I can't believe I'm caught up in this scheme now. "That song's not just for Ranma. I don't know Koizumi well, but..."*

"Enough. I'm going up there." Nodoka resumed stalking up the stairs, although thankfully she didn't have her weapon. Kaede followed as the music continued, the two teenagers either unaware or choosing to ignore the sound from the hallway.

Ranma, of course, was not unaware. Even if he couldn't hear, he could feel his mother's *ki* aura flaring from up Maki's room. "Right, mom's coming. Don't be surprised when the door opens."

Hanayo was too caught up in the song now to actually acknowledge anything anyone was saying, but she somehow instinctively knew to turn to her coming 'audience.' While nothing about her voice changed in the slightest, her eyes narrowed just the tiniest bit, and the glitter of her eyes hardened
into gemstone, creating an altogether different, and almost terrifying effect. At least if you knew the normal Hanayo.

Nodoka opened the door on this version of Hanayo, and felt herself stopped stone cold dead. While the girl was looking towards the woman, it was obvious she wasn't the one the message being sung was intended for - there was something very different in mind for her.

*This throbbing in my heart won't disappear with a 'thank you'*

*Little by little, I'm grabbing hold of my dream*

*This throbbing in my heart won't disappear with a 'thank you'*

*Thank you*

*Isn't it fun? Isn't it fun? When I try to embrace you*

*My tears come spilling out*

*I'm sorry*

Nodoka turned to Ranma in desperation, trying to seek some handle on this bizarre turn, but he shook his head. Having done what she needed to with Nodoka, she turned back to Ranma, standing as the music swelled one last time.

*My gratitude is about to overflow*

*Little by little, my dream draws closer*

*My gratitude is about to overflow…*

At that point, she took the few steps towards Ranma needed to close the distance between them, bent down to where he was sitting at the computer, and gave him the briefest of kisses on the forehead. "Thank you."

*I'm happy, so happy that I don't know what to do*

*So happy that my tears come spilling out*

*I'm sorry*

As the music died, for a moment, no one seemed to know what to do. Ranma, finally, turned back to the computer and clicked something. "Got it."

Kaede blinked. "What, exactly, did you get?"

"The recording, of course," Ranma smirked, causing Hanayo to meep in dismay. "Didn't think I'd waste a perfect chance to get that song for the album, did you?" Everyone blinked in astonishment as Ranma turned to Nodoka, his own eyes hard now. "Do ya get it now?" Nodoka shook her head, but before she could start Ranma cut her off. "This. This is what I'm doing out here. These girls might've been able to pull it off without me, but I doubt it." He made a gesture. "Two months ago this girl here couldn't say her name in public without running and hiding, and now she's ready to be a star thanks to me."

He stood up. "I've also been reading, thanks to the homework I never had time to do before now. You're all obsessed with honor like it's still the Tokugawa era? Well, remember a martial artist is
supposed to have a creative side too. Calligraphy, theater...music?" Nodoka swallowed - she wasn't used to her own arguments being turned on her. "It ain't traditional, and maybe it ain't your idea of 'perfectly masculine' but you just heard the results. I think I'm pretty good at this stuff, don't you?"

Nodoka seized on the weakness offered. "But that is the problem, Ranma. You cannot participa-"

"Who says anything about 'participating'?" Ranma shouted back. Hanayo was now cowering in the corner, as the anger in the room grew. "I know all the dances, sure, I watch enough. But I'm not doing them. I don't wear the school uniform, and I sure as heck don't wear makeup or anything like that. I'm just doing what I gotta do for the test."

Nodoka looked between Ranma, Kaede, and even Hanayo (who had managed to recover a bit and was glaring at her slightly.) "...I hold you in violation of your oath," she said formally. "Come to the dojo at dawn to atone."

Ranma blinked in surprise. Kaede gasped, and Hanayo nearly fainted. Nodoka ignored all of it and turned to go. No one stopped her. When she was gone, Ranma looked at Hanayo. "Uh...yeah, sorry about claiming too much credit there."

"That's what you're worried about?" Kaede and Hanayo shrieked at the same time.

Ranma signed. "If everything else fails, I can just point out she said the oath was fulfilled, right?"

"Don't tell me you're actually going!" Hanayo shouted. "How are we going to make it into Love Live without you?"

Kaede put her hands on her hips. "Ranma, I can't stop you, but this is insane. She's going to kill you!"

"She's still my mom!"

Kaede shook her head. "Not for long. With that kind of behavior I can have a family lawyer get you out of there in about an hour, and probably make it permanent with one psychiatric evaluation - "

"I told ya I ain't goin' ta no head shrinker!" Ranma growled.

Kaede smirked. "The doctor's not for you."

That gave Ranma a chill. "You think…"

"No doubt in my mind." Kaede said with steel in her voice.

Ranma thought about it, and shook his head. "Still no good." He took a seat in the chair. "If I don't at least go, it's...maybe I'm not the one to really explain this. Even with the other martial artists, I've been on the move too much to really set down roots, but for a lot of schools lineage is important. If I get kicked out of the family, I don't got any other options than Love Live and establishing my own school directly under the old letch's, and even that could be a blow." Kaede and Hanayo looked at him skeptically. "It's kinda hard to explain. I think I get what the old men were trying to do now, though. Pops took me on a long training journey to make me the strongest. Tendo set down roots to try to make a reputation."

Kaede nodded. "That didn't go so well, as I understand it," she said. "Tendo's school doesn't have any real students either."

"Yeah." Ranma signed. "I guess they were hoping I could turn it around. Probably could if I cared."
Hanayo blinked. "You don't? But...what about your Mastery?"

Ranma shook his head. "That's mostly about the right to teach. I'm nowhere near ready to settle down that much, and I'm sure not putting my own kid through what I did. It's gonna be about fifty years before I'm ready to pick out an heir." Both of them gave him confused looks. "Oh, yeah, you don't know. One of the things about ki is that, if you are real good and real talented you can extend your own lifespan. The letch does it by absorbing it from the girls he feels up, or even with that his drinking would have him dead by now. If I'm careful and live healthy, I could probably make four hundred or so." Kaede just stared at him. "What? You've met two people who are three hundred and change, and neither of them had modern medicine on top of the talent."

Kaede needed a moment to shake it off. "So...Tofu really is in his early fifties? He looks fresh out of his residency..."

"Yep," Ranma grinned. "But that's beside the point. Having a family, being able to trace back your Art...it's important enough that it could set me back later if I don't at least try to take care of this. Even Sonoda wouldn't touch me after just walking away."

Hanayo gulped. "But...what if she makes you..."

"We'll just have to see."
Rin sighed. "Why won't you just let me stand up?"

"Because there isn't enough room in here for a dance routine," Erena said patiently for the third time. "Why the heck do you need to move so much for English work?"

Rin twisted in place to try to work out a kink in her back. "Because that's how Ranma drilled me on it before." When Erena's confusion was clear on her face, Rin quickly described the exercises she had been put through.

When it was done, Erena shook her head. "You're all nuts. But at least most of it seems harmless enough."

Rin groaned. "Tell me about it. I just hope Kayochi's safe." She sighed. "Look, thanks for trying to help, but I don't think we're going to get any more studying done as long as I'm waiting to hear something."

"You make it sound like this is life or death," Erena said skeptically.

Rin tried to smirk, but it just came out weak. "It probably is. Mostly just Ranma's, but it's hard to tell." Then her phone rang. She had it out of her pocket so quickly Erena was wondering if she'd imagined it until the redhead spoke. "Hello? Kayochi! What's going on?" She paused, then looked up at Erena nervously. "Uh....I hate to ask, but do you have Skype on your laptop or something?"

Erena shrugged. "Conference call? Yeah, sure. What's the number?" Once she had it, though, instead of turning her laptop around Erena turned on the flat panel television embedded in the wall. Seeing Rin's amazed look, she rolled her eyes. "In case we need to do an audition or something. Easier than traveling across the country or to Hong Kong or wherever."

Rin was about to ask just how often they really needed that when the screen popped up. It seemed Maki and Honoka were in a fancy inn (of course), and Kayochi was in Maki's house with Ranma and Maki's mother. Umi, Eri, and Kotori had somehow wound up in an unfinished room, probably underground, with sleeping bags set out over thick pads. And Nozomi was finishing up rolling up a poster in a surprisingly bare room with Nico sitting at the computer. "Uh, okay, what's going on?"

Surprisingly, it was Mrs. Nishikino that stepped up to fill them in on the entire conversation. The whole thing created a round of silence as everyone digested what was said, but Honoka spoke first. "No. Ranma, you're not going, and that's final."

Umi bit her lip nervously, but finally nodded. "Ranma, I can't honestly see how you haven't already done all honor demands of you. The oath is fulfilled, anything else...insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result. I know you know that one."

"I know, I know, she ain't gonna listen." Ranma sighed. "I was hoping to talk to Pop, actually. I know he don't wanna die either."

Nico gave . . . well, the screen, but probably Ranma a shrewd look. "You know, I thought I'd be telling you to stick with your family, but no. Screw it. If you need something else for a family, I think we've got a good one here." Everyone stopped. "Whaat?"

Nozomi chuckled. "Wouldn't go that far yet, but I think we all know what Nico's trying to say."
Eri gave Nozomi a smile. "We may not be that close, but we *are* a team. What hurts one of us, hurts *all* of us."

Kotori just smiled. "Ranma, I'm sure we can figure something else out. Mama got you into Otonoki, right? There's some other way here."

Ranma stopped to think about it, then shook his head. "Guys, I appreciate it, I really do, but this? I gotta handle it myself. I just...I gotta. I promise I'm not going to die. If she tries to make me kill myself, I *will* walk out. But if that isn't the plan, I don't wanna just...you know, give up."

Rin felt her hackles rising when Hanayo put a hand on Ranma's shoulder. *Kayochi never touches anyone but me!* But she quashed it, saying nothing.

Honoka finally sighed. "All right, Ranma. But if you die, I'll...I'll...I'll kill myself too so I can follow you into the afterlife!"

Everyone laughed at that, and it descended into a few minutes of small talk before people started to disconnect. When Rin ended her end of the call, Erena was staring at her. "You were awfully quiet."

"It's just Ranma," Rin grumbled. "Boy ran up a skyscraper today. He'll be fine. I don't know why everyone's worried."

Erena sat down. "You mean other than the fact that he's going to the home of a psychopath?"

"Probably is one." Rin shrugged. "Look, I'm up for some more English."

Erena gave her one last look, then sighed. "I guess it's none of my business, but Tsubasa *owes* me for this."

Eri sighed. "Umi, you're practically **vibrating.**"

The second year girl in question wasn't quite that bad, but there was a bit of a nervous tick in her eye that seemed to refuse to go away. Kotori was doing her best to consult some nearby charts she had found to rub Umi's back, but it just seemed to be making things worse. Umi finally put a hand, gently, on Kotori's and shook her head. "I'm....I'll manage. I'm just really afraid Ranma will end up going through with this."

Kotori found this puzzling. "Umi, no one really does that kind of thing anymore....do they?"

Umi sighed. "Not really. Father says even with other martial artists that went out of style after the war, but *Ranma doesn't know that.*" She punched the concrete, cracking it. "That idiot father of his....oh, I want to *kill them.*" Eri put a hand on her shoulder. "...right, right, that's...ugh."

"Don't get me wrong." Eri's voice was cold. "I'm right there with you." Both of the younger girls stared at her in shock. "The whole family's a bunch of dangerous lunatics. Ranma included." Seeing both their expressions turn to alarm, she smiled. "Look, I wouldn't have him any other way, but he's definitely crazy, and definitely dangerous. Just not to us. The rest of them, we don't have that. If I could keep you all safe with violence, at this point..."

"Eri, no." Kotori covered her mouth, looking vaguely ill. "This..."

Eri sighed. "I know it's wrong...and it probably wouldn't work."

Umi winced. "It's...it's not that it wouldn't work. It's just not who we are." She started to pull off her
blouse, making Eri blush, but she didn't notice. "I want to follow Honoka's lead. She's . . . if anyone has the right of this, it's her."

Kotori shrugged, and started to strip down for bed in the hot room as well. "That's nice, but what if we can't?"

Umi was about to respond when Eri's phone went off.

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After most of the Muses had gone back to whatever they were doing, Honoka had chosen to stay on the line with Ranma and Hanayo, retreating from the main room into the large bathroom with the laptop. "Listen, can you guys close the window? I don't want to give the world a peep show."

Ranma coughed while Hanayo blushed. "Honoka, seriously! Over the net?" the girl stammered out.

"What? It's seriously nothing either of you two hasn't seen before," Honoka chided gently. "Besides, I need to run the water a bit so Maki can't hear this." It actually took a few minutes with the compromise of the camera not being pointed at Honoka until she was in the bath, with a towel wrapped around her body. With the water running and the mic pointed away from it, allowed a conversation after a fashion. "Okay, Hanayo," Honoka said. "Don't think I didn't see you back there. But that's my little brother you're looking at going after."

"Oi."

Honoka gave Ranma a bit of a look. "Since there's no one sane to give this talk, it's up to me. You realize what you're getting yourself into, right? Three crazy fiances and all the rest?"

Hanayo shrunk a little from the screen, but nodded. "I don't...I don't know if….but…"

"Oi."

Honoka gave Hanayo an evil smile. "Good, because if you make things any harder for us, I will track you down and tickle you."

"Oi! Honoka, you're layin' it on a bit thick, aincha?" Ranma finally managed to get a word in. "I ain't even said I'm interested back."

"Yes, well, that's the other thing," Honoka said easily. "So we have no misunderstandings here. Ranma, without any hesitation, are you willing to go out with Hanayo?" Ranma gulped, and when Honoka saw him hesitate she held up her hands in a 'T' sign Ranma didn't recognize. "Time, time out. No good."

"Hey, you can't lay that on a guy like that!" Ranma shouted.

Honoka smirked. "In your case, I can and I will. Not giving a decent answer to that question for the past year is how you got into this mess. I'm not asking you to go out and get a ring, but is this an option you can see yourself taking?"

Ranma gulped. "I think I preferred Pops' idea of intense training to you, sometimes." He turned to Hanayo, and took another deep breath. "Look, Kayo, you're cute and all..."

Hanayo blushed. "You...you're not..."

Ranma nodded. "Definitely not now, probably not once I get...everything else sorted."

Hanayo gulped. "Don't tell me you're seriously thinking about going back to that...that..."
"It ain't like that, Kayo!" Ranma stood up, starting to pace in the living room. "I mean...maybe it is, but I think I won't say stupid stuff around her as much now."

Hanayo felt tears welling up. "So...so that's it then? I'm just too late?"

Ranma groaned. "That ain't it. Look, please don't cry, it ain't gonna help. It's just...you know what it's like, right? Things may slow down a bit, but that's pretty much the kind of life I'm looking at. Crazy challengers at the crack of dawn, months at a time in the country on this or that training trip, solving problems with magical beings that want to kidnap the local maiden population...the old lech getting in my business..." He finally turned and looked at her. "And that's the nice version. Eri says I may need to go to university, get a doctorate or something if I really want to look for a cure to the curse. The money's got to come from somewhere for that, and a university's willing to foot the bill if I can find things for them. You'd either have to live without me for months or years at a stretch, or be ready to live in the Amazon or the Sahara or even worse to stay with me." He put a hand on her shoulder. "I'm not trying to scare you, just making you face facts. Until you can tell me you're really up for that, and mean it, you are not the girl for me. You understand?"

Hanayo wasn't crying now, but staring at him. "Y-yeah, I get it."

"Right." Ranma turned back to the screen. "Happy?"

Honoka nodded. "Mostly. That was a little rough, but I guess under the circumstances we can't do 'gentle' yet." Ranma was about to say something, when Doctor Tofu's window popped back up on the Skype call. Honoka blinked, but opened it, splitting the screen with her and Umi. "What is it?"

Umi wasn't in the slightest phased by Honoka being in the hotel bathtub. "Ranma, you have to get back to the Dojo! Right now!"

"What?" all three shouted.

"Your mother is trying to kill your father!"

Genma really wished he knew what this was about. Oh, he had his guesses, of course. Nodoka spends all her time giggling into her cell phone like she knows something no one else does? At the time, it seemed to be distracting her from the problems with Ranma, so he hadn't said anything, but that was obviously a mistake.

But what had brought on this change? All he knew was she hadn't been around all day, and now she was screaming about how their son was a 'girly-boy' and that he had failed in his sacred duties. At least, that's what he thought she'd said. He had been paying more attention to the edge of that katana.

And the problem was that, while Nodoka hadn't trained in years, had never used a katana in serious practice, and had never undergone ki training because, in her family, women simply did not do so, she did still have the talent. And, much like Akane, she was able to tap it instinctively. By contrast, he was unarmed, and to tell the truth he really didn't want to hurt her.

Which left two options, and frankly, running until she calmed down wasn't working. "Dear, please, just tell me what happened! Killing me isn't going to fix this!"

"That little tramp practically threw herself at Ranma in that big house, and he didn't do anything to tell her off!" Nodoka shrieked. "He's dishonored the engagement, and he refuses to stop going to that school or doing this 'School Idol' thing! You've failed, Gemma! Now, are you going to honor your agreement, or do I need to do it for you!?" Nodoka punctuated her yelling with several wild swings as neck height.
Genma scrambled away from the slices easily enough - Nodoka's lack of familiarity with the heavier weapon meant she mis-timed each swing, making it easy to dodge. "Nodoka, you're clearly distraught! I won't have this until you've had a chance to calm down!" To try to put some distance between them, he ran out into the garden and leaped over the pond. *With any luck, Nodoka won't realize she can just jump over it in her current state.*

His luck never was that good. Nodoka did, in fact, make the (relatively short) leap and nearly cleaved him in two, only her lack of skill saving him again...as he found his back against the wall. *Not good. If I don't resolve to seriously hurt her, there's no way I can get that blade out of her hands.* He finally assumed a proper stance. *Please, don't make me do this.*

Nodoka raised her blade high…only to have it kicked out of her hands, and not by Genma. It twirled as it sailed through the air, until Ranma caught it and landed easily. "Mom, *enough!*" Nodoka just stared at him in absolute bafflement. "What the hell is *wrong* with you?" Nodoka just continued to stare at him, completely dumbfounded by his presence. "Oh no, none of that. You gave me till dawn. Til then, I don't gotta do nothing, and you've been acting crazy this whole time!"

"I have not!" Nodoka shouted. "It's obvious what you've been doing."

Ranma narrowed his eyes. "Okay, explain. Step by step."

Nodoka snorted. "Well, first you went to that club...were you even in the crowd?" When Ranma hitched a moment, she smiled. "I knew it, you were on the stage!"

"Uh, no."

"I was never inside. I just left my phone on the roof so you'd think I was there." Nodoka repeated her gesture of disbelief. "You're questioning my word?" He asked, shifting to a completely formal tone. "What's your school? Your *real* school?"

Nodoka blinked. "Son...are you...?"

"If you're gonna be like *this*? Hell yes!" Ranma shouted at her. "Now, stand down or be challenged."

"You're tryin - "

Ranma snarled. "I am *not* trying to get out of anything. I'll be here at dawn either way, it's just whether we talk this out or fight it out." Nodoka seemed to consider this for a few moments, but said nothing. "Very well. As the only practicing student of the Anything Goes school, I challenge you for the right to determine my own path."

Nodoka nodded. "Very well. I am Hanpieta Nodoka, of Hanpieta Hoteita school. If this is what you want, I'll kill you in a duel instead of seppuku. You've earned that much, I suppose."

Ranma nodded, and held out his hand. "I'll hold onto this in the meantime. I assume your family uses a different sword. Do you have a champion, or you gonna fight yourself?" Nodoka blinked. "It's a Western thing. I'm not going to make my own mom fight if she's not up to it."

Nodoka narrowed her eyes. "You will find, son, that there is more to battle than *ki.*" She undid the scabbard from her own belt and held it out to him. Ranma took it, sheathed the blade, and left at a slow walking speed.

Nodoka waited until he was out of earshot before she squealed. "Oh my son is so manly….just a shame he's not manly enough..." She looked around...only to see Genma was also nowhere to be found. "...oh well."
Ranma was wandering the Nerima streets, vaguely making his way towards Tofu's clinic, when he glanced over his shoulder. "Old man, I got a sword. Better make this good."

Genma stepped out of the shadows. "Son, I can see we're past where I can tell you what to do, but have you really thought this through?"

"Well, let's see. I lose the dojo, the Saotome name, Akane's not under any more obligation to marry me, same with Ukyo..." Ranma looked back at his father. "Miss anything?"

"What about the Art?!" Genma roared

Ranma's eyes narrowed. "I'm the pervert's student now, not yours, remember? I left the name out of the school for a reason."

Genma looked as if he'd been gut-punched. "...you...you're..."

Ranma nodded. "I'm pinning my future on Honoka, not you."

"I'm...I'm hurt." Genma said, and something in his tone prompted Ranma to hold back his usual sarcastic reply. "Ranma, yes, I was hoping you'd support me in my retirement. What father doesn't hope for that, even in this new era? It's not that I don't have contingencies, I'll be...well, not fine, but we went to China for more than just training. You remember, I was careful in our dealings?"

Ranma quirked an eyebrow. "Other than the Amazons, how many of my scams from China have come back to haunt me?"

Ranma blinked. "Not as many as I'd expect, even with Shampoo chasing us on the return trip."

Genma nodded. "There are a number of Wudang monasteries I was careful to establish friendly ties with. I'll have to brush up on my Mandarin again...and learn to read it. But I was trying to give you some of the things I never had. Stability, a home, a place to call our own."

Ranma shook his head. "Why didn't you just tell me?"

"I tried," Genma pointed out. "You weren't in a place to listen to reason that day...and in hindsight, I can't say I blame you. But at the same time, I'd been reading Tendo's letters for years. I knew he was falling apart. I...I had hoped having one of his daughters engaged would be what he needed to start coming back, and I wasn't completely wrong." Genma saw Ranma's face hardening. "I have made mistakes. Now that there's nothing more to be gained by lying, I can admit that. But any moron could see your affection for Akane. Won't you reconsider?"

Ranma sighed. "Pops, ask me in the morning. Do you have any idea why Mom's snapped?"

Genma shook his head. "She was always...high-spirited, but I can only assume the isolation of the last decade got to her." He took a deep breath. There was only one chance, maybe, to get his son's life back on track before he did something that couldn't easily be walked back. "Ranma...regardless of your mother's decisions tomorrow, I will not hold you to the pledge. At least, not while Nodoka's in this state. If, after she's had several weeks to calm down, and she shows serious understanding of the facts, we may have to revisit this decision, but right now she is clearly not in her right mind."

Ranma stopped walking again and looked at the man who was his father. "All right. You got a deal in mind. I'm listening."

"I will sign the permission form to transfer to Otonokizaka. In fact, I'll do that anyway. I only ever sent you to Furinkan because it's free and I couldn't afford high school. I'd be a fool to let you pass up a free scholarship to such a prestigious school." Ranma seemed a little surprised at that. "Good,
now to sweeten the deal. "Further, I won't try to stop you from attending the Idol Research Club if you want to continue after we discuss the real deal. I can see now that trying to stop you was a mistake - but I also won't interfere in your fiance's efforts in that direction."

"Get to it, Pops," Ranma said coolly. "I need to get a few hours sleep."

Genma nodded. "Very well. Here is what I am offering - I will administer the Mastery exam proper. Right here, right now. If you pass, you will be a Master of the Saotome School of Anything Goes Martial Arts. Free to teach any student as you see fit. If you fail, you may continue Happousai's test, or abandon the school if you see fit. But before I will do so, you must answer to your actions."

Ranma snorted, and Genma snapped. "Do not pretend innocence. On your solemn word, you will actually take some damn responsibility for your petition against Akane and interview her, and guide her progress before she gets hurt?"

It was Ranma's turn to wince. *He's got me dead to rights there. But...* "Pops, I gotta protect my other friends from her temper too. The second she gets mad she's gonna assume they're out to get into my pants. Hell, Nozomi is trying to get into them, she's just honest about it being a fling."

"The lesbian?" Genma asked. "Or at least, the open one?"

Ranma nodded. "So you been keeping up with the web site? Yeah, she ain't the only one, but..."

Genma shrugged. "As long as you're not interested, it's not immediately relevant...but Kousaka Honoka is."

"What about her?"

Genma smiled. "That's my other question. Describe your relationship."

Ranma shrugged. "Ain't a lot to tell. Remember what I said about Ukyo, way back when? There's no way in *hell* I would ever say I prefer daifuku to Honoka. She's....I used to say Ukyo was my best friend, and at the time it was probably true, but Honoka makes you wonder what 'friend' even means by comparison. And you know what I'll go through for my friends."

Genma nodded. "Would you marry her?"

"No." Ranma shrugged. "It just...doesn't feel right. Can't say I know about 'kissing your sister' since I don't have one, but..."

Genma nodded. "Very well....then, if you pass your Mastery exam here, I will adopt her." At Ranma's confused expression, he smiled. "It would only make official what you have already described. Akane would have no objection then, would she?"

Ranma gave him a look. "What's your game, old man?"

Genma shook his head. "No more games, son. Or, rather, we've reached the endgame. It's getting to be time for this to end. The only question now is whether you're committed enough to see the path you obviously want to choose through...or you give up and take the Master's easy out."

Ranma's eyes narrowed. "Okay, Pops. What's your scam?"

Genma shook his head. "I don't blame you for asking that, but really, there isn't one this time. *Think.* I already told you the plan was to live out our lives here. You don't soil your own backyard. This had to be one hundred percent legitimate or it wouldn't work." At Ranma's skeptical look, he smiled. "Okay then. You've seen me work long enough. If there was a big payday after the wedding, what
would *you* do if you wanted it?"

Ranma blinked. "Nothing...but you're really asking what I think *you* would do. Yeah, I see that. Two forged signatures, a few pictures while me and Akane are drugged out of our minds, and a week later we're living the high life for a month in some temple back in China?"

Genma nodded. "Even if you don't take my path, it seems I taught you well. So you see, this is it. Do you accept?"

Ranma seemed to be debating it. Finally, he said, slowly "Tonight? No. I'll find out how Akane's doing first, then maybe we can talk. In Numazu it wasn't going so hot."

Genma swallowed. "I...I understand."

Ranma found another surprise when he got to the clinic, with Happousai sitting in the waiting room despite the late hour, with some tea that was so acrid both the old man and the student had crinkled noses in moments of the door opening. "Geez, what's got you so sick you'd drink *that*?"

"Bit of rheumatism," Happousai said back calmly, before downing the cup in one gulp. "What brings you back out here?"

Ranma shrugged. "Weren't you at the dojo earlier?"

"Actually, no." Happousai opened up a small bottle and popped back two pills. "But I can guess. Things are coming to a head?"

Ranma laughed. It wasn't his usual good humor, he seemed genuinely unhinged for a moment. When he got control of himself, he just said "Mom's decided that I'm a stripper and that Kayo's my new wife, I think."

"Giving up?"

Ranma stared at him. "Not on your life. Challenge at dawn." He held out the Saotome blade.

Happousai's reaction was not what he expected. "Ranma, keep that sword. You are going to need it."

"What can you tell me?" Ranma asked. "Mom said something that tells me she uses a style specifically meant to handle *ki* users, but how can something like that exist?"

Happousai shook his head. "I've never seen it myself, but supposedly her grandfather was able to take down a grandmaster with a simple parry and riposte maneuver while he was startled. I don't know if I believe that, but regardless, you're going to need something to defend yourself from her blade while you figure it out."

Ranma sighed. "Old man, seriously, what is the deal? You haven't been yourself ever since this whole thing started."

"All you need to know..." Happousai said with a very nasty look "...is that I will be here well after your test is finished, and the rest is none of your business."

Ranma blinked. "Yeesh, okay, okay...."

"Oh, and you've passed another test tonight." Happousai said idly. "Working out which one is your next test."
In the back office, set up on a cot, Ranma found there was one last thing he needed to do before bed. Taking a glass of cold water, he splashed himself before she pulled up Tofu's laptop to make the call. Honoka popped up on the screen, still wearing her day clothes. "How's it going? Maki doing okay?"

"She's fine," Honoka said. "Still frazzled. I'm working on her."

Ranma smirked. "In a love hotel?" When Honoka instinctively reached for the pillow, he laughed. "Good thing I'm in the wrong district. Anyway, I know you're not doing anything. But seriously, she's worse off than I am."

"Are you sure?"

Ranma shrugged. "I dunno….it doesn't...hurt as bad as I thought," she said with only the slightest hitch in her voice. "I mean...I know this ain't gonna work, but at least no one can say I didn't try."

Honoka was horrified. "You're still going?!"

Ranma sighed. "Honoka, she made it a challenge. I can't…"

"You damn well can!" Honoka shouted. "Ranma, you're really scaring me!

Maki suddenly peeked back into the frame. "Ranma! Please!"

Ranma sighed. "Look, I get it. I really do. My mom's going to try to kill me, I'm going to try to stop her. If I don't go there's no telling what she'll do. It's…" He sighed. "A martial artist's duty is to protect the weak. I had to leave Akane there, and Kasumi." Maki winced. "Ya see? It's not just me."

Maki sighed, taking a seat. "So go in there and get Kasumi out. Akane too, I guess."

"And then I don't know what happens," Ranma pointed out. "This way she's gonna spend the night sleeping and getting ready. And hopefully she's just got some Amazon herbs in her system or something…" Although he didn't hold out much hope of that. Shampoo never repeated herself that quickly, and anyway there was no motive.

Honoka sighed. "Well, we shouldn't keep you. Good night. I have a feeling you need the sleep." She quickly cut the feed before he could reply, turning to Maki. "Did you figure out the alarm clock?"

Maki stared at her. "You don't use your phone for that?" Honoka laughed nervously. "What time do you want to get up?"

"About 4 in the morning."

Nozomi sighed from her place on the floor of Nico's bedroom. The futon was certainly nice enough, but she found herself wide awake. Nico's voice came down to her "You're worried about him."

"You're not?"

There was a very long silence. "No more lies. Yes, I'm scared out of my wits."

"Thinking of making a play yourself?" Nozomi teased.

Nico tossed a pillow over the edge of the bed. "Be serious."

Nozomi chuckled. "Well, I sort of am. Don't tell Eri, but I've been kinda interviewing Ranma's
fiances whenever I get the chance." She paused. "On second thought, I'm sure she knows but I'd rather she not hear it spoken."

Nico groaned. "She's right about that. Are you crazy?"

Nico wasn't prepared for the suddenly wistful tone from Nozomi. "I just...I wanted it to work out, you know? It's a beautiful story, don't you think? The young warrior and the princess in an arranged marriage that find true love? Or the star-crossed childhood friends? The barbarian who learns to find her place in a wider world without losing herself and finding happiness?" She sighed. "Even the rebellious girl who betrays her parent's dream for a chance at what she wants from life? Any of them would be a great ending to this mess."

Nico sighed. "A girl who works hard from the beginning and becomes an idol through sheer determination? Those are stories, Nozomi."

"Well, you'd better hope that last one works out," Nozomi pointed out. "You've pinned your whole life on it."

Nico snorted. "Yeah, learned my lesson there. It takes way more than that. I've got another chance, but it's not on my own like I wanted it. I'm not blowing it this time, no matter what."

Nozomi couldn't help but agree. "Yeah, I know. Life doesn't make a beautiful story with a happy ending without help. And...and I guess one person's fairy tale is another person's tragedy. I've been going over everything I know, but there's just no way out of any of it for him...for them."

Nico sighed. "Well, it looks like we're not getting any sleep anyway. Have you tried talking it out with someone?"

Nozomi sat up. "Well, no. If I tried it with Eri she'd tell me to stop."

Nico nodded, pulling herself out of her covers and grabbing a night robe. "She's right about that but if it hasn't stopped you so far you're not going to, so get it over with." She got out of the bed. "Figure out where you're going to start, I'll get tea." When she got back, it was with two tall glasses of iced roasted tea. "Sorry, it's all we've got."

"It's fine, Nico," Nozomi sighed. "I know you're a bit sensitive, but really, Maki's the only one of us with piles of free money laying around." Taking her glass, she sipped at the beverage. "Okay, let's start with my favorite, Maki. Emotionally, probably the best match of the current options."

Nico couldn't resist a small laugh. "You mean in that she's passably sane? Sure, let's go with that. But seriously, Ranma and a lesbian? The only reason we're even talking about this is that it's Maki."

"You seem to know a lot about it." Nozomi said in her most suggestive voice.

Nico shrugged. "I can put myself in his spot, actually. You're bi, right?" Nozomi nodded, surprised. "Why so shocked? I remember back in first year you were just as dreamy over that movie as the rest of us. So it might surprise you that for some of us it's a little more than just a preference. I'm not saying I wouldn't sleep with a girl, but it'd need to be way more than a fling."

Nozomi considered that. "Right. I could see it as part of Honoka's plan to get Ranma to accept that he's also a girl, but that's a step too far. Still, other than that 'little' problem...." She sighed. "And it just gets worse from there."

"Right. Let's go with the Chinese girl." Nico said, a little too quickly. "I mean, she's an obvious knockout, but that's practically the only thing going for her."

Nico nodded. "Right. So….the deal there is…"

"As far as she's concerned, Shampoo and Ranma are not only already married, but there's no way out of it. Ranma disagrees. Apparently this somehow started with Shampoo stalking Ranma across half of China trying to kill him."

Nico nodded. "Right. I don't know him as well as Honoka, but that was over before it started. And the chef?"

"Are you not referring to them by name on purpose?" Nozomi asked.

Nico smirked. "They don't deserve names."

Nozomi sighed. "Fine, then, 'the chef', as you put it, is Ranma's childhood friend."

Nico nodded. "Actually seems to think of herself as cute, which I'm guessing is her leverage?"

Nozomi shook her head. "No….this is where it gets bad. We've got to go to Tendo here for a second - you know about the arranged marriage and honor pledge there, right?" Nico nodded. "Apparently Ranma's father promised him to both."

Nico frowned. "...a paradox. If Ranma picks one, the other is instantly slighted and has cause to do...something...to the Saotome family."

"Kill them, most likely," Nozomi said. "They're really big on killing each other over this."

Nico nodded. "That has to be what we go after, then." Nozomi stared at her, startled. "It's not Ranma's feelings that are the real problem, right? This wouldn't be so over-the-top crazy if the honor thing weren't behind it. There's real consequences to each choice beyond 'Who does Ranma get hitched to' and Ranma doesn't want to kill everyone."

"...Nico, you're a genius. I've got it."

Tsubasa heard a knock on the door, bringing her slowly to consciousness with a snore that utterly contrasted with her public image. Pulling on a nightgown, she opened up only to find Erena standing there in hers. "Better be a good explanation for this. Where's Rin, anyway?"

"Curled up in my closet, on a pile of old costumes and some spare pillows." Erena said. "Look...I'm sorry, but this couldn't wait." She took a deep breath. "I'm sorry."

"Huh?" Tsubasa blinked, then sighed. "Oh, fine, why can't this wait 'till I'm conscious again?"

Erena closed the door to avoid the wrath of the dorm mistress and took a seat. "It's just...Anju and I...we were really awful. I mean, Mu's, yes, we were right about that, but I just saw....well, the rest of it was pretty ugly."

Tsubasa groaned and poured herself a glass of water. "Well, I'm glad you came around about that, but..."

"I think Ranma's going to end up dead tomorrow." Erena put in. Tsubasa dropped her glass. "Yeah, that's why this couldn't wait."

Tsubasa took a deep breath, then picked up the cup which, amazingly, hadn't shattered like all the
laws of drama said it should have. "I...I've gotta…"

"I know." Erena sighed. "Don't expect me to go with you. He's not my boyfriend. But...good luck sorting out all the...not-idol stuff there. I don't believe it."

Tsubasa drank down the glass this time, then set it down. "I...thanks, Erena."

"Don't mention it." It was clearly not a euphemism. "I haven't talked to Anju about it."

After far too little sleep, Ranma rolled off the medical bed and made her way to the door, looking for the shower. She had gotten so little sleep, in fact, that she screamed when the wall opened and her arms were suddenly full of blonde girl. Kotori was hugging her tightly. "Ranma, please…"

"Whahwhahwha?!" Ranma felt the world slowly right itself while Eri and Umi came up the stairs from the hidden shelter. "Geez, you guys were down there this whole time?"

Umi smiled slightly. "We knew you needed the sleep, so we didn't come up to say 'hi' in person." She punctuated her words by doing up the last wooden snap on her clothes.

Ranma chuckled. "See ya got my 'present.' And yes, they're new, or at least I never wore'em."

Umi sighed. "That would be a relief if you weren't about to go off and die."

Ranma shook her head. "I'm not planning on dying today, Umi. I wish you'd quit talking like that."

Eri reached out and put a hand on Ranma's shoulder, giving it a squeeze. "Ranma, I'm going to say this one last time. Let me get through this, and I'll stop anyone else from just protesting. If they have a plan to get out of it, well, they can speak and you can decide." When Ranma didn't reply, she said, "Give up. I know that's the hardest thing anyone can ask of you. I know every instinct and lesson you've ever learned is against it. But Ranma, the fact is is that you can't win this one. Your mother's arranged everything. The only way to walk out of that fight with your life is to kill her." Ranma gulped and was about to interject something, so Eri put a finger on her lips. "Let me finish and restate that, just so you know what I'm saying. If you lose, you die. If you show up but refuse to fight, you either commit seppuku, and die, or you leave Mu's behind forever, which is losing. If you fight and win by the rules, you've killed your own mother, who, by every definition Umi's heard of, isn't a martial artist. That has legal ramifications, and therefore you lose."

Ranma nodded. "I know. I need to do this, though. There's one option there you haven't said. I can try to force her to yield."

Umi shook her head. "You know she doesn't have to do that. She can force you to actually kill her. If you don't, it's as good as a loss."

Ranma didn't answer, and then Kotori started to wail. "Ranma, please don't go!"

"...I'm...I'm sorry, Kotori," Ranma swallowed. "I swore I'd give this one last try."

Nerima's streets were well-maintained and well-lit, like much of the rest of Tokyo. So they were perfectly safe for two teenage girls in the pre-dawn hours. Nevertheless, Ranma gave the two who were waiting for him outside Doctor Tofu's clinic a look, having changed back for the fight with the Saotome family blade tied to his waist. "Girls, seriously, this is going to be dangerous."

Nozomi grinned. "Don't worry, not going to stop you. I'm sure you'll get through this alive, but
there's one last thing." She leaned up to whisper in Ranma's ear.

Ranma just nodded. "Last. Resort."

"No."

Tsubasa blinked. "What?"

"Absolutely not." Ranma said. "My fights can get out of hand. I don't want you anywhere near this when it goes down."

"But -"

"I don't want them anywhere near it either," Ranma said, jerking a thumb over his shoulder at the growing crowd. "But for some reason they aren't listening."

Tsubasa smirked. "What makes you think you're gonna have any better luck with me?"

In front of the Tendo Dojo, Ranma wasn't the least bit surprised to find Honoka and Maki waiting. Even Hanayo wasn't too great a shock. What did surprise him was who else was waiting. He was so surprised, in fact, he almost failed to take notice of the larger than usual number of cars on the road "Sonoda?" He asked of the older man, who had two long cases under his arms.

Umi's father was indeed waiting, and looking grave. "I'm not here to intervene directly in your duel, Ranma," he explained. "But from what you've said, your mother may not restrict herself to the terms. That is why I'm here." He looked to his daughter. "Umi! Come forward."

When Umi did so and bowed respectfully, he held out one of the two packages for her. When she opened it, she found it contained a bow, but not a traditional one. This was a hunter's weapon, modern and sleek, with a series of pulleys and wheels that made it look like something out of a recent movie. The arrows were also obviously not wood, but the tips were simple and sharp. "Father? Seriously?"

"Only if it's necessary," Sonoda nodded. "You're not quite ready for the ancestral bow, but that's quite all right, since I need a weapon myself." With that, he pulled his own weapon out, a bow that was far too thick to seem practical. "Of course, that's assuming you desire witnesses of your own, Saotome. I suspect your mother might not honor the terms of the duel otherwise."

Ranma nodded. "That's...a good point."

Honoka was suddenly there, hugging Ranma and Umi tightly to her. "Do...do we really need to do this? Can't we just head back to Kanda?"

For a moment, with Honoka there, he was tempted, but Ranma still shook his head. "You know I can't. Don't worry too much, okay?" When Honoka, reluctantly, nodded, he looked up at Sonoda. "Who else did you bring along?"

"No one who fails to understand the gravity of the situation, I assure you," Sonoda replied. "There will be no interference until after the duel is concluded."

Ranma needed time to consider this, but it was denied him by the first rays of sunlight coming from behind the city's skyline. He turned and entered the Tendo courtyard, followed by nine school idols. The Tendos did nothing, said nothing. Even Akane was too stunned by the display of near-suicidal
loyalty to object. Instead, the Tendos joined the procession as it entered the hall.

The Tendos silently filed to the back. Soun took up the central position behind the kneeling Nodoka, and if he had been surprised at the appearance of Mu's, something about Umi's father nearly had him wetting himself. Ranma was momentarily surprised, but not nearly as much as Genma seemed to be.

Another glance around told a whole tale that would need to be resolved another time. Akane glaring at Honoka, who looked back at her like she had just found something very unpleasant under her shoe. Although, knowing Honoka, it was probably a squished sweet rather than any of the expected things. Maki and Kasumi exchanged a look as well, one that instantly said 'I know what's upsetting you, and I'm sorry I can't do anything.' But the strangest one was between Nico and Nabiki. Ranma figured that if sharks in the ocean fought over bits of food, that was the look they gave each other before both diving for it, although nothing of the sort happened.

Then there was Nozomi giving Shampoo a very odd smile. Ranma didn't even try to figure that one out.

That taken care of, attention was turned to the kneeling figure in the center of the room. Ranma had figured his mother would be wearing a traditional kendo uniform, or possibly even a suit of armor. However, she had apparently gone in for full European style, with a military jacket straight out of the Meiji-era police force, a pair of white slacks, and even a captain's insignia. At her hip, she didn't have the expected katana, but a police saber. "Oh for..." Ranma let his exasperation show.

Honoka, who had taken a position by Umi, leaned in to whisper. "What's wrong?"

Umi was looking annoyed herself as she whispered back. "You know all those legends about how a proper katana can break any sword made anywhere else? Well, that's not true, but those police swords they handed out in the Meiji era were mostly for show, especially at first. They're all nice and shiny, but hit them with any real blade, not just a katana, and at best the edge cracks, if it doesn't just split and shatter. Really...."

Ranma had waited for the whispering to subside before he said, much louder, "Mom, quit clownin' around. If you don't got a good sword and you really wanna do this, borrow one from Tendo. He's got plenty."

Nodoka stood tall and proud, looking at her son with loathing. "Do not mock me or my blade. Come to me and die. Or don't, and show the world and your new 'teacher' just what kind of honorless dog you've become."

"Ranma, NO!" Two voices, one Akane's, one Honoka's shouted as he took the bait, charging forward in a classic that was almost more drawn from cinema than the real world, drawing the Saotome blade just as he reached his mother. The blade came, reversed, from the sheath. Nodoka brought her saber into place to block it, and to everyone's amazement, rather than the locking of steel that could be expected from such an encounter or the aforementioned shattering, Ranma's blade went skidding down the saber. Nodoka neatly side-stepped and finished the draw, coming within centimeters of slicing into Ranma's neck as he almost tripped at the sudden change of momentum. The follow-up, too quick for the heavier katana blade, would surely have taken off the arm of a dedicated swordsman.

Which made it very fortunate that Ranma was not a dedicated swordsman. He had already seen the follow-up attack and rolled, hard, into his new trajectory, letting gravity do the work of bringing him out of the way before rolling back up into a standing position, holding his blade in front of him. And then he stared at the weapon that had almost killed him. It wasn't the machine-pressed chromed steel of a typical saber, but a real blade. He suppressed the urge to swear. "Where'd ya get something like
"My family's ancestral blade. When the katana was outlawed, many families hung up theirs for good, but my great grandfather foresaw the need for blades to serve the new Emperor of the day." Nodoka explained. "To uphold tradition, even at the cost of tradition. And a new style, one meant to deal with the samurai of old as they otherwise faded away, emerged. One that could be learned by anyone willing to serve."

Ranma did swear inside his head. He took several steps back, sheathing the Saotome blade again to let him shift to more familiar ground. "That was why you let me take the Saotome sword...and why you never seemed to have any idea how to use the damn thing."

"If you're so confident in your skills, then, let's see them?" Nodoka said.

Ranma narrowed his eyes and began to focus his confidence...only to find that wellspring empty. The Moukou Takabisha! I can't use it! He had to duck as Nodoka charged at him, sword held forward rather than high to keep her body covered. He tried to slip past her defense, but in restraining his first blow he nearly found himself being cut open at the belly. Dammit, that light sword means she's almost as fast as Kuno, and I don't care how hard I knock him around. I can't punt my own mother into the sky! He briefly considered his other techniques as he flitted around each of Nodoka's attempts to disembowel him. She's not using ki, which means the Hiyruu Shoten Ha is right out. He briefly considered the seals in his mind. No way. Not the Forbidden Techniques. I don't want anyone dying today.

Without any instant-win techniques to draw on, Ranma found himself needing to analyze Nodoka's style on the fly. It wasn't exactly something he wasn't used to, even with the added difficulty of doing it from the point of view of being attacked by it. That said, there were problems. He hadn't seen very much of European weapons to this point, and there were few real practitioners of those styles left in the world anyway. He had seen sport fencing with less lethal weapons, of course, but Nodoka was doing things subtly differently. She was lighter on her feet, the better to move around traditional kendoists. She kept a hand on the back of the blade for increased control most of the time, probably for parrying those same heavy blades. Okay, that style reduces her reach advantage while I'm unarmed quite a bit.

Deciding on his course of action, he deliberately feinted an opening with a kick to try to force Nodoka to commit by slashing at it, before ducking back out of range and appearing to present a follow-through opportunity that would force her to over-extend. With Nodoka's sword arm reaching out too far, he lightly swatted her arm aside and grabbed at her wrist, trying to take the blade away from her.

Then Nodoka twisted her wrist, and the large hand-guard spun back around, crushing Ranma's fingers against the hard bone. Then she spun the blade down and thrust it into the tatami floor, twisting his arm awkwardly around before kneeling him in the stomach. "Simple Judo won't help you." She released his hand to pull her blade out, but needed just a moment to wrench it from the reeds and wood, which Ranma easily took advantage of to get himself back out of range. "Draw. Or die. Your choice."

Finding himself without options, he slowly drew the Saotome blade again. A few more experimental swings, though, showed that Nodoka had studied this just as well as she had Judo. Aikido and Kempo were likely out as well. Of course, even with his bruised hand, he could just speed up to Amaguriken levels and win the battle outright, but Nodoka's defenses were good enough that with a real blade that might kill her. But... He suddenly leaped across the dojo, borrowing enough space to sheathe the sword again. Then he charged forward, just like the first time….but this time, he swung
with the sheath still hooked to the blade. The combined weapon was incredibly heavy, but he aimed it towards her legs, hoping to cripple Nodoka for the immediate future and force her to give this up.

His hopes were dashed when Nodoka still saw the move coming and, again, slammed the saber into the ground, helping reduce the force by drawing her sheath and using that to block as well. "Ranma, start taking this seriously," she instructed.

* I am taking this seriously or you'd already be in the hospital! * Ranma thought, pulling back. Too bad I don't know the Bakusai Tenketsu or something like it. I could get rid of the floor she's using...get rid of the floor...I need to get this out into the street somehow. He ran through his options, only to come up short. Dammit, fighting a softer opponent is way harder than someone on my level!

Nodoka took advantage of her son slipping into deeper strategic thought, and thrust forward at him. Ranma didn't see it in time. Instinctively, his hand shot down to try to grab the weapon, slow it by increasing friction along the flat and sides. It wasn't enough to prevent it from striking home. The blade sank a few centimeters into his stomach.

Honoka screamed first. Umi nearly went for her bow, but a gesture from Sonoda-sensei stopped her. For another moment, no one moved. Nodoka tried to pull her sword back to finish the job, but Ranma gripped harder and looked up at her. "Lucky me...didn't get anything important." He grinned, and pulled back, revealing the blade had only a few drops of blood on the tip. "I figured you had some kinda trick, so I grabbed a bunch of the doc's bandages and made some thick padding for my stomach. It's not real armor, but it woulda been enough for a glancing blow. And thank the Kami that tip ain't made for stabbing. Especially not after the way you've been shoving it into wood."

"I won't make that mistake again," Nodoka said simply. She brought the sword up to her shoulder in a more classic ready position. "I won't ask you again, Ranma. Take this seriously."

Ranma thought for a moment. "Can I ask a question? How are ya doing this?"

"I'd have thought..." Nodoka said with mock-sweetness "It would be obvious to a master like you."

And it clicked. * There's a lot of styles, but only one Art. But, in a way, the style you use determines what kind of moves you make. And, when ya get down to it, all the styles from Japan today have a few common roots. I've been using a katana, but that put me in a mind of Japanese styles. She tricked me. *

And just like that, Ranma had an answer. He flipped the blade in his hand into a backwards grip, and held it vertical along his back. * This thing's way too heavy for this * he noted, adjusting his grip slightly while holding out his other hand to Nodoka and gesturing her forward.

This time, when Nodoka slashed, Ranma didn't do what she expected. He actually reached out and pushed the blade down, spinning like a top past her swing and bringing his own blade up and slashed, not quite reaching her neck. Nodoka seemed to believe that she had dodged that by her own skill, because she twisted back to try again, only to once again find Ranma well inside her guard. "Wha - HOW?!"

Ranma smirked. "You said it yourself. Your style came out of the Restoration, right? You only ever studied Japanese martial arts. Well, sure, we borrow from the continent when it suits, but the styles always remain the same at the core." Nodoka tried again, and this time Ranma flipped over her. "And, of course, I saw all your technique enough to have it down already, I just needed that piece. A little less kempo, a lot more peh-ho-kun and a few others in the mix, and you don't know what to do."
Nodoka screamed and charged, seemingly purposely leaving herself open. Ranma slid under her with a sweeping kick, knocking her down. "Picking my weapon, though, that was smart. I almost fell for it too." He brought the Saotome blade up to strike. "Mom, yield. You lost this one."

Nodoka just closed her eyes. "Do it." When Ranma hesitated, she screamed again. "DO IT!"

For a very long moment, no one dared move or speak. Ranma whispered. "Mom...I can't kill ya. Not over this. Just...just back off, okay?" Nodoka didn't answer. "Please?"

The silence in the hall was deafening.

Finally, Ranma brought the sword down. Honoka screamed again.

Nodoka heard the thunk, and for a moment she thought *Being dead isn't as painful as I thought.* Then her eyes slowly opened, and she realized the sword was sticking into the floorboards next to her head. The thrust had missed her ear by a centimeter.

Ranma looked at her sadly. "Last chance, Mom. I don't want to do this."

"No son of mine would walk out on a sworn agreement," she snarled. "Finish the duel!"

"...if that's how ya want it." Ranma gulped, looking at Honoka, then Umi, then Eri, and finally Nozomi. It was the last girl who nodded solemnly, and held up a single tarot card. The Tower. Ranma swallowed again, nodded….and twisted the sword. He had apparently embedded it much deeper than the floorboards, because the blade shattered into metallic dust in several places, the pieces falling on the floor without so much as scratching her. "...you win. Saotome Ranma dies today."

The room broke into pandemonium, and it seemed like violence was about to erupt, when an unexpected and unfamiliar voice roared "SILENCE!" Sonoda coughed. "I will accept the duel as concluded."

Nodoka was outraged. "Who are you to intrude on a family matter, good sir?"

Sonoda smiled. "Umi, please introduce yourself properly. I think it's time the Saotomes and Tendos knew who they were dealing with."

Umi nodded and bowed low, far lower than necessary. "I am Sonoda Umi, student of the Toyotama-Tsume style, direct descendent of Fujiwara no Hidesato." Nodoka gasped. Soun stopped crying and stared in shock and horror. Even Kasumi stared in astonishment. Only Nabiki seemed unaffected by the announcement. Well, and Shampoo, who had an excuse.

Sonoda bowed as well, also showing excessive respect. "I am Sonoda Hideki, grandmaster." He glared at Nodoka. "You will accept the outcome, or face me. And I assure you, I am not in a merciful frame of mind." Soun's face turned ashen pale when Sonoda turned to look at him. "And then there's a certain matter of your daughter's disrespect at the beach. I demand an apology."

"Of course!" Soun bowed, so low his head almost touched the ground. "Please, I'm sure you can overloo--"

"That's not a matter for today!" Sonoda snapped. "But very soon."

Soun realized this meant the discussion was ending and tried to interject with the most important thing. "But...but the engagement..."
From a nearby rooftop, Happousai whistled. "I should have caught that one."

Cologne looked at him, pulling down her binoculars. "I'm not up on all these local family politics. Enlighten me."

Happousai put his binoculars down as well, and pulled out a pipe to begin smoking. "Sonodas are a dime a dozen. Not the most common name, but it doesn't quite have nearly the same punch as a 'Saotome' or even a 'Tendo' might. Not as many of them around, you see. But the core of the family, they held on to their status till the end, and beyond. They weren't just samurai, they were nobles in every sense of the word. Even today, Sonoda's brother is in the Diet - ah, the Japanese ruling council."

Cologne thwapped him gently. "I am well aware of the basics of Japanese politics. Continue."

Happousai rubbed the spot where Cologne had hit him, but obliged. "Yes, well, their style...oh, Sonoda doesn't practice, not to the extent it goes. I can tell that from back here. Tell me, have you heard the tale of Tawara no Tota?" When Cologne shook her head, Happousai smiled. "Might want to look it up, but after that whole thing there's one thing that the legends usually get wrong. The Dragon Princess didn't just share her treasures, she taught him the Art." Cologne's gasp left him to smirk, satisfied. "He was already pretty impressive, but I bet Ranma could learn a lot from this..."

Cologne started watching again. "Assuming he lasts the next thirty minutes."

Ranma turned and bowed to Tendo. "I'm sorry, sir," he said, with some anger. "I'm afraid that Saotome Ranma isn't available, nor is he likely to be. Any arrangement you have with the Saotome family should be taken up with them."

Surprisingly, it was Nabiki who responded. "No way, Saotome!" she snarled at him, emphasizing the name. "You still owe us a year's rent, and you've got one way to pay up!"

Sonoda just nodded approvingly when Ranma ignored her and walked out of the dojo, and even moreso when he actually turned to bow ritually. Umi followed suit, but her hand was on her weapon the entire time. The rest of the Muses followed suit, each bowing in turn, until Maki, the last one, gave Kasumi an apologetic look and closed the door.

Honoka was surprised when Ranma made it all of halfway out of the courtyard before he croaked out the word 'water.' She didn't even ask to make sure what it was for, she just opened the bottle she had on her and dumped it over his head, before taking the now redhead into her arms. "It's okay, Ranma."

Ranma nodded. "I'm...I'm okay. We're not home free yet."

Sonoda nodded approvingly at his assessment. "That's true, but I suspect you aren't aware of everything. Please take a look outside."

Curious, everyone followed him out. While all the cars were still there on the street, there were several additions as well. For one, nine black cars, not quite the size of limos but far too large for the word 'car' to be accurate, were lined up directly in front of the gate, their doors open and the drivers, dressed smartly in tuxedos, waiting. Even more surprising, just across the street were two police vans and, between them, an ambulance with Kaede personally briefing the emergency crew. If that hadn't been enough, Ranma realized, the street was also rather crowded. On top of the policemen, there seemed to be a virtual army of salarymen, construction workers, and even a guy in a tweed jacket
that would have screamed 'college professor' if he weren't in his early 30s by appearance. And all of them, he also realized, were armed with a martial arts weapon. Ranma looked to Sonoda disbelievingly.

"You were told, I believe, that the adults in your life now are willing to shoulder some of the responsibility," the man told him with some amusement. "If your mother had tried to press the issue of the duel, these men were available to ensure she couldn't harm herself or anyone else. The purpose of the ambulance, I think, should be obvious."

Honoka blinked. "And the police?"

"To ensure Lady Saotome doesn't harm herself or anyone else again," Sonoda explained, gesturing over the lead officer. "You will find her in the dojo. These girls will happily testify that she did, indeed, draw live steel against her legal son. I believe that takes care of the formalities."

Ranma blinked. "Uh...yeah....you ain't gonna hurt her, right?"

The officer nodded. "That is the plan. There will be charges, but if the situation is as described she will most likely be remanded to outpatient psychiatric counseling, since no one was actually hurt. Oh, and the swords will have to be confiscated."

"...only need to get hers," Ranma said, choking back her tears. "I broke the other one. The rest are for practice, and this place still got its' license so..."

"Okay," The officer said softly. "Does she still have it?"

Honoka nodded. "Yeah, we didn't take it from her."

The officers made ready to do their duty, and Kaede came over. "Okay, okay. Everyone, get to a car. There's breakfast in there for you. Ranma go with...whoever." She almost said Maki, but thought better of it. "We'll discuss what happens next with my husband tonight. Oh, and I got your phone fixed."

Shampoo was utterly baffled. Oh, the duel itself had made perfect sense, after a fashion. Once she realized men were generally considered superior in this backwards place, a lot made sense, actually, but in this case it was at least egalitarian rather than offensive. Ranma had shown his mother proper respect while disagreeing, and they were both warriors, so settling a dispute with a challenge like this was completely within reason.

But then Ranma had broken his own weapon and declared his own defeat, and walked out acting like he was a completely different person. It seemed like time had stopped after that, so this was apparently serious. Somehow. The Tendo father breaking down into tears was an expected reaction, and ignored as it should be. What did baffle her was the Panda (she always thought of Genma as 'the Panda' these days, even when he was human) had managed to vanish with his wife still half-laying on the floor, completely stunned.

More immediately worrying was the black aura surrounding Akane, trying to break out. This, at least, she knew how to handle. She snapped at her charge. "Soul of Ice! Now, before you hurt yourself!"

Akane seemed shocked by the concern, but she stopped and closed her eyes. Over the course of several seconds, the black faded, first into the red of ordinary anger and then into the cool blue of the technique as the air cooled. "Th-thanks. I...I guess you really are looking out for me."
Shampoo rolled her eyes. "Someone have to."

That was about when she heard the police getting ready to burst in. Shampoo was under no illusions of what would happen if she was detained. There was no time to actually leave the building, so she leaped up to the rafters and pressed herself into a shadow to wait it out.

The police did not, in fact, break down the sliding door. For one thing, it didn't lock. Instead, they calmly opened it and walked into the room. While the two uniformed officers weren't armed, there was no mistaking the Special Assault Team behind them, in their anonymizing face masks, flak jackets, and assault rifles. Soun reacted to their sudden presence by bawling again. The two men ignored him and stepped up to Nodoka. "Ma'am, I'm afraid we're here to place you under arrest for assault."

"I did no such thing!" Nodoka said, recovering herself and sheathing her sword regally. "Duels have always been respected."

The officers glanced at each other nervously. The second coughed. "Nonetheless, a complaint has been made and we have eyewitnesses. I'm sure it can all be sorted out if you'll just come down to the station."

Nodoka hesitated. "Very well." She glanced to Soun, who had managed to stop crying and was looking serious.

Nabiki smirked. Gotcha, Saotome, she thought. It won't take a lawyer to get her out of this, and the longer she's free the more trouble she can make. "Gentlemen, gentlemen…" Nabiki began. "You're aware that those girls are in a rather direct competition with members of my family, right? Why, I imagine they'd say anything to get us in the papers in a negative light."

The officers suddenly looked uncertain - they had been told to potentially expect violence, but a reasoned counter-argument from a teenager? It was true that Ranma had been unharmed - while that technically meant nothing, if there was reason to doubt Nishikino Kaede's claims it could look bad. Soun was pulling himself together, as well, even as the officers went to check their notes.

No one expected what happened next.

Kasumi coughed gently. All eyes turned towards the young homemaker. "I'll corroborate their story. Mrs. Saotome attempted to hold her son to a suicide pact, then accepted a duel in lieu of enforcing seppuku."

"KASUMI!" Every other Tendo shouted at her, but she didn't budge.

The officer nodded. "I'll need you to come down to the station with me to take a statement." Then his eyes landed on Nabiki again. He looked down at his notes, then at her, his eyes narrowing"And you too, miss. There are some serious questions we need answered."

Kasumi nodded her acknowledgement of both statements, giving her father a second glance. On his face was an expression she hadn't seen in a long time. Genuine anger. "I only want to do what's right."

Soun seemed momentarily torn, but it didn't take long for him to decide on a course of action. "Officer, I'm sure you're aware of certain...accommodations. I'll see to it that Nabiki is punished appropriately, you have my word on that."

The officer shook his head. "We just need to clear some things up," he explained. "I understand you wanted to spare her even this much, but under the circumstances there's little we can do. It would be
very difficult to explain not bringing her in after visiting. Especially if we're taking statements at the station."

Soun saw his escape, and turned to Kasumi. "Daughter, I forbid this."

"You forbi - " Kasumi's eyes flashed in genuine anger. "Father, I'm twenty years old now. Or did you forget that I am legally an adult?" Soun winced. "I understand that you want to keep us safe...but it seems the world will no longer allow that." The young woman looked around, and said to no one in particular "I think after this I shall take a vacation…"

Shampoo paused. Somehow, she felt that message was meant for her. She stealthily crossed the beams, and dropped down into the storage room behind the main dojo so she could sneak out. Apparently Kasumi would be needing a travel pack.

After all, it was the duty of an Amazon to help a woman in need, as long as she was fleeing men trying to control her life. Well, and not challenging Amazon superiority, of course.

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Eri got into a car and told the driver "Kanda ward."

He nodded. "And the other young lady?"

Eri was about to ask what he meant, when she caught movement out of the corner of her eye, and turned to realize Nozomi was next to her, with her arms pulling her into an embrace and kissing her passionately. This was so unexpected that Eri let it happen while the car pulled away from the curb. "No-Nozomi…" she said, blushing heavily.

Nozomi shook her head. "Don't. Eri, I need you right now."

"We're in a taxi," the blonde hissed.

Nozomi giggled. "That might be fun to try some time, but not what I meant." Eri nodded, so she went on. "That was close. Too close. I need to know that someone....someone better than me is here at my side. You're it."

"Don't you think you're being unfair?" Eri asked, but she did keep her arms around her girlfriend. "I'm not some...some paragon."

"I know." Nozomi said quietly. "But you're cool-headed, can think things through, and you don't need to rely on my gifts to know when you're doing the right thing. Besides, my apartment's getting lonely."

Eri winced. "Nozomi, you can't mean…"

"Just for tonight?" Nozomi asked. "I don't want to be alone today."

Eri sighed. "All right."

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If Honoka was surprised that Ranma made it out of the yard without breaking down, she was outright astonished that he made it as far as the car, and baffled when Umi joined them and the car pulled away before it finally happened.

It started as a sniffl, then a little tremble around one of her eyes. Honoka reached out and pulled her friend over before Ranma's resolve finally broke like a dam and she started to sob, squeezing almost
hard enough to hurt and definitely enough to make Honoka's breathing uncomfortable, but she just held on a hummed softly while Umi waited.

They were about five minutes from the border to the next ward when Honoka finally felt like she had to say something. "You're being ridiculous, you know?" Umi gasped in shock and even Ranma looked up at her, stunned. "You had to turn into a girl to do this? Isn't that a little extreme?"

Ranma stayed there with the same slack-jawed expression at Honoka's seeming sudden cruelty for a moment, before starting to giggle, and then laugh. Even Umi chuckled gently, but she kept her eyes out the windows while the other two continued to hold onto each other. It seemed strange, but there really were no words, and Umi did not want to interrupt.

Genma had ceased his frantic sprint - he was far enough from the dojo that Nodoka couldn't possibly catch up without resorting to a vehicle. He was still moving at a good pace, when he felt a breeze and ducked into the nearest alleyway, passing by a rather familiar face.

"Going somewhere, student-of-mine?" Happousai asked.

Genma shrugged. "What do I always do when I've failed?"

"Leave someone else to fix it," Happousai answered. "Oh well, I suppose that's my fault. Taught you well, I did." He glanced over his shoulder at the man. "Any idea where you're headed?"

"I told Ranma 'China.'" Genma replied. "Of course, I probably won't stop there. I can probably swim to Australia from Hong Kong."

Happousai seemed to think about that. "Really are that scared of me, huh? Well, don't worry, I don't think I'll need to find you again. And if I do, I know where to look." Genma just sighed. "I understand, student. I took your only disciple when you couldn't finish the job. So now you're heading to some backwater to drink and try to put the style on some scrolls so some future generation might figure it out? That's just fine by me. You're a Master in your own right, if you want to beat your head against the impossible go ahead and knock yourself out."

"You're...not objecting?" Genma seemed surprised. "I would have thought - "

Happi sighed. "Really not getting any younger this time. Soun'll make it long enough for me to finish things out."

Genma seemed to consider this as a black town car passed behind him. "Well, for what it's worth, my condolences. I thought you'd live forever, honestly."

"Me too." Happousai said easily, "That was a mean trick, too. Water in the sake barrel, I never…” He shook his head. "I'd almost think you planned that, but you were more desperate to get your retirement set up than to off me right then." Genma looked distinctly nervous at that. "Oh, stop that. Go on, run. I've got a style's future to secure."

Genma thought about it, then walked away, trying to marshal what dignity he had left. With the police directly involved, it was only a matter of time before certain...improprieties came up. With Nodoka in jail, or whatever was going to happen to her, there would be no favors to protect him. Definitely time to leave.

It was going to be lonely without his son, though.
Kaede sighed in relief as the towncars - even the empty ones - sped off in different directions. Those that were empty had been pre-paid with specific instructions to drive around Kanda and Akihabara for a few hours, just to be confusing. It was probably overkill to give school idols the same treatment as foreign diplomats or the like, but really, after the events two weeks ago she felt, as a parent, she was fully justified in taking no chances this way.

She leaned against the ambulance in relief when Hideki joined her and gave a nod. "Okay, so, am I going to be needing to organize any other emergencies this month? I'm not that rich, you know."

Hideki sighed. "I can't make any one-hundred-percent guarantees. But fortunately I think the worst of it has been resolved. The remainder is down to whether the Tendos can, if you'll pardon the expression, get their damned act together."

Kaede blinked. "Does this have something to do with that fiance of Ranma's? Akane, was it?"

"It does," Hideki said. "You must understand, the secrets of the higher Art are hidden from those who have yet to unlock them. I would have told Umi this in a few weeks, once she had gained some control, but it's imperative this doesn't get out." When Kaede nodded, he continued. "You already know the basics. And no, I do not understand what little research has been done on the subject. You would be better off consulting Tofu on that." Seeing her put out look, he smiled. "I'm sure there's a rational explanation for all of this. I just don't know what it might be, as it's not particularly relevant. What works is known, that suffices for my purposes."

He continued. "Now, mental state can actually be used to amplify the results of ki. It's not, to my knowledge, a magnification precisely although it appears as such. It's more of a... a focus, if you will. By forcing ki into particular states, the results can be harnessed more thoroughly, like the light of a magnifying lens setting fire to paper. You're familiar with this from popular fiction on the subject, of course?" he asked suddenly. "For example, the Chinese practice of copying the movements of animals and spirits to harness a fraction of their power, or Buddhists seeking to emulate the divine to shape their own lives and, perhaps, become gods or more in their next life."

Hideki's expression grew grave. "This works, of course, better than you know. But consider this. What would happen if a martial artist chose to emulate the endless anger, bitter hatred, and unmatched cruelty of a demon?"

Kaede paled. "With what I've already seen of these kids, that would be - "

Hideki nodded. "That is why these gentlemen were here. This must be kept secret, of course. I cannot even trust my own daughter with it until she has proven she understands what her new state can do to her emotions, and what those emotions can do to her in turn, and why it can never be used. So she will understand."

Kaede nodded. "I understand. Can I make a suggestion for the future, though? Maybe mandatory psychiatric counseling before undertaking advanced training?"

Hideki laughed uproariously. "Our community is not that organized, Kaede. Believe me, it would be easier, but many of us value our freedom too much. Young Ranma among them. So if I have another heir at some point, I may do it, but getting everyone to go along would simply be impossible."

Kaede looked around, noting the crowd starting to disperse. "The danger's over, then?"

"It is."

Kaede smiled. "Good. Let's get in the ambulance and take a ride back home before the traffic gets
really miserable."

Tsubasa was finding the cab ride rather awkward. It was obvious Hanayo was caught between wanting to be a typical squealing fangirl and absolute rage at Rin, who they were going to pick up. Tsubasa wasn't quite sure what to *do* about this, so until they pulled into Toshima they simply sat in silence. Once they had crossed the imaginary district boundary, however, it became obvious nothing was going to break. "Look, I'm sure Rin didn't understand how serious it was going to be. Heck, did you really believe it?"

Hanayo jumped. "I-I'm sorry?"

Tsubasa chuckled and gestured out the window. "This has been going on for over a year and Nerima's still there, right? 'How serious could it be' would be what I would be asking. Heck, I was. I knew Ranma was going to have a hard time, but I didn't think there would be sharp swords and blood involved."

Hanayo balled her hands up into fists. "I know, but it's just....they've had this stupid feud going on for months." She forced herself to calm down. "It's all because Ranma called Rin a 'tomboy' and she started doing the cat thing she always did that he hates for some reason he won't talk about and -"

"And then she decided to sleep in instead of checking up on someone she doesn't especially care for," Tsubasa said in understanding. "And have you wondered why?"

"Huh?"

"Seems to me..." Tsubasa said mock-idly "...something like this doesn't come out of nowhere. Especially when she's trusting Ranma with her physical training. He could do any number of things to mess her up - and I don't just mean martial arts. Push a little too hard, or not hard enough, or in the wrong direction? Maybe create a subtle flaw in her dance routine by misinforming her. *If* Ranma were that petty, of course."

"But...but Ranma wouldn't!" Hanayo protested.

Tsubasa smirked. "Of course she wouldn't, but Rin's got no reason to trust that. They may not like each other much, but I'm sure Rin *doesn't hate* Ranma. Or at least, she didn't until last night."

Hanayo jumped. "Yes, I saw that. If I did, you can bet someone who knows you as well as your best friend caught it a lot sooner."

"I...I didn't know myself..." Hanayo admitted. "I'd have...have..."

Tsubasa sighed. "The girls are right. Mu's is way too much work." She put a hand on Hanayo's shoulder. "I can't solve this for you. All I can tell you is that if she's really your friend, she'll be happy for you."

Hanayo shook her head. "I still want to smack her."

"Does it matter who smacks her?" Tsubasa asked. "I could do it."

Hanayo thought for a second. "Nah," she said, in a sudden imitation of a certain redhead. "Someone showed me something I think Rin needs ta see."

The car pulled up to UTX, and Rin was standing out in front, looking rather disheveled and half asleep. "Hey, Kayochi..." she mumbled as Hanayo got out of the car, sounding slightly irritated.
She didn't see it coming when Hanayo punched her in the stomach, luckily a bit below the solar plexus. She doubled over, eyes bugging out in surprise, and coughed as Hanayo growled. "Hoshizora Rin, Ranma nearly died this morning and you were busy catching a catnap!" Suddenly, her phone rang. She continued glaring as she answered it while Rin was staring at her in shock. "I'm busy!" she snapped, hanging up. "I know you don't like Ranma much, but this was serious!"

Tsubasa's phone rang next, but Hanayo wasn't paying attention. "He split from his family and everything!"

Tsubasa groaned. "I'll tell them." Both girls looked at her. "Ranma wants everyone to practice today. So maybe do this later?"

Rin shook her head. "No...we're finishing this now." She grabbed Hanayo by the shoulders. The blonde winced at the contact, seemingly instinctively, but Rin was smiling. "Kayocchi...I'm sorry. I...maybe I was jealous. I still am, but that's no excuse for not being there when you needed me too."

Hanayo blushed heavily. "Rin, I . . ."

Rin grinned and turned around, taking a few half-skipping steps. "Don't get me wrong. I don't like girls that much. But I always kinda hoped we'd be friends...y'know, through everything."

"Oh, Rin, of course we're friends...but we do need to - " Hanayo started.

Rin chuckled. "Maybe, maybe not...but if you've found someone, well, I gotta make sure he won't hurt you. Or she won't hurt you, now that I think of it." She turned back around and winked. "I think Ranma passes the test. For now."
Chapter 24

The car dropped Honoka and Ranma off at the Homura sweet shop that Honoka lived over. "I'm home," Honoka called out, before opening the door and putting the umbrella in the stand.

Honoka's mother looked like she was working herself up to an apocalyptic rage, but a single look at Ranma stepping in behind put a stop to that before it could begin. "Go upstairs quickly. Ranma, use the bathing room. Yukiho drew the bath water, if she did what I told her to." Honoka started to draw in a breath. "I'll need to open up the shop soon, but if you can stay quiet I see you and your boyfriend need to rest."

The air temperature dropped - literally - before Ranma trudged upstairs. Honoka shivered. "Don't say that word again. Don't even imply it. Or 'girlfriend' for that matter. Ranma...she had a rough morning." Seeing her mother's puzzled look, she sighed. "A lot of the problem was because no one Ranma ever knew could seem to tell the difference between 'girlfriend' and 'friend who happens to be a girl,' okay? She doesn't need the reminder of what he just lost."

"Oh, Honoka, honey..." Hotaru finally dropped any pretense of still being angry. "I heard things went badly, but...well, no one was hurt, right?"

"No one was injured." Honoka corrected. "Ranma just tore his heart out and stomped it flat to try to bring some sanity back to the situation, and it didn't work. What did was...the thing I think he was trying to avoid. Her mom's on her way to the loony bin, Nico said she saw his dad running away - again - and kami know where that useless Grandmaster got off to."

"Figured Ranma would be coming by," Happousai said, chewing on the end of his unlit pipe while he contemplated some sweets. After the screaming died down he shrugged. "I'll take twelve of the traditional. I honestly don't get why you youngsters need to mess with such a classic." He put money down on the counter. "And yes, Genma's...well, probably not out of the picture but by now he'll be halfway to Yokohama looking for a spot as self-loading freight. No way he's got the edge for a swim these days. If he finds something he thinks Ranma'll want as much as his Mastery, he'll be back. Probably the only thing would be a Jusenkyo cure, so I don't think I'll see him again. You might have to deal with him in a couple of years, but I can't hold your hand for everything."

Honoka nodded and bowed. "Thank you, Sensei. The only important question now, from the report from Maki's mother, is what happened to Kasumi."

Happousai shrugged. "I honestly don't know..."

Maki slipped into her own bathtub and was just about to get down to the business of relaxing when the doorbell rang. Groaning, she managed to throw on a yukata as the bell continued to ring. "Coming, coming..." she muttered, knowing whoever was ringing the bell couldn't hear her until she got to a small TV screen that linked to the camera outside the gate. On seeing who it was, she pushed another button and the gate slammed open while she ran to the front door. On the other side, soaked even under her umbrella, was Kasumi. "Oh my."

Honoka got up to her room to see Ranma had already sat pulled some manga from her bookshelf and had started reading. Honoka sighed when she noticed Ranma had picked up some of her more romantic yuri collection. Doesn't mean anything she decided. Ranma's just that out of it...well, and probably doesn't think there's anything weird about it anymore. She pulled her laptop out of its' place
in her desk. "Wanna watch something on NicoNico?"

Ranma mumbled "Nii."

Honoka's lip quirked upward in a mixture of amusement and annoyance. "No, no, the streaming service."

"...oh. Yeah, whatever."

Honoka thought about it for a moment, then just sighed. "Never mind, actually. It'd just be background noise anyway. Enjoying yourself?"

"It's all right," Ranma answered, turning the page. "Your parents let you read this stuff?"

Honoka chuckled. "Well, until recently they didn't know to care, and I've already read it anyway, so what's the point taking it away now?"

Another page turned. "Pop said storie - " Ranma suddenly choked.

Honoka put a hand on Ranma's shoulder and squeezed. "Do you need water again?"

Ranma thought about it, then shook his head. "I'll...be okay. Just snuck up on me. Don't worry, tomorrow it'll be cool." At Honoka's skeptical look, Ranma smiled. "No. I mean, it won't be good. But we'll be able to get on with it. Hell, maybe I'll track th- I'll track Saotome down and we can actually talk this out. Y'know, once everything else dies down."

Honoka made a small noise, then stood up and took the covers off her bed. Ranma seemed completely unaware of things until he was suddenly being lifted up. "Ooof!" Honoka exclaimed. "You're heavy!"

"Gyah!" Ranma cried out as Honoka teetered unsteadily. "If you're gonna do that change me first! You can't pull a muscle now!"

Honoka managed to get Ranma onto the bed without injuring herself, then wiped her brow off. "Whew. Anyway, you got two hours sleep last night, and not much the night before I think."

"I'm fine" Ranma retorted.

Honoka shook her head. "Sleep, little brother."

"Where will you sleep?" Ranma asked.

Honoka shrugged. "I can grab a futon, or head over to Maki's place, or maybe Umi's would be better."

Ranma sighed, defeated, and sat up. "Fine. I left some spare clothes in your closet, mind if I get changed at least?"

Honoka choked. "Wait, in my closet?"

Ranma shrugged. "I might've needed a place to hide. Every one of my fiancées believes I have more of a sense of self-preservation than to do it in a girl's bedroom, and you ain't gonna kill me for being in here naked. Seemed like a good place."

Umi looked deeply into Kotori's eyes for a long time. There was just enough light to see the other
girl by, their arms were wrapped around each other, and they were close enough that the only word that fit their embrace was 'intimate'. Neither spoke for over a minute after the kiss, while Umi felt Kotori squirming nervously while she considered the situation. Finally, she just smiled sheepishly. "...nope, nothing."

The blonde shrugged and pulled away, just thankful that the privacy of her room hadn't been disturbed. The pair were in pajamas (even if Umi's were just one of the silk shirts borrowed from Ranma and way too big for her) with the blinds drawn down. With the weather outside showing no signs of letting up, at midday this was enough for them to be in near-darkness. "So...yeah, I guess that's weird. You're sure there was nothing. I mean, you've never…"

"Not so much as a peck," Umi said. "And why are we doing this right now, anyway?"

Kotori pulled back the covers of her bed. "Because it's better than talking about anything else?"

"I guess." Umi slipped into her sleeping bag. "I think it'd be the same if it was a boy, so don't ask."

Kotori laid there for a few moments. "I guess that explains why you didn't freak out more about Honoka. It's...I don't know, I thought everyone loved someone."

Umi found herself actually pouting. "I still love you, and Honoka, you know. Just because I don't want to do..."

"Would you?" Kotori cut in. "I mean, if I wanted to. Which I don't. Especially not now. Lost the mood."

Umi... had to actually think about that. "If I really had to, I could? It doesn't... ugh, I don't know. If it was to save your life, like a true love's kiss thing? Definitely." Neither girl brought up that that wasn't just a hypothetical these days. "If you just wanted to... I guess? It's like... like a medical procedure, maybe? Or doing something for someone you don't particularly enjoy because they do. It's a little... off-putting, but..." She sighed, obviously giving up on finding the words.

"...you know, that's sweet," Kotori admitted. "In its' own way."

Umi sat up in the sleeping bag. "It is?"

Kotori peered over the edge and smiled at her. "That you'd do something like that just because you think it would make me or Honoka happy. And maybe you'll change your mind some day."

Umi laid back down. "Okay, yeah..." She rolled over with a soft chuckle. "Okay," she repeated. "I guess when you put it like that I'm... glad we did this where no one was going to interrupt."

The two girls slowly drifted off to sleep for the day. And if they weren't a little closer for their experiment, Umi would eat the sleeping bag.

And so it went. Rin and Hanayo at Rin's place, Eri and Nozomi sharing Nozomi's bed, with Nico and Maki collapsing into their own beds and sleeping peacefully through most of the stormy afternoon, stirring only briefly at dinner time to eat and then going straight back to bed. While their night-time sleep wasn't as dreamless as the first, it was restful enough.

It was almost an hour before dawn, if that concept meant anything with the storm clouds still thick overhead, when Rin slowly stirred towards wakefulness. Her eyes slowly opened, to a set of sharp canine teeth perched right next to her neck. She gazed on them just long enough to register before closing her eyes again.
Hanayo's eyes opened, and she shrieked and sat up sharply, sending her own, remarkably detailed, plush dog toy flying before she realized what was going on. The two dogs had started barking their heads off. Rin turned her attention to Hanayo and screamed even more loudly, setting the shy girl off even further before they both gasped and calmed down. Hanayo's eye caught the alarm clock almost immediately thereafter. "Five in the morning..." Then, surprising Rin, she giggled. "We...we missed practice yesterday."

"...so did everyone else." Rin said.

Hanayo picked up her new stuffed animal and started to laugh. The dog had a small timer attached to its back, which she carefully removed before squeezing. Apparently someone had carefully put the timer around the standard battery connection, for once it was removed the little squeeze caused the toy to bark again. She gave it one last squeeze, then got up and pulled on her workout clothes while Rin was still rubbing the sleep out of her eyes.

Nico's alarm clock went off considerably earlier than she'd planned, and Ranma's practice schedule already had her up far earlier than she liked. Then she realized what song was playing. It was Tendo - Akane, not Nabiki's - rendition of 'Love Novels.' Growling, she smacked the alarm clock off and turned on the lights. Stretching and yawning, she went to fix the playlist when she realized that her music player's hard drive had apparently been erased and reloaded with bootlegs of the stolen songs.

Then she took a deep breath and remembered she hadn't actually unpacked her music player from yesterday's trials. But this one was...entirely too close, right down to the Mu's decals she had decorated the pink stick with. She had to look closely to realize that the stickers had been applied some time recently, where the ones on her own music player were starting to peel back from the last few months' use.

Grumbling, she threw the forgery on the ground and stomped on it, hard enough to crack the tough outer plastic.

The previous night, Maki had taken note of the absolute mess Ranma had managed to make of her recording setup, but concluded that it was an issue for the next day.

Which she was sure hadn't arrived yet when the whole thing came to life and started playing Babymetal to her headphones at a volume that would doubtless wake her parents. What made it worse was that, as she had paid for the noise-canceling feature, she had decided to use them to shut out the city noise through the afternoon. She shot up with a cry of alarm, then slammed her hands across her mouth - there was no good in waking their new guest before her father got home to pass judgement on all the craziness of the past few months.

Eri's eyes quirked open at the sound of the music box, which was most unwelcome at the early hour. "Nozomi, did you set an ala - " Her voice died in her throat as she took in the room. Nozomi's private chamber normally consisted of a simple twin bed, a desk with her computer on it in one corner, headphones hanging from a hook when she needed them, and nothing else.

Instead, the bed had been moved to the center of the room, and the floor seemed rather closer than it had last night. It was still too dim to make things out, but she could tell the bed was surrounded by strings of some kind. Half-awake, she realized was just in range of the light switch, which she reached out and clicked up.
Lilies. Literally lillies everywhere. All colors, all plausible sizes. It was as though someone had gone through the whole city and bought every live and dead example they could lay their hands on and stuffed it into Nozomi's small room. They were in pots on the floor, hanging from frames on the walls, and even dangling from pots stuck to the ceiling by methods Eri was certain the landlord would want words with them about. Even the bed itself had been covered with plants, and most of them had that distinct shape.

Nozomi rubbed her eyes with a mumble "wha, time for more already?" Then she took it all in...and laughed.

After a bit of exasperation, Eri joined in.

Honoka was sleeping soundly when a crack of thunder woke her up. She wondered for a moment why she was on the floor before she remembered the previous day. Then she pulled her phone off the nearby table without getting up. Seeing the time was, in the most precise terms, 'too damn early', she tried to go back to sleep when the futon suddenly rolled out from underneath her, improbably sending her flying into the air, spinning like a horizontal top for what felt like several seconds before she was sent crashing back to the ground.

She glared up at Ranma, who was just smirking. "I thought I told everyone ta practice yesterday. Get dressed. We're heading to school."

Everyone filed in, bedraggled, soaked to the bone, and in that strange tired and wide-awake state of one who has both overslept and had their sleep interrupted. Umi and Kotori arrived last. Honoka stared for a moment, then picked some seaweed out of Umi's hair.

"Don't. Ask." Umi had said. "I take it Ranma got all of you too." When no one said anything to the contrary, she hung her head. "He's as crazy as any of them."

Ranma stretched out, alone seeming to be in a decent mental condition. He noticed Eri bringing a metal bottle of coffee to her lips and easily plucked it out of her hand. "Not till you've done the set first. I want you to know your parts like you know a kata." Umi and, oddly, Honoka winced. "That means you could be *unconscious* and still do the moves."

Eri sighed. "Ranma, they're nowhere near up to that. Maybe Umi could, *maybe* Rin and Honoka,"

Ranma just shrugged. "I'm sure ya could if we had a month. And I ain't gonna smack anyone who can't do it like the old days. I will just be *extremely disappointed.*" Mysteriously, everyone woke up very quickly without any chemical assistance.

There was an unfamiliar face at the dinner table when Ranma and Maki arrived home, Ranma dumping the thermos over his head while standing in a tray set aside for that purpose as soon as he was out of the rain. "Saotome," The man said, his voice calm and polite in the manner that indicated an extreme frustration the speaker wasn't allowed to let show. He was tall, with dark red hair in contrast with the lighter tone of Maki and Kaede, and dressed in a three-piece suit that looked as if it had not just been custom-tailored, but stitched for him on the day specifically for this meeting, with the exception of a single frayed thread that Ranma noticed. Ranma knew this was rude, but the old rules applied in a situation like this, so he pointedly ignored him. "Saotome," the man repeated.

Maki sighed. "Papa, Ranma just broke from his...clan, I guess. Remember, they're *really* old-fashioned, and so is he."
Maki's father sighed. "Very well. I am Nishikino Chikao…Ranma"

"Nishikino." Ranma said respectfully. "I sincerely apologize for the disharmony brought on this household by my presence and actions."

"That is what needs to be discussed, yes." Nishikino said. "Unfortunately, in my neglect I left the management of this situation to my wife. Had I known what we all know now, I would never have allowed this. Do you understand, Ranma? My daughter is everything, for all that I haven't been able to show it much of late."

Maki winced, but Ranma just held up a hand. "Sir, respectfully I agree with the sentiment, but it's a little late for regrets."

"Indeed it is." Nishikino said. "First of all…Miss Tendo, if you would?" Ranma's jaw dropped when Kasumi stepped out from the kitchen, bearing a tea tray. Not a traditional Japanese tray, but western-style. "We haven't had a live-in housekeeper since Maki was born, but Maki…insisted."

Ranma nodded. "Well, she's the best in the country…" he said carefully, still eyeing Kasumi. The young woman returned the look with an extremely sad smile. "So, what is it you really need to say?"

"I need you to be honest with me." Nishikino said. "What are your intentions for my daughter?"

Ranma shrugged. "Make her one of the top nine school idols in the country, at least as long as that's what she wants. If ya wanna talk practical, that includes making sure she's breathing through the Festival, but I'd do that anyway. Good friends are hard to find."

Unfortunately, Maki couldn't suppress a look of disappointment at that assessment. Even more unfortunately, her father picked up on it and pressed. "It that all? Do you, perhaps, have your sights set on one of the other girls in the troupe?"

Ranma rolled his eyes. "Too many of 'em chasing me as it is. One thing at a time, right?"

"…yes, one thing at a time." Nishikino said. "I...don't believe there's any justification to add you to the Nishikino register today, then. But you may continue to stay here until you have new…clan arrangements?" He shook his head. "Barbaric, if you ask me."

Ranma gave that some consideration. "Ya know what? It kinda is, but if you got a machine gun maybe you can make 'em get with the times."

The rest of the week gave no relief from the relentless storms. Two days before the concert was scheduled, they decided to test Maki's illusion in the auditorium. Everyone spread out, taking seats in as many different rows as they could manage. "Okay!" Eri called out, standing in the back.

"Action!"

Maki stood in the middle of the stage, took a deep breath, and gestured expansively with her arms. The light covered the whole room, and then it resolved into the stage from Maki's dream again. "How is it?" she asked, looking to Eri.

"Seems fine so far," Eri said, looking around, until she realized she could only see the backs of the others' heads. She looked down and realized she was 'floating' about five meters over the 'ground'. "Wait, no. You got the seats and the floor too. Can you do something about that?"

"I'll try." Maki closed her eyes and took another breath. The world seemed to shimmer like a desert mirage, then popped and the auditorium was back. "That's harder than I make it look. I can match it
up to the actual roof pretty easily, but anything else…” She sighed. "Maybe it's because I did it before, even if I was asleep. Just because I can write music doesn't mean I can draw or make movies or anything else, and there's...well, there's art to this and I'm not that good yet."

Honoka was looking contemplative, which was slightly odd on her face. "Does it really matter? We just have to keep people's attention on stage."

Ranma glanced across the room. "Hanayo, come over here." The girl gulped nervously, trying to keep her footing...and cried out when she banged her knee against the back of the seats. Instantly Ranma was across the theater, holding her up and checking. "See? Same problem as in the classroom," he said to Honoka, before helping Hanayo into a seat. "You okay?"

Hanayo made a little 'eep' at realizing how close Ranma was, before rapidly nodding and blushing. Ranma sighed and took a few steps away. "We gotta make a choice. We either hold the concert in this weather outside, or we ditch the illusion." He paced back and forth, easily tracking where the real seats were until Maki let the room return to normal. "Maki, do me a favor. Make some other illusion. Something you haven't done yet."

"What? Just like that?" Maki asked, startled.

Ranma shrugged. "I need some idea of how fast you pick this up. Do...uh, do Akiba."

Maki shrugged, then closed her eyes and tried to call to mind the main strip of Akihabara. The buildings appeared, and the sun was shining down. The biggest problem was the billboards just had pictures of Mu's, rather than advertising stores and the various anime of the season. "Okay...so I guess I can do stuff I've seen pretty easily, it's just...changing it or making it up on the fly that's really difficult."

"Work on it, then." Ranma instructed her. "We'll do it on the roof."

The stage was set up, a rental made of steel tubing and polished wood, covered by a brightly colored, striped tarp that Honoka inspected from under her umbrella, getting thoroughly soaked despite that. The stage itself would be dry enough to not get slick, but they've have to stick clear of the edges. "Hey, Ranma, can you do that Hiryuu Shoten Ha thing and clear up the sky?"

Ranma, to her credit, seriously considered that before shaking her head. "Maybe if I powered it with the old lech, Cologne, Taro, Herb, and Saffron put together. Half of them are in China as far as I know, and the other two wouldn't cooperate. And even then, I'd probably destroy the school and a good chunk of the district on top. Hell of a warm-up act, but not what we're looking for."

Honoka stayed quiet while Ranma tested a bit of the structure for sturdiness, before she said "You want to try it now."

"Hell yeah!" Ranma said, grinning. "Somewhere safe, of course. Somewhere with no other people around." She thought about it, then shrugged. "But like I said, not gonna happen." She jumped down, then jumped up and down on the stage a few extra times for good measure before jumping to the ground and kicking it. Deeming it solid, she looked back at Honoka. "Okay, final dress rehearsal in 15?"

Honoka shook her head. "Not until you set up a covered change area."

"Okay, fair point." Ranma said, looking to the next crate she'd hauled up. "45 then. Tell Kotori to start packing up the costumes so we can set them up, get the RSVPs from Nico to see whether we should try to set up seats - "
Honoka shook her head. "Not in this rain. I'm not sure they could take it."

Ranma thought about that for a moment. "Okay, standing only. You're making it twice as hard on yourself, you know."

Honoka nodded and, after roping Rin and Umi into helping Kotori out with the rather large number of costumes that needed protection from the storm, popped her head into the club room to see Nico hard at work on the computer. A few months ago, Honoka would have assumed she was slacking off but no one had caught her at that recently.

She did have one of her idol DVDs playing, but the window was mostly obscured.

Honoka slid into the seat next to Nico and pulled up to the screen. Nico politely took the headphones off and flipped to a screen. "Okay, first the bad news. I'm just guessing, but I'd say only about one in ten of the people interested is actually going to show up." When Honoka looked crestfallen, Nico narrowed her eyes. "With this weather, what do you expect? A-RISE couldn't pull a better outdoor crowd in this weather."

"Why didn't you say anything before we rented the stage?" Honoka asked.

Nico sighed. "I probably should have, but Ranma's right. We built the concert around the surprise of Maki's illusion. We could have dropped it but then we'd just have a normal concert. Good enough if we just want to sink slowly, but after propelling ourselves to the top? No way, we need the word of mouth about something special."

"Okay," Honoka said. "I got you. Anyway, 30 minutes to a full dress rehearsal. I should probably track down Nozomi and Hanayo."

"Kayochi's sleeping in the closet in the rehearsal room." Nico said. "Apparently she's been up since four practicing."

"...make sure to wake her up ten minutes before you head up," Honoka said after a pause. "Geez, my little brother really is contagious."

Nico raised an eyebrow. "You have some idea what that's about? All I know is the heat's pretty good for a closet."

"That's probably part of it, with this weather," Honoka said. "As for the rest...I think Hanayo's trying to be worthy of him."

Nico snorted. "That's stupid."

"Choose your next words carefully, Yazawa Nico." Honoka said in an uncharacteristically icy voice. "That is my brother."

"Exactly." Nico said. "Ranma's standards are not exactly high at this point."

Honoka winced visibly. "That's a problem."

"Yep. Point is, Kayochi's sane, doesn't mind the curse without being obsessed with it like Nozomi, is actually into the boy side, and won't try to push him around. Sounds like a winner compared to before." Nico had turned back to her work.

Honoka sighed. "Well, yes but is he right for her?"
Nico shrugged. "Probably not. I didn't say I think it's a good idea, just that she doesn't have to try to live like he does to make the grade."

"I guess." Honoka stood up. "Anyway, need to track down the others."

Nico shrugged. "Your call on that one."

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Honoka was surprised when she found Nozomi alone in the Student Council room. "Hey. You okay? We've gotta do an outdoor rehearsal."

Nozomi nodded. "Just wrapping up some paperwork for the next term. I'm going to reduce the School Idol Research Club's preliminary budget, if you don't mind?"

"Nope," Honoka said, taking a seat. "Our sales are doing good enough to make up for it, right? Only problem is not running it by Eri."

"Actually, she's taking our resignations down to the Principal's office." Nozomi said casually. "Eri and I talked the other day and... well, on top of it being tradition, there's no way we can keep up with Love Live, college entrance exams, and the student council at the same time. Eri may end up as class rep so she can help you out, but..."

"Huh?" Honoka felt her heart momentarily stop. "Wait, you want me on the Student Council next term? And don't we need to have an election?"

Nozomi laughed. "Seriously, you're asking the fortune teller what will happen next term?" Honoka made a face. "No, I didn't run a prediction. But Mu's is the biggest thing the school has going, and you managed to put together a club that runs a positive budget. One that's now famous throughout the country. No one's forcing you, but face it - if you want the job, it's yours. And it would be good on your college entrance applications."

Honoka frowned thoughtfully. "I...I don't know."

"You're worried about whether you can handle it after last term, and this summer?" Nozomi asked, a little surprised. "Honoka, you've held us together through way worse things than Eri and I dealt with from the school clubs."

Honoka shook her head. "It's...no, I think I could manage, but there's no guarantee things won't stay crazy, or get worse."

"And if it does, you have all of us helping you," Nozomi said. "I think this would be good for you, and good for the school."

Honoka looked out the window, at the skies that still refused to clear. "I'll...I will think about it," she said, more firmly than she'd initially intended.

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When Honoka found Maki, it was in the music room, at the piano. A mischievous impulse overtook Honoka, and the second Maki finished playing she started to clap enthusiastically. "You remember how we met?"

Maki just smiled softly. "Y-yeah, I do." She pushed back from the piano, then walked over and hugged her girlfriend. "I still don't know how you roped me into this crazy relationship, but I'm glad."
Honoka sighed. "You know, we're going to have to tell your parents you're serious about not liking boys at some point. Has your father even met Ranma yet?"

Maki frowned. "Yes, just the other day," Maki said. "But it was all about the crazy stuff. I know he's been home, but he's just let Mama handle things. And Ranma's usually in early or super late, so we haven't had dinner together since the whole thing started..." She sighed. "I...do you think …"

"Shh." Honoka tightened her embrace. "No use worrying too much right now."

There was one more person to definitely talk to before the rehearsal. Honoka didn't know why she had shied away from it until now, but it needed to be done. No lingering issues before their most important performance yet.

Honoka found Rin in the sewing room, loading up some light and filmy things that Honoka was sure were Kotori's idea of a joke after the near-disaster of the beach vid. "Leave those there. No way we're going out like that."

Rin shook her head. "Accessories."

"Oh." Honoka nodded. That seemed more reasonable. Maybe they were part of what everyone was referring to as the 'Maki Costume' much to Maki's own chagrin. They were cute, and maybe a little naughty but decidedly nowhere near the level of what Maki's subconscious had produced for herself, never mind that other Ranma. Kotori had been decidedly secretive about some of these even after the beach. "Well, we need a chat anyw - "

"It's cool." Rin said, cutting her off. "I'm not into girls, even if Kayochi is." Honoka tried to come up with a response. "No, really. She's my best friend, I love her, and I'm not letting just any boy or girl date her. Doesn't mean I want to." There was a long pause, wherein Honoka's expression seemed to ask 'But, if not Hanayo, then?' The answer was a shrug. "I dunno. Tall, handsome, strong, not my best friend's boy. I'll figure it out." She lifted the box the rest of the way again. "That all?"

Honoka found her voice, shakily at first. "This is pretty sudden," she started. "Are you really all right?"

Rin's answer was unexpectedly cold. "No. I'm not all right." Then she brightened. "But it's getting better. I knew it had to happen eventually, I guess. Hanayo'll be fine, with or without - " that word caught in her throat.

Honoka shook her head. "Hanayo's going to be your friend forever. Unless I'm really wrong, anyone she goes out with had better be willing to double-date a lot."

Rin stopped, then laughed. "I guess you're right. I do kinda wish it wasn't Ranma, but I'll deal."

Honoka smiled. "Jealous?"

"Yep." Rin said. "But it's my problem. Sorry I put everyone out over it, but I can deal." To prevent Honoka from probing further, she flicked the door open with her foot and walked out.

Honoka was about to follow when Eri and Kotori pushed in. Eri took one look, then gently, but very firmly, patted Kotori on the back. "You two, talk. Rehearsal on the roof, right?" Honoka nodded. "Okay then. I'll see you up there."

Eri didn't even manage to get the door closed before Honoka suddenly had her arms full of blonde. "Eh?"
Kotori shook her head. "Honoka, I... I don't know. I think... I'm scared." Honoka waited for Kotori to go on. "I..."

Honoka squeezed her friend closer. "I haven't been making enough time for you lately, have I?"

"Well... I mean, you have your girlfriends, and Ranma, and..." Kotori babbled nervously.

Honoka smiled. "And that's no excuse. Even being in the hospital for a few days, I got distracted by Ranma."

"He's your brother," Kotori said lamely. "I was going to be fine but he'd done something else crazy so..."

"I remember we went out in middle school." Honoka said seriously. "Do you want to do that again?"

Kotori froze. "Yes! And... and no... and... gah!" Suddenly she was squeezing harder, Honoka afraid she'd bruise. "I want you! It's selfish, especially because I know you can't do that but if you're my girlfriend you should be my girlfriend not my girlfriend and Maki's girlfriend and Tsubasa's girlfriend and Umi's girlfriend..." she trailed off. "I... I guess I could handle that last one, but where does it stop?"

"...wait, Umi too?"

Kotori winced. "Uhh... Umi's kinda got her own thing," she admitted. "We tried to make out the other night but things got weird and awkward and... I don't really get that either."

"... but two's your limit." Honoka said, somewhat sadly. "I... I don't get that either."

Kotori smiled. "It's okay. I mean, it's not but..."

"... I still shouldn't have been so selfish." Honoka said.

Kotori smiled. "I'll... we can figure it out another time, okay?"

On the way up the stairs, Honoka ran into Umi coming down and blushed. Umi's eyes widened and she blushed too. "Oh no, did Kotori tell you about the other night?"

"Uh... she said you got kinda weird."

Umi laughed. "Yeah. I kinda looked it up online the day after. I think they call it 'Ace' or something, but... well..."

Honoka shook her head. "How did we not know all this stuff? We've been friends for years."

"Exactly." Umi said. "We've been together so long we started taking it for granted we knew everything about each other... and ourselves. But it was never that simple." She shrugged. "Anyway, now's not the time. We have the rest of the year, and next year, to figure it out." Then, she gave a wicked little smirk. "Besides, Miss Idol, you're gonna have to figure out how to break to your manager that you're both seeing two girls and available."

Honoka pouted. "Aww, c'mon, can't you help?"

Umi laughed. "Nope. You got yourself into this, you get yourself out." She paused. "Anyway, ten minutes to go... are we missing anything?"

Honoka thought for a second. "... Hanayo!"
When Honoka ran into the practice room, it was to the sight of Nico trying desperately to pull the sliding door to the closet open. "What happened?" Honoka shouted.

"LET ME OUT!" There was a pounding on the wood.

Nico groaned. "I'm trying!"

Honoka glanced around, sighed, and yanked on a length of wood that had fallen into the sliding channel. The door nearly took her fingers off in the bargain, Hanayo tumbling out onto the floor wearing - Honoka did a double take. "Where the heck did you get a qipao?"

"Kotori," Hanayo said, getting up and brushing off the minidress. "Rejected costume idea, but it just looked so nice when I was going to sleep for a bit…"

Honoka shook her head. "Hanayo, this is. . . "

Nico swallowed, edging towards the door. "Uh...I'll see you guys at practice." Neither of them stopped her from slipping out through the main club room while Hanayo slowly grew more and more nervous.

"Well, I guess it doesn't look bad on you…” Honoka finally said. "But you know you don't need to do this, right? Sleeping on floors, working to exhaustion…"

Hanayo shook her head. "I do need to do this." Honoka gave her a nonplussed look. "I...Honoka, this was his life, right? I mean, I can't do the life and death fighting or the crazy fiances or anything like that, but this is how he grew up. How can I understand him if I don't at least try?"

Honoka laughed gently. "Ranma's not going to expect you to be able to keep up or anything…"

Hanayo swallowed. "It's not about keeping up, it's about doing what I can. I don't...he's...maybe, maybe if I can live a few days as much like him as possible, I can…"

"That's...very sweet, Kayochi," Honoka said. "But will it work?"

Hanayo nodded. "It may not be enough but it'll be something. I just...I know Ranma but I have no idea how he got there and it's not something I can just look up or read."

Honoka sighed. "Okay, I can't stop you but can this wait until after the concert? It won't make anyone happy if you're too exhausted."

"...oh. I didn't think about that." Hanayo admitted.

Honoka didn't laugh. But she wanted to. "It's okay. That's kinda a Ranma thing too sometimes." She put a hand on Hanayo's shoulder. "C'mon. Let's get to practice."

After several months of having Ranma as a friend, Honoka felt her awareness had definitely been improved. That was why, when she had a bad feeling, she pushed Hanayo gently on the shoulder. "You go on ahead, I wanna check something." Hanayo gave her a very hesitant look. "Don't worry, it'll be fine." She leaned in close to whisper. "Get Ranma down here."

To her credit, Hanayo didn't run off, but casually went the rest of the way up while Honoka turned off to stroll down the second floor hallway. At each door, as casually as she could, she peeked past the paper windows to see if she could spot a moving shadow, but when she passed a utility closet she
realized the sliding door was - just barely, cracked open. She walked right by, intending to point it out to Ranma, when the last voice she expected to hear called out "HONOKA!" and tackled her from behind.

Fortunately, that voice was attached to a much smaller person than most. Honoka spun just in time to catch Chika in mid-air and haul her up into a hug that, not accidentally, brought them eye-to-eye and prevented the younger girl from making her escape. "Chika! What are you doing here?!

"I came to see the concert tomorrow!" Chika answered. "Only I didn't check the weather report."

Honoka stared, her jaw dropped wide open. "You didn't check the…" Slowly, she lowered Chika to the ground. "Wait, wait, wait, that doesn't explain anything! How'd you get past Numazu without your parents?"

"Uhh…" Honoka's glare intensified. "Well, I…"

Ranma sighed. "Chika…" Both girls jumped, as they hadn't heard the martial artist approach. She went on. "I didn't show you that stuff so you could break the law or run away from home. I know Uchiura's dull as dirt. Hell, that's why I went there." She knelt down and put a hand on the young girl's shoulder. "Okay, how'd you do it?"

Chika gulped. "It wasn't all that hard. I just took the local busses. I've been saving up all month."

Honoka shook her head disappointedly. "Is that all?"

"Well…" Chika gulped again, starting to sweat. "Well, I kinda came by myself so the truancy officers weren't happy. I mean, they couldn't stop me because school's not in session but some of them knew I wasn't from their area…"

Ranma just said "Aaaaaand?"

Chika broke with a soft whimper. "But I wanted to see you guys and Mama said I couldn't go and my sisters said she was right and You and Kanan wouldn't lend me any extra money and - "

Ranma rolled her eyes. "Chika! You had Honoka's email!"

"I wanted to surprise her!"

Honoka sighed. "Chika, that's sweet but you have to understand how much trouble you're in. I think your parents have noticed you're gone."

"Let me worry about that!" Chika shouted petulantly.

Ranma rolled her eyes even further. "Yeah, right. Like it or not we're responsible for you until someone comes to pick you up."

"CHIKAAAAA!" Another voice called out from the first floor.

Honoka shook her head as Kanan and You came tromping up the stairs. "Speak of the devil." She turned and pushed Chika towards the pair. "You better prepared than she was?"

Kanan nodded. "Yes. We're here with Chika's sister. Shima's off at the police station, but You had a hunch…"

Chika paled. "I'm in so much trouble, aren't I?"
"You have no idea." You said, tears in her eyes. "I thought the worst had happened! No email, no phone call, no note!"

Chika gulped. "Well, I meant to send you one, but my phone died. That's why I was in the closet, actually. There's an outlet in there. Found a charge cable in the computer club but I couldn't log in."

Kanan sighed. "Chika, seriously. This is no way to go about things. Besides, didn't Miss Honoka already tell you she already had a girlfriend?"


Ranma raised an eyebrow. "When did this happen?"

Chika just looked smug for a moment while Kanan and You tried to figure out how their jaws worked again. Honoka laughed. "Yes, that's not the problem here. Well, not the only problem." She looked back to Chika. "I'm flattered. You went to some pretty crazy lengths here, and I appreciate it. I really do. But you have to think of your own friends and family. And the girlfriend you've got."

She nodded to You, getting an embarrassed blush from the blonde and a chastised expression from the redhead. "I was thinking we'd have Nozomi put her up, but with four people and her tiny apartment that's not going to work."

"You guys go home." Chika said firmly. "I'm fine."

Ranma glared at her sharply. "What's your plan, Takami?"

"Well, originally I was going to find a shrine like you said you sometimes sleep under," Chika said. "...sensei." she added after a moment. "But with all the rain...well, the school gate was open so I thought I'd..."

Honoka shook her head. "You're out of your mind if you think we're letting a girl your age do that."

Ranma pulled Chika around, going down to her knees so he could look the smaller girl in the eye. "Kid, I'm thinking maybe you got the wrong idea." Chika winced. "Yeah, I did crazy stuff as a kid. But it was crazy. And even then I wasn't on my own. My fa-" She choked. "I was going around with the man who raised me."

The Uchiura natives gave Ranma an odd look, but Honoka answered. "It's complicated."

Ranma resumed. "The point is, even if I was damn near killed every day of my life, there was supposed to be an adult responsible for me. Could I have managed on my own for a few days? Yeah, probably. After being on the road as long as I could remember. Enough money for train fare and cup noodles ain't gonna cut it for you, and even then you're a runaway. That's a problem."

"I...I didn't think about that." Chika admitted. She shook her head. "But I thought about the rest of it! I brought along enough cup noodles for a few days." She choked, realizing Ranma had already called her out on that point. "It takes a few hours for them to get ready to eat in cold water, but it works eventually! And I brought some changes of clothes, and enough money for a bathhouse!"

Honoka sighed. "And return train fare?"

"Oops!"

Ranma shook her head. "That's only about 60% of what you needed to do, and in this case 100%'s the only passing grade. Sorry, Chika. It ain't up to me what happens from here, and I am not going to protect you."
Honoka just looked...disappointed. Finally, Kanan put a hand on Chika's shoulder to lead her away. "We're really sorry that she bothered you. But we have to get her back to Uchiura before the last train leaves."

"NO!" Chika shouted. "I'm sorry. I was stupid. Really really stupid. But I'm not leaving Tokyo before this concert!"

"..." Honoka sighed, then looked to Kanan. "What's her sister's phone number. I'll see what we can work out, but no promises. At least you weren't stealing or begging..."

With a few minutes to negotiate, it was decided that the Sonodas would let Chika sleep in their dojo for the night. This was, in part, to be accommodating, but Ranma also reasoned it would be part of her punishment. They couldn't let her sleep in the rain in good conscience, but it was the closest they could get to giving her exactly what she had planned on.

You, Kanan, and Chika's older sister would be allowed futons in the apartment.

That settled, Honoka made her way to the roof and looked around the change tent. "Ranma really thought of everything this time." It wasn't just a little thing with only enough room for the nine of them to throw off clothes - it had nine partitions made with towels clipped to clothing lines, and each partition had enough room to hang all the costumes for their changes. They were also arranged so that each girl could only look at one of the others. The Management had even been thoughtful enough to consider assignments. Umi had a space to herself at the end, and Honoka noted, with some embarrassment, that she was across from Maki.

She stepped up to her alcove, finding Eri already there and hanging up costumes. "You don't have to do that," she said.

Eri grinned. "Just wanted to make sure you'd finished checking in with everyone."

Honoka blushed. "Was I that obvious?"

"You're the lead, and this is our last rehearsal," Eri said. "It'd look bad for you if you didn't."

Honoka put her hands on her hips. "Is this about the Student Council spot? I told Nozomi I'd think about it."

"Not...not really." Eri said. She looked around, then across. "Could you grab an extra stool?"

Honoka eyed her, but took the one out of Maki's stall and sat down. "I just...I wanted to thank you. On behalf of all of us, since I know most of them won't say it.

"You're welcome." Honoka's voice was filled with emotion.

Eri's eyes widened in panic. "Don't cry!" Honoka jumped. "You'll ruin your makeup! Ranma will kill you!"
Honoka laughed. "Ye-yeah. She would. Amazing, he's even got you on board."

"Well..." Eri chuckled. "I know my limits. We could probably do the job without him, but now that we've got the rhythm it's so much easier."

Honoka nodded, and started to pull off her sweater to Eri's mortified blush. "What? You're not my girlfriend."

"I'm Nozomi's."

Honoka smirked wickedly, sweater still in her hands but not showing anything from where Eri was seated. "She wouldn't mind."

"I mind!" Eri shouted. "Geez, I know you're poly, but tha - " Honoka's laughter cut her off. "Okay, okay, you got me." She turned to go to her own alcove. "Some time we need to figure out boundaries, though." Whether she was referring to Honoka or Nozomi went unsaid. Eri slipped off to her own change area. Honoka casually started to finish what she'd started in front of Eri, putting on the long dress, the shorter skirt concealed beneath it, and the blouse, all in frilled orange.

"...veils?" Honoka asked.

"Ranma said 'no.'" Eri said back, leaning out. "Said it suggested stuff we're not."

Honoka set the accessory aside. "Gotcha." When she came back out, she turned and looked. The concert stage was set up and covered. They'd have to cross a short section in the rain to get there, but other than that everything was set up. She took a deep breath, and walked out onto the stage.…. 

The cloud cover was still so dense it required stage lighting. Honoka was only blinded for a moment, before she could fully see the crowd. Umbrellas tilted back so they could see the stage, Honoka couldn't make out the numbers as well as she'd like but there were dozens, far more than she could have hope in the torrential downpour. Her eyes turned to the stairway, where Ranma had set up a lean-to under which she had a laptop open to control the lights and music.

Honoka stood alone, or seemingly so, at center front. "Everyone! Welcome to Mu's third live concert! We've got a great show for you today, so clap your hands together!" The crowd started to applaud, but when no one else walked out onto the stage everyone suddenly went quiet. "Hmm...well, I guess it is raining pretty hard. Maybe they didn't hear you!" Honoka joked, and the crowd roared more loudly. "That's more like it! Mu's! Sound off!" She turned around. "ONE!"

Suddenly, one by one, each of the girls appeared as they shouted their numbers. "TWO!" Kotori was at just behind Honoka's left shoulder.

"THREE!" Umi a little farther back.

"FOUR!" Maki, taking Honoka by 'surprise' right behind her, peering over her shoulder before moving back to center stage.

"FIVE!" Rin right next to where Maki now stood.

"SIX!" Hanayo was well out in front now.

"SEVEN!" Nozomi was a bit out of their usual order, standing across from Hanayo and turned to the audience with a bright smile.

"EIGHT!" Nico's appearance was in front of Maki, bowing before stepping back to her position.
"NINE!" Eri appeared next to Maki.

All the girls waited a moment before, seemingly as one, they decided to go off script. "TEN!" Honoka explained. "None of this would have been possible today without our producer, or the cooperation of Otonokizaka. So before we begin, why don't you give her a hand too?"

Ranma grinned but bore it well as the crowd broke out again. Once it began to calm down, she started playing and Maki made an expansive gesture. Just like in the dream, and the auditorium, the roof vanished. The floor covered in gold, the light of a brilliant, starlit evening appearing overhead, and the city vanishing as the world, or at least recognizable monuments from all over it, appeared and seemed to be watching. People even lowered their umbrellas in astonishment before realizing that the rain hadn't actually stopped and hastily putting them up again.

That done, Maki, Honoka, and Eri took in a deep breath and began to sing. "Endless Parade, I want the magic of these lights to reach you…"

ENDLESS PARADE was only the first. Each song seemed to win a better reaction than the last. Warmed up, they let Kotori and Nico share Takaramonozu for a repeat of their last, almost-disastrous, concert. Of course, few knew what had befallen Kotori immediately after that, even with the rumors of the School Idol world. Nightingale Love Song and Omoide Ijou ni Naritakute both got the expected reaction, but what even Ranma did not expect was the fire of Maki's center of Saitei de Saiko no Paradiso, bringing the crowd back up to fevered pitch when everybody came back out to finish up with HEART to HEART and, finally, Sore wa Bokutachi no Kiseki.

Honoka didn't even feel she was breathing hard as, along with her friends, she sang out the last line. "This encounter is a miracle...so never forget this moment is ours." She held the pose for a moment as the crowd erupted, before bowing. "Thanks everyone!" She said, bowing again. They started to walk off the stage, but the crowd kept going, shouts of 'Encore' starting until they were a chant. ...uh oh. We didn't plan an encore!

Everyone else was looking just as startled, and Ranma wasn't much better for a moment, before she started scrambling on the laptop while drawing a kanji in the air. It took a couple of repetitions for Honoka to get the message, "All right, all right," Eri said, waving her hands for calm. She'd gotten the message as well, apparently, signaling Nico.

Nico took center stage. "I think I heard some calls for Natsuiro Egao de?" There was a roar of approval. "Well, all right…" Cheers. "But we're not putting on the costumes from the video." Some disappointed noises followed, mostly in good humor. Ranma made note of the ones that weren't for later automatically. The performance was well-received, even without the scantier costumes. Nico and Ranma had a brief, almost invisible back and forth look that suggested the song might be put back into the rotation with some modification.

But the cheers wouldn't stop. Finally, one call from the audience threatened to overwhelm the others. Honoka blushed, and shook her head. "I'm sorry everyone. Yuujou no Change was a one-time thing. We don't own it…"

"Who cares!?" A voice called out. Everyone was surprised - even the audience, who hadn't expected A-RISE to be present. Honoka hadn't been able to pick them out from the audience, especially since they weren't in uniform. Even more surprising was that it was Erena. "Everyone knows who that song really belongs to! Screw the copyright!"

Another voice, Chika's, said "That was the most beautiful song ever! I don't care who wrote it, you do it!"
Ranma, slowly, nodded. Honoka gulped. "All right…"

They had needed to perform two more songs after that before everyone was satisfied. The unedited upload of the concert footage was already underway - Nico had decided to leave that up for a couple of days until a pared down version could be used for sale. "It's too bad about the illusion," Nico said. "Still, word of mouth should get more people to the next concert. Maki, will you have another stage by then?"

Maki was laid out in Honoka’s arms, a little pale and drinking her tea out of a thermos. "I hope so. Kami, that was exhausting."

"You did great." Honoka said, brushing some hair out of her girlfriend's eye. "You worked twice as hard as any of us."

Eri nodded. "It's been a long, hard road, but we made it."

Ranma chose that moment to enter the change tent, with a whole box filled with hot tea bottles. "We sure did. I'm no expert, but that's probably better than anything the competition's done."

Tsubasa poked her head in after. "Yeah, no kidding. Care to tell me your secret?"

"Blessings of the Kami," Nozomi said. "Sorry."

Tsubasa shook her head. "Anyway, just wanted to offer congratulations. This is the first full concert you put on without help." She held up a hand. "Full concert. The maid cafe doesn't quite count since you couldn't really perform in the confined space. You're officially rivals." Tsubasa then stepped fully into the tent and put her arms around Honoka and Maki. "You two, we can talk as soon as Maki's feeling better."

Maki smiled faintly. "Looking forward to it."

Hanayo and Rin were leaning against each other, drinking their tea, when the former said suddenly "I wonder where everyone is going. After the concert."

"I dunno." Rin said. "Does it matter?"

"Back home." Nico said. "Which we should be doing soon. Ranma, you're sure you're fine packing this stuff up on your own?"

"Yeah." Ranma said. "We could pay a crew to do it, I guess, but . . ."

Kotori smiled. "Just leave it for tomorrow. The weather's finally clearing up."

Umi nodded. "That's a good idea."

Honoka suddenly got up and ran out. Everyone looked at each other, then followed. Below, the crowds had just reached the first floor and were in the courtyard. "I see what you were getting at, Hanayo. Everyone came here and gave us their time, and their attention, and their . . . their love. And we gave it back to them, made them happy. Every day was a struggle, but we've made it. We're really School Idols now. And now, they have to go back to their lives, and we have to get on with the next concert." Everybody looked at Honoka with some degree of skepticism. Except Ranma.

Ranma smiled as the rain came down, and turned out to the crowd as they were leaving. She took a deep breath, and began to sing.
"Aishteru, Banzai!" It was so startling to hear her voice that everyone but Honoka was astonished. Honoka just grinned and joined for the next lines. "We're glad to be here! Our present is right here!" Then, everyone else grinned at each other, nodded, and joined in.

"Aishteru Banzai!  
We're counting on you again tomorrow!  
We haven't reached our goal yet.

Smile when you're sad,  
Let's blow it all away!  
If you can laugh, the scenery will change.  
Peeking through the clearing weather  
Even when you're unsure,  
The road leading to happiness

Comes into view under the blue sky.  
Rain falls from time to time but it's harsh without water

Don't wither, nurture everyone's tree of dreams  
Now! Daisuki da Banzai!  
With the courage to never give up, let's enjoy the present  
Daisuki da Banzai!  
We can do our best  
So wave goodbye to yesterday and look forward!

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